

Document Citation

Title	A woman under the influence : an interview with John Cassavetes
Author(s)	Judith McNally
Source	<i>Filmmakers Newsletter</i>
Date	1975 Jan
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	23-27
No. of Pages	5
Subjects	Cassavetes, John (1929-1989), New York, New York, United States
Film Subjects	A woman under the influence, Cassavetes, John, 1974

directing a scene from "A Woman Under the Influence"



A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

An Interview With John Cassavetes

"I have a total awareness that a film can be successful only because an audience is interested in a particular subject. The quality of the film itself doesn't affect an audience as much as the subject you've chosen."

by Judith McNally

It's hard to find a lukewarm reaction to John Cassavetes' work. Mention the films and you get a highly original, fiercely independent writer/director and you usually get a chorus of superlatives praising his ability to capture day-to-day reality, emotional truth and intensity, and his innovative filmic techniques. Once in a while, however, a dissenting voice is heard. "I can't stand that man's stuff!" or "It's over the top and hominem it may be, but it's so good you wonder if such a stern reaction doesn't grow from the fact that Cassavetes' films can hit home with an accuracy which some are bound to find uncomfortable."

His latest film, *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE*, is no exception. On the surface, it's a simple enough story: a young housewife is harassed and smothered by her husband, who has three small children, and a demanding Italian-American mother-in-law. We see her make the transition from a charming kookiness to full-fledged mental disturbance, both because of her husband's well-intentioned, but misguided attempts to "straighten her out." But put it, the film brings to the very core of a mind in retreat. "It's a brilliant performance by Mabel (brilliantly played

by Peter Falk and Gena Rowlands, Cassavetes' wife) are hardly excerpts from a psychiatric textbook. Rather, like all Cassavetes' characters, they are fully-conceived, fully realized human beings: no stranger and no smarter than most of us, coping as best they can with universals like marriage, families, pain, and loneliness. As usual, Cassavetes has cast some important supporting roles with non-professionals, many of them his friends and relatives, and has drawn such excellent performances from them that, as one top critic phrased it, it almost makes nepotism seem desirable.

Like all his previous films, *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* was independently produced and financed. The facts of his career bear out what you quickly sense in talking with the man: he has the courage of his convictions. He wants to do his films the best way he knows how, and if that means going it alone, well, that's what he does. Risky? Of course. But the risks have paid off. His first film, *SHADOWS* (shot over three years with his acting students) received critical acclaim and several awards. *FACES* won numerous awards including three Academy-Award nominations. *TOO LATE BLUES*, *A CHILD IS WAITING*, *HUSBANDS*, and *MINNIE AND*

MOSKOWITZ, all of them popularly and critically successful, complete the roster.

Cassavetes was in New York for the premiere of *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* at the NY Film Festival and we were able to talk for several hours. As is usually the case, his stay in town was a tightly-scheduled round of press conferences, talk shows, and interviews. In those circumstances, an interview can often become a carefully-choreographed ritual as a tired, harried director does his best to hide his fatigue while trotting out pat answers to questions he's already answered a dozen times.

It is not the case when you talk with John Cassavetes. He's intense, volatile, down-to-earth, and unpretentious. And when we got down to what John considers brass tacks: people, working with actors (not surprising, since he was a successful TV and film actor before turning filmmaker), and the film industry—then hot coffee got cold and cigarettes went unlit for unnervingly long periods while he stated his case, by turns vehement, thoughtful, even angry. But always candid. I kept waiting for the almost standard "Of course, this is all off the record," but it never came. It was hardly a typical interview; but then, John Cassavetes is far from a typical filmmaker.

FILMMAKERS NEWSLETTER 23

JUDITH MC NALLY: How did you get involved in doing the screenplay for *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE*? Is it something you had wanted to do for a long time?

JOHN CASSAVETTES: I think we're just reporters, all of us basically. And a story like this is not newsworthy really—it's not Watergate, it's not war; it's a man and woman relationship, which is always interesting to me. And in telling a story, I think the important thing is to make it correspond to the emotions of the audience you're addressing. I have a total awareness that a film can be successful only because an audience is interested in a particular subject. The quality of the film itself doesn't affect an audience as much as the subject you choose.

JM: Did you have a particular audience in mind?

JC: Yes—people. Women and men, to be more specific. Actually, *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* was first a trilogy of three-act plays which I converted to one screenplay. It was hard to cut down, and the finished film is long. As I get older, I guess I have a tendency to make longer pictures. But the subjects are also more difficult. I don't think audiences are satisfied any longer with just touching the surface of people's lives; I think they really want to get into a subject.

JM: I certainly didn't find the length excessive, but two and a half hours is long for a feature. Do you anticipate any trouble from theater owners?

JC: I haven't had any; no one has brought it up. This film deals with the serious problems of a man and woman who are alienated from each other by their backgrounds, ignorant of their problems, yet totally in love. If we rushed the story just to get to the dramatic areas, it would no longer be a valid picture. So I can't take into consideration what some theater owner or distributor might think—I couldn't care less.

JM: How tightly was the film scripted?

JC: I think it's in the modern screenplay tradition—if there is such a thing. The old screenplays, as you know, detailed every shot, every angle, every location. Today we just don't do that; pictures are much more loosely made. This script was really for the actors, so we did have all the dialogue scripted.

JM: One of the hallmarks of your films is the consistently brilliant performances you get from your actors. Do you do a lot of rehearsing?

JC: Not that much. I just use very good actors; that helps! I really believe almost anyone can act. How *well* they can act depends on how free they are and whether the circumstances are such that they can reveal what they feel. I don't think there's any great trick to my directing: I just get people I like, people I'm interested in, and talk to them on the basis of their being people rather than actors.

If an actor wants to do something in a certain way, I don't want to tell him that

wouldn't be right—that would be crazy. I'm never aware of anyone being bad; I don't have that type of criticism in me. I believe everything until the actor stops and questions. I don't want big, long discussions; I don't want to know what they're thinking. If an actor tells me, "Look, I'm going to be this" and then tries to do it, he's putting untold pressure on himself.

JM: Can you explain why you often work with both amateurs and professionals in the same picture?

JC: I find it very easy because they help each other. The amateur has no preconceived notions of how it should be done; the professional has: he's gone to school, learned techniques, knows what will work—his choices, his selections, are usually better. The amateur has no selection: it's a very pure thing. So the professional gets a little jealous while the amateur begins to pick up a few things. Somewhere in the course of the film they come together and aid each other: the professional takes purity from the amateur, and the amateur takes on a certain amount of professionalism.

JM: Do you consciously direct this process, or does it just sort of happen by osmosis?

JC: I think it's all in the atmosphere. It's very hard to let the technical processes of film take over and then expect the actors to reveal themselves. I mean, you can't take a shower at a dinner party. If I have any special way of working, it's just to set up an atmosphere where what the actors are doing is really important, fun, and nothing takes precedence over it.

For that reason, the choice of the crew becomes extremely important. They have to understand that what they're doing—no matter how hard they're working—is only to help what's going on in front of the camera. Audiences are not watching the technical processes as hard as they're watching the actors. If the actors are good, the picture looks good—I mean, the actual photography looks better when the actors are better.

On a set there's really a lot that can hamper the actors. For example, in this film, here's maybe the most important moment in two people's lives: a guy is committing his wife to a mental hospital. But someone is also fiddling with your hair, putting lipstick on you, placing lights above you, sitting you down, marking your feet, moving cameras, yelling, "Hey, she doesn't look good; her skin is out of focus." Now, I ask you, how can the actors concentrate? So we do all this *before* the actors come onstage. We all work quietly, and hopefully efficiently, and get it done.

JM: In this film the performance of the three small children is critically important at times. Did you find any special problem in working with such young children?

JC: It is different. You're always stooping to the children, always aware they are

children. You don't quite know how they can comprehend or how good they're going to be, so you're always a little afraid they're going to be little snooty cute kids.

I found the best approach was to be kind of cold to the kids, not to deal with them as children and not to tell them whether they'd do well. I just hoped they would pick up, as an adult would, what the story was going. As a matter of fact, I was really quite thrilled. At the end of the picture, there's a scene where Peter is apparently attacking his wife, and the kids *automatically* attacked the father. I never said for them to do that, they just did it—and in an exquisite way, with a delicacy with which they approached their own intervention and the taking of sides was something that could not have been told to them. You just don't put any pressure on the children; they can listen and do things their own way. And I think they did.

Now in working with the kids, or actors for that matter, I certainly give directions—but I'm not aware of it. Hopefully, the people I give them to are not aware of taking them. So I know, for example, they went up the stairs; they must have said something about it, but I tried to do it within the framework of the action so it didn't become a set direction. I might have said, "Take them up the stairs, Pete," and then eliminated it from the soundtrack.

JM: One striking thing about your films is your use of the camera to select, probe, and reveal. How closely do you work with the cinematographer in planning camera moves and angles?

JC: Obviously, you have to begin by putting the camera somewhere. But I don't think there is no such thing as setting up a shot that is "right" for the scene. So I'm just shooting the action, and the decisions are those of the operator. The operator is free to think in those terms; he can simply photograph what's happening without constricting the actors.

Usually the actors don't know what they're being shot. Even though we sometimes shoot very tight, they never know where the camera's going to swing onto them. Everyone has to play every moment. If I set up a formalized shot, the tendency is for the actors to let down when they're on screen. So the fluidity of the camera really keeps it alive and allows the operator to make his selections emotionally.

JM: In that long sequence when Michael is committed, it was fascinating the way people kept going in and out of focus and it very much matched the emotional dynamics of the scene. Was that carefully pre-planned?

JC: We just set it up on such an extremely long lens that I knew it would be technically impossible to do it all in focus. The operator and the focus puller were possibly in concert because there was no way of knowing where the actors would be at any moment. It had to be a



Director John Cassavetes (center) discusses a scene with Gena Rowlands and Peter Falk

about certain things would come in and out of focus because there were so many closely interest switching back and forth to grasp time.

and about that sequence many different to begin many different ways. But out of here. By twelve takes, this was the only one setting to play in continuity in terms of scene. Situations and everything else.

and that it was all shot in one long operate

those, yes. I shoot almost everything in that's hard to take—unless, of course, it's a scene with actors. I'm not bright enough to know if I think anyone is really) to get through we start all at once. If there are never key and revelations taking place a moving on minute, how can we separate all very moments with our camera and then go hot, the editing room and try to make own when it would be really impossible. tidity of the to get a take that plays. If we and allow Peter for a moment, or if we tions emotion for a moment, it's not that quence what. The important thing is to play was fascinating. The most interesting at the going in a. I'm not going to stand over the much matter of the shoulder and say, "Sw- es of the scene that. . . . Do you have a good -planned? No?" It's more like documentary p on such as that. . . . we had a wonderful camera I knew it now they would be as artistic as ible to do it and would frame in such a way he focus pul- didn't seem like a movie.

cert because you do a lot of handheld where the film? It had to be 100% of the film was handheld.

And I do all the handheld shooting myself. I like to use it where it wouldn't ordinarily be used—for example in an acting scene rather than in an action sequence—for fluidity, for intensity.

Besides, once there's a handheld camera up there, the actors go much faster. When I'm shooting, I think nothing of saying to the actors: "Get the hell out of there, move, move!"—but I don't think the camera operators would dare to take that privilege.

JM: About how many takes did you usually do per scene?

JC: It depended on the difficulty of the writing. If the writing was excellent, the scenes went easily. If the writing wasn't too good and there were loose or open ends, then we did several takes, sometimes up to 12 or 14.

I shoot a lot of film because I shoot ten-minute takes. I can't stand to have an actor go through a whole scene in master and then simply because he has nothing to do shift him into one little thing: "Now look here . . . Look there . . . Fine. Cut. Print." I'd rather spend a little bit more time and money and give the actor an opportunity to play the scene with other actors who are also playing the same scene. So our ratio goes up. We had a 13-week shooting schedule and must have shot 600,000 or 700,000 feet of film. The finished film is about 13 or 14,000 feet.

JM: Did you do much multiple-camera work here?

JC: Not too much. We were shooting in

regular 35mm with a Mitchell BNC. We used an Arri for a second camera—for the handheld work and for exteriors. Mainly we used long lenses and wide angles. We tried to match their look by setting the optics so we'd always be shooting from underneath, which gives the wide angle the same appearance as the long lens.

One of the reasons we used long lenses, especially for all the work in the house, was to avoid a feeling of confinement. So much of the picture takes place in the Longhetti house there's a real danger of getting the feeling the actors are locked in by the camera. The long lenses meant the camera could be far away and the actors wouldn't be constricted by its proximity. And after a while, the actors weren't aware of the camera. It seemed to work very well, very easily.

The location could have been a serious problem. At first everyone said, "How can you do a picture where 80% of it happens in the same house?" I think that's one reason why we had such difficulty financing the picture; it didn't seem to have enough movement, enough openness. But we decided we wouldn't try to exploit the house or make a "thing" of it. So most of it was shot in the dining room and the foyer, basically from two angles. One good thing about the house, of course, was that we could shoot all the sequences there in continuity.

JM: Was it hard to find a house like that with that extremely big, open entrance hall?

JC: We looked at maybe 150 houses in Los Angeles. It was really hard to find something in the right price range that would make you feel you were in a real house and also depict the kind of blue-collar existence we had in mind. Some of the houses we scouted had plastic covers on everything, plastic pictures on the walls, and most of the family's money went into electrical appliances. That's a very real thing, but we didn't want it. So we decided we needed a hand-me-down house and finally found one that had been given to the Nick character and still had all the old furniture and old woodwork.

We had an incredibly talented art director, Phedon Papamichael, who has worked with us before. Not only was he the art director, he was the whole fun of the production. His desire to keep that house neat and clean (and it was an important part of Mabel's character that she was a good housekeeper) was fanatic; he had his cleaning fluid out all the time. He'd say: "I don't want anyone walking in the set"—and this with 30 or 40 people around! Or, "If anyone smokes, I kill them! I kill them with my hands! I throw them down on the ground and kill them!" He really kept everything quite alive.

JM: What was the budget?

JC: We didn't have a budget. We got as much as we could free: food and Coca-Cola and beer and whatever we could grub. I haven't even gone over the budget yet, but I imagine it's somewhere in the vicinity of \$800,000.

JM: Faces International Films, the production company, is your company, isn't it?

JC: Yes. Peter Falk and I did the financing. We went into this together and he deferred his salary. He loved the picture; he's a great actor and very artistically oriented. He is also about the best friend I have in the world.

JM: What directors do you feel have influenced your work?

JC: Well, I'd like to feel that people have influenced me, but then when you get on the floor you realize you're really alone and no one can influence your work. They can just open you up and give you confidence that the aim for quality is really the greatest power a director can have—if you're in quest of power. In a way, you must be out for power. We wouldn't make films if we didn't think that in some way we could speak for everyone.

When I was a kid, Frank Capra was certainly America to me. In terms of today's directors I think Marty Scorsese is phenomenal and singular. I very much like Don Siegel for what he does, and Bob Altman for what he does, and also Bogdanovich, Melvin van Peebles, Aldrich, Shirley Clarke, Antonioni, Lumet, and certainly Elaine May. In a way I admire them all: each picture is different, every person has a different strength. When it comes right down to it, I admire anyone who can make a film.

JM: Sooner or later the question comes

up of whether film is an art or a craft. JC: I think film is magic. With the tools we have at hand, we really try to convert people's lives.

Directors are alone because their work is so disproportionate to daily life. When you become a director, you take on the responsibility not just of making a picture and putting yourself on the line as a person, but you're also saying: "Today I am going to make a great movie. I am also going to be successful. I am going to reach an audience so I can make my next film." I hate the present system of directing because there's too much pressure to be good. There's no relaxation at all. You're constantly aware of the financial responsibility, the fact that your life without directing is very empty, and that you have to make a successful movie. So your instincts and what you know sometimes give way to what you have to do. You must please distributors and your audience.

I see people like Bob Altman, Elaine May, Elia Kazan—great directors. These people shouldn't be left alone. Somewhere along the line there has to be somebody who makes things easier. Not someone who says (like most distributors) "Can you do it? Can you be a killer? Can you pretend that everything is right?"

I think the greatest thing a director can do is keep himself straight, realize that he or she doesn't have to know all the answers and be content with enjoying oneself without thinking about what's going to happen afterwards. That's very hard to do. You have to be somewhat innocent.

JM: You've always stayed well away from the usual Hollywood system. Do you think it's possible to maintain that kind of innocence in it?

JC: I don't think I could ever make another film like this again. And I'm not talking about the quality of the film—I mean the kind of film where you do everything. I've done it four times, and I don't know that I could do it again. I would want to have more ease and relaxation; I would want to have some endorsement of my talent and the film I'm making.

This way, it's too difficult. You say to yourself, well, what is it? It's a film. All right, it affects people's lives. Maybe it'll connect with somebody. But it doesn't affect my life that much—I'm just putting down what I know. So is it worth it to kill yourself to make the film and bring it to an audience so that someone will applaud? Or so that you'll have a big house? I can't like making films anymore if they're this tough. The pressures are too unnatural. I'm not crying, because I enjoy it. But I am saddened by the fact that I have physical limitations.

At the end of every film you have to say goodbye to everybody. Here are people who worked night and day and killed themselves and at the end you shake hands and go away and now all of a

sudden all the credit belongs to the actors who put in their 12 hours while other people put two years in. At the end, I feel this bitter hostility because I've got to wait and do another film that may have nothing to do with them. It seems like a double-cross.

If a major distributor comes in, people who made the film possible are acknowledged—they're not even given a ticket to see the movie! That's the reason against major distributors.

We're distributing *A Woman Under the Influence* because the studios have had no interest in it. And if they did come to us, we wouldn't sell it cheaply because we've taken our risks and expect to be paid for it. After all, who the hell are we? Unless they finance the picture, they're a bunch of agents who go to book theaters; that's what it really comes down to. Sure, being a distributor is a craft in itself, and if they had a better job we'd all be in better of it. They've lost millions and millions of dollars because of their petty ego; of them don't have any real interest in films. How could they? They have no money anyway.

Everyone who makes a film is a victim of major distributors' mercy. We don't need great sums of money, but we need distributors to offer us some money and be more practical: not to offer us a million dollars when times are good, but make the business impossible; not to give us 25% overhead so they can put money in their coffers; and not to make destructive pictures they don't believe in. They'd make a picture that would be a revolution in which all major studios were killed if they thought it would make money.

That's the kind of impossible situation that makes paranoids out of all the people who make films. We have to confront it; we accept it, and in accepting it we hurt ourselves and everyone else. I don't say I've been a saint in this, but I couldn't sell my soul out for the just don't believe in. And if that were true, I'll never make film again, then I'll never make another film again.

JM: You don't have any plans at all for another film?

JC: Right now all I can hope is that a picture is extremely successful. And if it isn't, I won't make another one. It's all. Which in itself is no great thing.

The real tragedy is that other young filmmakers are coming along and will go out and conform before they've even opened their mouths. Occasionally you'll get a Marty Scorsese who has a sense of independence built into his body that enables him to withstand it. But he's abused because he's independent. The idiots don't realize that to be independent isn't something against them; it's something for good films. And they never understand that as long as the



John Schlesinger and Peter Falk play Mabel and Nick in "A Woman Under the Influence"

...as long as they're accountants, as long as the deal is more important than the movie itself. As long as this exists, we'll have difficulty making money. It's not that it is an art, a beautiful art. It's a business that overcomes all of us; we're not with it. Money is really not that important to us; we can work 36, 48 hours a week and feel elated at the end of that week. It's incredibly hard—but if you have a business connected with it, it's impossi-

...the difference between the film industry now and the old days is that back then everybody had a responsibility to make a good film. They had a responsibility to work with the big guys, band together, and work on their own small level. It's not that the accidents of great films are gone, because the love was always

there. All those guys had pride in making a good film, if only to be able to say, "Well, our picture was good at least." No one thought in terms of millions of dollars.

Now the big question is: can a picture make 100 million? Who the hell cares? If you're thinking that way, you're not making films, you're making money. If that's what it's come to, let the audience look at pictures of money, put money on the screen, and then rape it, shoot it, defecate on it—because that's basically what everyone is doing.

I'm not really an angry person, but I get angry when I see people of extraordinary talent and ability abused so terribly by the majors who defile anything. That's why I admire Sidney Lumet: because I think he's been able to withstand those

pressures somehow.

I don't understand why people in our business are such hypocrites. We never sit around discussing how much money a picture is going to make, we discuss the picture, whether it's good or bad. I don't mind criticism on my films—yes, they are long; sometimes I'm not as good as I could be; I may not tell the story as well as I might; maybe I'm clumsy in certain areas. That kind of criticism is terrific.

JM: Do you feel your films have been an evolutionary process? That you learned something in each which you could apply to the next?

JC: Oh, yes. I learned to be more worried about every picture I do, to be more skeptical, to look at people I'm working with and know that I'm using them because there's no ultimate payoff for them, no continuity. That's what I learned. And I also learned to try to keep a story in mind, and to keep people, kindness, and love in mind. You need that to work with people, and it becomes increasingly difficult not only for me but for everyone who works in this stupid business.

I sometimes think we should all go on strike until people become nicer. I can think of one actress, very famous in her day, who is now getting older. She devoted her life to acting and gave people enormous pleasure—but now she's got to look for jobs and is having a hard time of it. What the hell kind of business is that? How can we fail to take care of our own people that way? I see the same people who won't give her work going out and fighting for charities, hospitals, political causes, minorities—but they don't know how to be decent people. If you're successful they say to you: "You're part of a family." They play a shell game; they'll give a guy everything in the world—a big house, millions of dollars—until the minute he fails. Then they don't know him anymore. People live a killer existence, and I don't know how they do it.

JM: What advice would you have for young filmmakers?

JC: I don't know, except they've got to go out by themselves and make films. Hopefully they can make the second film as well as the first. If you go out to make an exploitation film, you're in a lot of trouble today, tomorrow, on your tenth picture. I've never seen a first film by an experimental filmmaker that wasn't good. Never. Not one. I'd love to see everyone's first film: Ford, Capra, Kubrick, Godard, Bergman, and all the others. It would be much more interesting to me to see their first and last films than all those middle successful movies which achieved a certain popularity but weren't necessarily made with the same intent as that first film.

The only thing young filmmakers can do is get some money and make films—anyway they can do it. There's no rule. Just get together with good, decent, artistic people and value them—because they're the only ones who will help you.