Document Citation

Title	**In the manner of heroes**
Author(s)	Michael Ventura
Source	*L.A. Weekly*
Date	1980 Oct 31
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	10; 59-60
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Gloria, Cassavetes, John, 1980

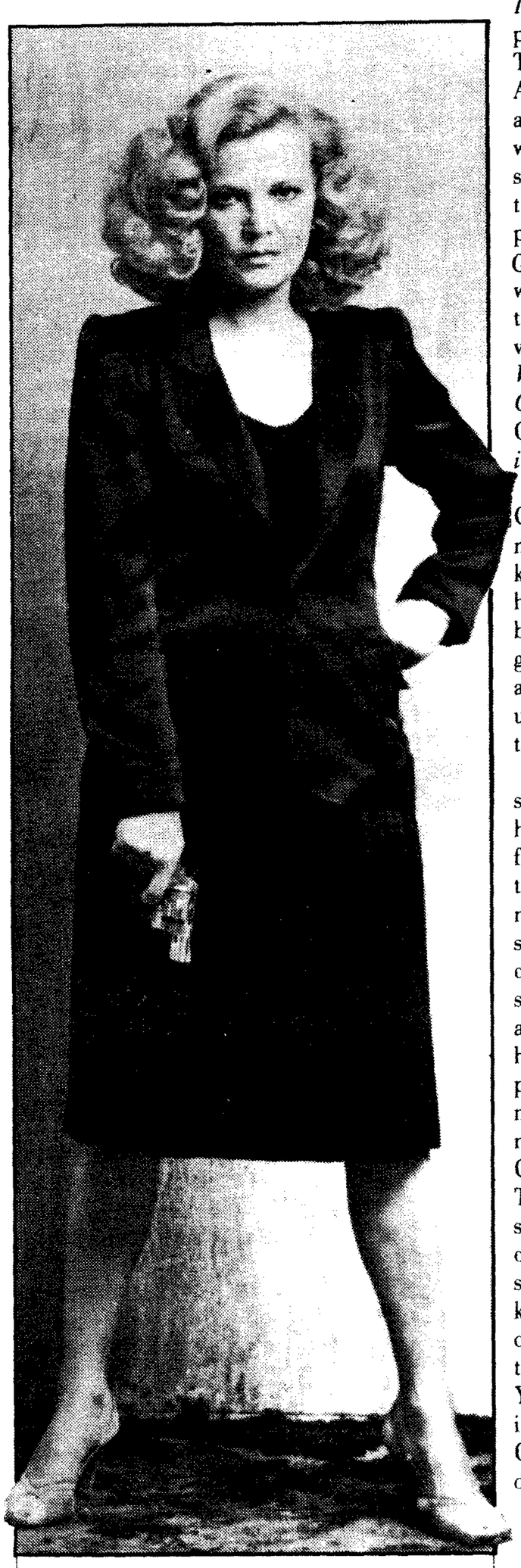
Film

In The Manner Of Heroes

by Michael Ventura

"A hero embodies the fantasy and so allows each private mind the liberty to consider its fantasy and find a way to grow."

—Norman Mailer



Gena Rowlands

Gloria's tough and she's pretty and she protects a child and she's been around and it shows and she doesn't seem to mind that it shows. And she's not dependent on men, though there's nothing to indicate that she's given up on them either. She's not perfect. She wouldn't matter to us if she was. She panics, freezes, makes mistakes — but she survives even her own mistakes, which is perhaps the best sort of heroism. Most of all, she's a *woman* of action, not an imitation of a man of action.

There's a scene in *Gloria* when she's alone on a subway platform. I think it's the only time she's truly alone in the whole movie — there's not even a cabbie to talk to. The kid whose life she's trying to save (John Adames) has gotten lost and is on another train; the mobsters chasing them can pop up anywhere, any time. There's nothing for her to do now but be alert and wait for the express. The shot is short and silent and in one take: she watches the train with the lost kid in it pull out, she looks for a moment at where it had been, she turns toward the camera and walks a few steps to stand against a girder. At the girder we see her in profile, the dull electric light of the subway shining beautifully through her mussed, chorus-girl hair-do. There is no visual self-consciousness, only the beauty of what's there.

It is difficult to say how beautiful she is in those few steps and in that profile, or why. The poet Boris Pasternak wrote, "The root of beauty is audacity,/ And that is what draws us to each other," and perhaps that is what draws us to Gloria.

Often the secret heart of a film rests in a scene that is just such a grace-note: it is only a woman on a subway platform, but there is a womanly beauty, a dimension, that has been no more than hinted at before. Flashes of it are in Harlow, in Veronica Lake; Jane Fonda approached it at moments in *Klute*. But in *Gloria* (played by Gena Rowlands), and especially in this sigh of a scene where Cassavetes lets us pause to look at it, we have it full force. As though Marilyn Monroe, who died at 35, had lived another ten years, lost some weight and some wispiness and had gained something else: savvy and a talent for loneliness.

They are killing women off in film after film this year because "they" — which is always "we" — are afraid of the raw yet controlled and beautiful power that Cassavetes framed on this subway platform.

This is the Woman as Knight. The urban private gun has always been just the Western gunfighter in a suit, and the gunfighter is the even more thinly disguised knight-errant, still riding a horse but wielding different weaponry. And the knight-errant always implies that he is the grail-seeker and grail-defender. Each damsel to be saved, each kingdom to be defended, each child to be rescued (as in *Gloria*), somehow hid the grail inside themselves and was necessary to its search. The knight-errant has been one of the most appealing, inspiring figures in the world's mythology, either as pure knight or echoed as gunfighter or urban gun; yet to my knowledge it has been until now exclusively male.

Not anymore.

Cassavetes On Violence

Violence on the screen is masturbation. Usually. Everything happens conveniently to the rhythms of the protagonist's needs. Duke Wayne always has time to telegraph his punch. Clint Eastwood always has time to light his cheroot. (Nobody is ever smart enought to shoot him while he's lighting it.) But real violence is like real sex. It's never just you. Whoever you're doing it with has their own rhythms and is likely to do something unpredictable.

John Cassavetes knows the difference.

In *Gloria*, Cassavetes has given us one of the most exciting action pictures in many years. But this is still the artist who gave us our best film portrait of the ruins of a marriage (*Faces*); the best film around about friendship between men (*Husbands*); a portrait of the artist and the art (*Opening Night*) whose only equal is *8½*; and a portrait of a contemporary American woman (*A Woman Under the Influence*) that has yet to be even approached by any other work of fiction. This is the writer with the finest ear for American speech as it's *really* spoken; and the only director, the *only* director, with the courage to use true American speech as a medium for his films. (It is, by the way, a myth that his films are improvised. In an interview with Gena Rowlands that will appear here in a week or two, as space allows, she confirms that the films were made as *written*, with very little ad-libbing — almost none in *A Woman Under the Influence, Faces* and *Gloria.*) Cassavetes doing violence is still Cassavetes, an artist committed to *revealing* subjects, not simply using them.

Before he ever lets Gloria on his screen, Cassavetes shows you what real violence means to people who can't be heroes. He knows that few people have the talent to handle the violence that is done to them by their very own bodies — the jolt of glandular energy, the jumps of heartbeat and respiration. That jolt causes most of us to panic of freeze; it's why it's so easy to be a mugger.

Cassavetes begins his film with just such unequipped people as most of us. It happens to be the Mafia coming after this family. It could as well be Hitler's stormtroopers, or Herod's. We are in the apartment. The family knows that gangsters sent to kill them are in the lobby downstairs, and what do they do? They scream at each other about money and about things in the past that can't be helped, about what should or shouldn't be packed for the getaway, and whether or not there's time to feed the kids. This man (Buck Henry) and wife (Julie Carmen) are just two adrenal rushes now. They don't know how to think in this state. Their bodies say "FIGHT" so they do the only fighting they've ever known, screaming bouts with each other. The kids catch the panic and freak out and one of them, while there still may be time to get away, locks herself in the bathroom. You're not about to leave your kid locked in the bathroom, are you? Good luck. Cassavetes has set up shop in the midst of our worst paranoias.

It is the mark of a great artist that he gives us a touchstone in our own reality by which to judge what he's doing. Not art, but experience, is his standard. Cassavetes will never give Gloria any better situation than that family had. And through her every gesture, awkwardness, jump of fear and muttered curse, he takes the chance of demystifying her by showing you that what she feels isn't so much different than what they felt. She is not a hero by being unable to feel, but by being able to face her feelings, handle them, and use them.

Nor does he give her situations that are any more ideal than theirs. Gloria is running down the street away from the mobsters. The predictable thing is to think that the kid — whose family has just been murdered, and whom the Mob wants to kill as an "example," would be tear-assing alaong with her. But this kid is a real kid, not a movie kid, not a diminutive adult. Like all real kids, *this kid has a completely different vision of reality than the grown-ups.* He misbehaves, he runs away, he yells at times when it could get them killed — he's only seven, and it's going to take him the whole picture to understand their reality. He's a *kid*, so he thinks his feelings are the most important thing in the situation. So Gloria is trying to run away from the Mob with this scared kid, but *he's* not running, he's trying to clutch her because he's so scared, and she can't run while he's clutching her, so she *has to* fight.

Or when they're running downstairs and the kid is terrified and she's saying to him softly, so the gangsters don't hear, "It's a dream — I told you before, it's all a dream — Now take a step, now take another, that's good. Now take another." Because kids need to be told *now*, when they need it, not some other time. Those who know have to teach those who don't in the midst of the chase. In the most crucial times, those who know teach by saying the simplest of words. (What else can the panicked understand?) One step, then another. It is the beginning and end of wisdom. Brutal violence, necessary instruction, chills and spills — it is amazing how complete these scenes seem, because nothing has been skipped or dodged.

There is a great deal more than this, but what do you say about a walk, a smile, a way of lighting a cigarette, a way of hesitating to speak, an exchange of looks between a boy and a woman that means everything if you're capable of feeling it and nothing if you're not. Chaplin once said, "The most important thing is a close-up when somebody smiles or looks at somebody and it is real and it is the end of the world and the beginning of everything." In *Gloria* there's such a richness, all contained and given power by the mythic resonance of the fantasy and the absolute verity of the violence.

Nor has there been space for any detail about Bill Conti's fine Mingus-like soundtrack, nor Fred Schuler's cinematography — the most apt Cassavetes has ever had. Schuler's not a fancy framer (fancy framing would be completely out of place in this film), but he has a fine eye for what James Agee once called "the peculiar kinds of poetic vitality that blaze in every real thing."

Continued on page 59

John Cassavetes

Continued from page 10

And I have managed to get this far without ever mentioning how very funny *Gloria* is, its comedy rooted in a simple relishing of life, far away from anything as artifical as *schtick*.

Gloria The Hero

Let us say that perhaps nothing happens gracelessly — that heroes do not appear without some need of them, without (I would suspect) our calling for them to come, silently and from the pits of our hearts.

Stories are wiser than writers. Writers will twist a story into plots and subplots to please themselves and make their points. But a story comes of itself, says what it has to say, and leaves — and no story-teller can tell you where it's come from or where it's gone. In this way, after ten years of early filmmaking, the Great American Hero came to the screen, greeting us with the same enthusiasm as we greeted him. Homer and Ovid had nothing on us, our Heroes dueling and shooting and enduring and loving and leaping across half a century, telling us over and over — or rather, telling some hungry nerve in the psyche, a nerve we most of us knew only in sleep — that we had to be brave, had to be brave. It was a way of warning us how bad the bad guys really are.

Yes, let's assume that things don't happen gracelessly, and that Jung is more right than Freud. Then you can't look at Hollywood and say "they," you have to say "we"; a Hero rises out of all of us, to remind.

Tracing America's dream-life hero superficially: toward the end of the '60s it became too much for even our Hero, and in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Butch Cassidy* and *The Last Picture Show*, our Hero looked desperately for a blaze of glory to go out in. There was even less glory in the '70s, and, in sordid fashion from *Mean Streets* to the *Godfathers* to *Apocalypse Now*, we watched heroic images (they were no longer heroes, they were gangsters and psychopaths with the faces of heroes) get chopped to ribbons for nothing. Even John Wayne got shot in the back in *The Shootist*, and in the film and in life was dying of cancer. Eastwood didn't get shot, he got gentle. Bronson didn't die, he faded. James Coburn had a career crisis. James Garner, tongue firmly in cheek, stood up for it all, a knight-errant living in a trailer on the outskirts of town, sticking to the safety of the small, the tiny, screen.

Now we have Gloria, who is really a hero. She takes to the big screen as firmly as Cagney ever did, reminiscent of Cagney's great one-line treatise on acting: "You walk in, plant yourself, look the other fellow in the eye, and tell the truth."

If Mabel Longhetti, the character Gena Rowlands plays in *A Woman Under the Influence*, had the chance to see *Gloria*, it might have made her feel a lot better about herself. In the midst of a conversation she might have imitated Gloria's pistol-stance — awkward, desperate, but *effective*; or might have said to a party-

Continued on page 60

Continued from page 59

room of people at Gloria's: "Sissies! Sissies! You let a woman beat you! Punks!" And with such playfulness and fantasies she might have begun to become acquainted with the idea that loveliness, too, has its toughness and can survive.

Gloria, in the manner of heroes, has apparently arrived almost too late, which used to be called "in the nick of time." ■