

## Document Citation

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|---------------|---|
| Title         | <b>Midsection Cassavetes</b>  |
| Author(s)     | Lisa Katzman  |
| Source        | <i>Publisher name not available</i>   |
| Date          |   |
| Type          | article   |
| Language      | English   |
| Pagination    |   |
| No. of Pages  | 6   |
| Subjects      | Cassavetes, John (1929-1989), New York, New York, United States   |
| Film Subjects | Opening night, Cassavetes, John, 1977<br>A woman under the influence, Cassavetes, John, 1974<br>Gloria, Cassavetes, John, 1980<br>Shadows, Cassavetes, John, 1960<br>A child is waiting, Cassavetes, John, 1963 |

# Midsection

# Cassavetes



"I like to act in films, I like to shoot 'em, I like to direct 'em, I like to be around them. I like the feel of it and it's something I respect. It doesn't make any difference whether it's a crappy film or a good film. Anyone who can make a film, I already love. But I feel sorry if they don't put any thoughts in it because then they missed the boat."

—JOHN CASSAVETES



'Opening Night':

# Moment by Moment



Gena Rowlands as Myrtle in *Opening Night*.

by Lisa Katzman

That *Opening Night*, the ninth of 12 films by John Cassavetes, who died this past February 3, is only now attracting attention from commercial distributors ten years after it was made, simply symbolizes what had been Cassavetes' lot in Hollywood since he'd arrived: he was the consummate outsider.

After acting for several years on TV and in the theater, in 1958 Cassavetes wrote, produced and directed his first film, *Shadows*. A 16mm black-and-white film cast with an ensemble of unknown actors, *Shadows* departed from the factory norm in significant ways: its focus was on black identity; it was improvisational and elliptical. Jonas Mekas hailed the film as a major achievement and gave it *Film Culture's* first independent film award. Cassavetes promptly spent the next year re-shooting and editing it. "It was too beautiful," he said.

Seeing the second version, Mekas was appalled. In a scathing review in *The Village Voice*, Mekas complained that he felt betrayed. All hell broke loose in the letters column, as Cassavetes, Mekas and a few of the actors argued issues and integrity. A year later, Cassavetes signed to star in the *Johnny Staccato* TV series (for which he directed five episodes), only to break his contract with NBC and accept Paramount Studio's carte blanche offer to make low-budget features using contract players. "Sell out," they tsked in the New York avant-garde coffee houses.

Meanwhile, Cassavetes irked his Hollywood masters. Over an editing dispute on his second studio production, *A Child is Waiting*, he was fired by Stanley Kramer at United Artists. The other studios blackballed him. Cast out by both Hollywood and the avant-garde, Cassavetes knew that if he was to work at all, he would have to do it himself, as a writer, actor, director and producer. In essence, he became the echo of the early film pioneers and the reflection in America of the French New Wave.

As an outsider, Cassavetes built his career by radically departing from standard Hollywood dramas both in content and form. By composing his frames asymmetrically (so that from time to time one sees a leg, a nose or an



arm sticking out of a frame), by crowding his frames with characters, keeping the camera on a character for a few extra beats, and by eschewing the use of the standard shot/reverse strategy whenever possible, Cassavetes developed a shooting style that articulated a formal retort to traditional Hollywood modes of filmmaking, in which the importance of the star is established through camera technique. With strong roots in ensemble theatrical acting, Cassavetes was more democratic in his refusal to privilege one actor over another in scene and shot composition.

Those who have criticized him for the haphazard, documentary, or amateurish qualities of his films have often failed to grasp that these features are the earmarks of his falling off the Hollywood bandwagon (or gravy train, as the case may be). They are precisely the point. They are part and parcel of an aesthetic vision dedicated to making something more than pretty pictures. The verité style, the deceptively random composition, the unfixed (often chaotic) camera movement all work to create a syntax that is, in effect, an extension of Cassavetes' dramatic concerns. At the center of these concerns stands the "moment," the Stanislavskian, Actors Studio moment.

Cassavetes was in many ways the method acting director par excellence. His camera stalks the moment, subordinates everything—symmetry, balance, steadiness—to the moment. And the moment, of course, is always created through interaction between two or more characters. Perhaps more than any other director of his generation, Cassavetes turned the moment into something more than an acting technique, into the veritable touchstone, drama.

It was this commitment to the moment and to the emotional truth he could squeeze out of it that created both the hyper-reality of his dramas, on the one hand, and their implausibility on the other. His characters look, act, and behave realistically to the point of our seemingly complete intimacy with them. Yet these situations challenge the bounds of everyday reality.

His characters are middle- and lower-middle-class people, scrappy entrepreneurs, professional people, and housewives. Ordinary people, but pushed to the limits of their identities. Cassavetes had a rare gift for locating the extraordinary, the edge of psychological extremity, within ordinary lives.

The three husbands of *Husbands* (1970) are all married and deeply ensconced in middle-class lives in a Long Island suburb. During an extended bender following the funeral of their friend, the three decide on a whim to take off for London. While Cassavetes upped the ante on what the viewer is willing to accept as typical behavior, after watching Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara, and Cassavetes for nearly two hours, drinking, fighting and carousing, I wouldn't have batted an eye had they decided to build a rocket and fly to the moon.

Cassavetes had a special talent for finding the appropriate outrageous gesture, action or plot turn. Think of Gena Rowlands in the title role of *Gloria* (1980), the ex-moll of the mafia *cappa di tutti cappa*, who blows

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away a whole car full of hitmen—who were, incidentally, her friends—when they try to abduct the young boy she inherits after his family is wiped out by the mob. Or her Sarah of *Love Streams* (1984), who decides her compulsively philandering brother (his Hollywood house is a harem) needs something else to love and brings home a menagerie of animals, replete with chickens, ponies, and ducks.

The moment-to-moment reality that Cassavetes established between his characters gives an astonishing emotional coherence and intelligence to their most outrageous actions. What appears outrageous makes psychological sense on closer inspection: Cassavetes said that his characters are not reducible to a particular psychology. They may elude our understanding, but because their actions possess an internal psychological logic, we accept them. They make the same sort of complicated claim on our attention as real people do: our families, friends, even our enemies.

Beginning with *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), Cassavetes' films increasingly incorporated elements of melodrama, but they also employed a rambunctious, high-spirited satirization of melodrama (as in *Love Streams*, when Sarah dreams of her reconciliation with her husband and teenage daughter as the climax of a fully staged opera). In standard melodrama, repression becomes a tidy machine for generating suspense, and resolution can follow on disaster with satisfying swiftness. The



Slap happy: Cassavetes, Gazzara and Rowlands rehearse *Opening Night*'s play.



problem facing the director is how to keep the Repressed Moment offscreen for as long as possible—a quandary circumvented by the flashback structure that reached its pinnacle in Alfred Hitchcock's *Marnie*.

Cassavetes' films do not revolve around hidden or repressed motives that work their design as the plot unfolds. With his aversion to oversimplifying psychologies, Cassavetes succeeded in forging a radical new form of melodrama—one in which the "return

family—his wife Gena Rowlands, Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara and Seymour Cassel—around him. Cassavetes provided these artists with the choicest roles of their careers, and they in turn gave him their most compelling performances.

**I**t is in *A Woman Under the Influence* that Cassavetes began to fully explore familial love and madness. Mabel (Rowlands), who is a mostly lovely and lovable lunatic, acts out the

of distraction. These characters experience love as an affliction, but not the usual sort, not the romantic passion that Scarlet feels for Ashley in *Gone With the Wind* or Ilsa for Rick in *Casablanca*, but an astringent that sharpens the edge to their desire. Their whole being intensely focuses on and strives for the object of their passion. Mabel, Myrtle and Sarah construe a love that disintegrates rather than integrates their identities, because it is a form of possession, of divine frenzy. Cassavetes' genius was to locate the place where this very classical idea about love intersects with modern American life.

Cassavetes did not chalk his characters' madness up to the standard modern psychosexual malaise that exists between men and women, and which unfortunately, in recent years, has become a gratuitous mainstay of contemporary cinema—a kind of psychological smog that never goes away. His women don't inhabit the hip social milieus privy some years ago to feminist consciousness raising. Yet he affords them a power and authority that supercedes that of most contemporary woman characters whose consciousness presumably have been raised. Moreover, his characters' power emanates less from conventional sexual allure than from the complexity of their personalities, which makes them sexy in another way. That Gena Rowlands looks dazzling in all these films doesn't hurt, but it's not the main point.

Mabel, Myrtle, and Sarah possess an emotional voluptuousness, a neediness and generosity that pushes them beyond the pale, straight over the edge of socially acceptable behavior. In struggling to love and be loved, they abandon their grip on reality, their purchase on sanity. Cassavetes presents madness as a sacrifice that women continue to make of themselves, usually through the tacit coercion of their families.

**O**f the three films, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Opening Night* and *Love Streams*, it is the middle film that portrays the most complex and subtle vision of madness. In the other two, madness is part of the ebb and flow of Mabel's and Sarah's lives, a condition that they more or less accept about themselves. In *Opening Night*, on the other hand, Myrtle struggles with her madness both in her life and her work as an actress, which are here inseparable. The extent to which she succeeds is less a triumph over madness than it is



Gazzara, Rowlands and Cassavetes in *Opening Night*—the play's the thing.

of the repressed" occurs not as a dramatic climax, but as the starting point of drama. Cassavetes laid it all on the table. This abolished the distinction between text and subtext (a feature that is particularly crucial to melodrama), and gave his films their haunting naturalism. Cassavetes' films are not so much *about* American life, love, ambitions, and madness, as their analogues. His metaphors of American life cleave so close to the bone of experience that we can practically taste the marrow.

His apartness went to the heart of the myth of rugged individualism, which fuses Calvinist morality and belief in free will with the late-19th-century notion of the romantic hero. Hollywood has polished and cashed in on the myth for years, sanctioning the individual on celluloid, but not in reality—which perfectly mirrors the larger culture's deep-seated intolerance for nonconformity.

Part of Cassavetes' uniqueness in American cinema derives from how he understood that. He dealt with Hollywood's rejection not by stoically braving it alone, but by gathering an artistic

family pathology as well as her own, and thereby becomes a scapegoat for her nefarious, controlling mother-in-law and her loving, but completely out-of-control husband, Nick (Falk), who insists on controlling her rather than his own rage. Because they are the more extreme and obvious, her furies feed her husband's more conventional craziness. Similarly, his alternations between trying to control her and losing control over himself feed into her insanity.

By casting Gena Rowlands in both *Opening Night* and *Love Streams*, Cassavetes divined how love and madness become inextricably intertwined, how madness becomes an expression of thwarted love. In *Love Streams*, to explain her revolving door institutionalizations, Myrtle tells the divorce judge that she loves her family too much and in an aside, that her husband screws around, a dilemma her shrink advises her to remedy by going off to Europe to have an affair. Conclusion: the bug house is more honorable.

Mabel, of *A Woman Under the Influence*, also loves her family to the point



over logistics: she has created a space in her life to contend with what madness asks of her.

Cassavetes envisioned Myrtle's madness not simply as a sympathetic condition but as a transformative power. She is a middle-aged stage actress who has never married or had children. The theater is her life. But there have always been men in her life and plenty of adulation. She's a star and needs constant reassurance that she is loved and wonderful. When she panics at four in the morning, she calls her director, Manny (Ben Gazzara), who, in front of his wife, must declare his love for Myrtle, just to placate her late-night anxieties.

Written by an aging playwright, Sarah Goode (superbly played by Joan Blondell), the play within the film concerns a woman who years earlier had ended her marriage to her oafish, lumpen husband and has since remarried a querulous middle-class photographer with whom she is having marital difficulties. It's not a very good play and it's meant in some vague way to be about aging and the loss of a woman's sexual powers. Myrtle is dead set

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*In criticizing the realism of theater, Cassavetes attacked Hollywood's slavish adherence to it as a model for filmmaking.*

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against playing the woman as Sarah has written her.

She doesn't see what being old has to do with her part in the play, what it adds to the story. She wants to give her role another interpretation, one in which she doesn't come out defeated. These are Myrtle's professional reasons for wanting to alter her role, but they are mixed up with more personal motivations: Myrtle doesn't feel particularly old, nor does she look it, and she's afraid that playing the part of an older woman will ruin her career.

So they become each other's nemesis. Sarah cattily needles Myrtle about her passage into middle age. Myrtle retorts in kind about Sarah's coming passage out of it. They are running a collision course, yet ironically both women have made their lives in the theater where their most private pas-



ship between the neurotic obsession women have with aging, the denial of death, and madness, Cassavetes treads upon territory investigated in literature by feminists, but never in a film (by feminists or anybody else) with his sensitivity, emotional intelligence and humor. It is unlikely, however, that Cassavetes' achievement will be appreciated even now, a decade after he made *Opening Night*, since it doesn't make politically correct or incorrect statements. It doesn't make statements at all—which is an essential part of its greatness. Myrtle doesn't overthrow her obsession with aging and appearance by cutting her hair or not wearing makeup. Her transformation is nothing so superficially symbolic as that. It is far more profound, something that approaches the metaphysical.

She becomes a newly-born woman, as it were, by doing something so simple yet so complex as entering the moment. She emerges from her madness into the evanescence of experience. Onstage, improvising her part, which is really her life, creating it out of the moment, she discovers and discloses to the audience, both the one within the film watching the play and us, the sweet evanescence of experience; and that, as maddening and ephemeral as it is, is also, ironically, the

enlarges both the play and her life, and makes them double each other in the way Artaud talks about the alchemical theater as a doubling of life.

Only Cassavetes, for whom the moment is the origin of drama, could have conceived of a dramatic resolution that uses method acting technique as a redemptive force by positioning the tyranny of an obsession with youth not as a sexist problem, but as a metaphysical one, which stems from society's neurotic denial of death and aging. Cassavetes created a dramatic framework to accept the moment as a redemptive force and made it work brilliantly. Myrtle's triumph may constitute a liberation from sexist ideology, but it also transcends gender. The only way to live one's life, onstage and off, she discovers, is in the moment.

Cassavetes saw in the practice of his craft how to reshuffle the way we think and feel out of habit about what's normal and what's madness. His genius was that he didn't just stop there; he pursued the healing power of the moment in his own dramatic form. *Opening Night* is a masterpiece because Cassavetes created a moment—and that is its own leap of faith—in which people onstage and off, onscreen and off, do not shrink from but embrace the most

**"I met John in 1957. He taught me everything I know about the business and a lot about life. We went to Ireland to make *Middle of Nowhere*. On the plane he said, 'Give me the script.' I didn't have it. So we went right into a meeting with the director, Don Chaffey, and the writer, Ted Allan, and proceeded to tell them what should be changed and how it should be played."**

**—SEYMOUR CASSEL, actor**



Joan Blondell, Gazzara and Rowlands in *Opening Night*.

only hedge in the world against the inevitability of death.

In entering the moment and then the next, and the next, Myrtle finally accomplishes what she has been trying unconsciously to do all along: break the strictures of both the play and her life. Her success is a kind of ecstasy, and there's something in this ecstasy that

basic and perennial problem of human consciousness: how to exist in time with the certainty of their mortality.

In *Opening Night*, as in his art and life, John Cassavetes charted the inescapable human pursuit of the meaning embodied in a wonderful old Ladino saying: "Our hope is to give time time." ☸