

## **THE ACHIEVEMENT OF JOHN CASSAVETES: AN AMERICAN GENIUS**

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**By Michael Ventura**

“You think you’re sensitive?! You can’t even vomit!”

*Peter Falk to Ben Gazzara in Husbands*

In 50 years or 500, anyone interested in our patterns of escapism will have hundreds of miles of film and videotape to watch. But if they are interested as well in what Henry James once called “the terrible algebra” of our private lives, their surest guide on celluloid will be John Cassavetes.

The art of John Cassavetes is an art of crowded close-ups and broken sentences. The speech of Cassavetes is the speech of hesitation that has become American speech -- rags of words that seem torn from complete sentences, made to suffice uneasily when they suffice at all. For Cassavetes knows that there are few things sadder now than Americans trying to speak. The words aren't with us anymore. They're just not there. Cassavetes' films can be frightening and discomforting because he doesn't try to fill in the terrible awkwardness -- the thinly patched over silences -- that American “talking” has become. There aren't snappy lines and neat cuts in his films. Instead, a critical sentence will trail off, and one person will look at another in a naked plea for acceptance without understanding as a condition.

I am thinking of Gus (Cassavetes) and Archie (Peter Falk) in the toilet-stall in *Husbands*, Archie trying to vomit up words the way he'll soon vomit up his beer and his grief, but he just can't get the goddamn thing inside him to *talk*. Archie looks at Gus; Gus looks at Archie. Those looks are all they have and they make them count. They are not, and they will not let themselves become, afraid of each other's eyes. Amid the shit and the vomit and their own absolute bewilderment at their own lives, they know that should they lose the ability to look into each other's eyes, they'll lose all. All hope, all love. They make the look enough, because it has to be. And one could do worse than make this the model of one's courage.

And alongside the silences and the awkwardness in Cassavetes, there are the sudden screams and equally sudden beatific smiles. Smiles that sanctify these people who are trying so hard, and so sanctify life itself.

Only Chaplin and Fellini have achieved with mere smiles the visual power of Cassavetes smiles. Only they have joined him in making this basic human gesture -- accessible to everyone -- the term of human victory. What a relief it is when a Cassavetes character smiles, what a joy. In *Husbands*, Harry (Ben Gazzara) tortured by a dependence on a life he hates, still is able to truly laugh, truly smile, though it comes and goes so quickly. Because at least he loves his friends, whether or not they understand him anymore, and despite having gone past their ability to help him. It is as though he knows in his bones that no love is wasted. Ever. Harry smiles at Gus and I want to cry.

(An echo of Brecht, something he said of a play he loved: “That's great art; nothing obvious in it -- I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.”)

Or in *A Woman Under the Influence*, Nick (Falk) running up and down the stairs after Mabel (Gena Rowlands), the mother of his three children, who's just tried to kill herself,

and he yelling that *he'll* kill her, and kill the kids, too; and he runs into the living room and sees her standing there with her bleeding hands and the three kids standing around her trying to protect her from *him* -- and Nick stands stock still a second, and then *laughs*. Not a hysterical laugh. A real laugh. God bless actor Peter Falk for the *reality* of that laugh, for the sudden attack of grace. This is, after all, a roomful of people who love each other -- bleeding hands, screams, panic, and all.

And these people had better love each other right then, or forget about love, because there's not much out there but bleeding hands, screams, and panics; if our love can't cut that then, yes, we have good reason to be afraid. There's nothing else to hold what's left of the world together.

*That* is Cassavetes' vision. Two people being able to look at each other and recognize their love, or *not* being able to look at each other and recognize anything (*Faces*), after a grueling experience.

Bergman's people may make or not make peace with God, or the Void, or Death, or whatever. Ford's and Hawks' people see themselves as part of a story (as many real-life people do, often calling the story "history"); at the end of a Ford or Hawks film, the characters may or may not make peace with the story they feel themselves part of. Fellini's characters may or may not make peace with themselves. Cassavetes' people must make or not make peace with *each other*. He knows no other terms, nothing else seems important to him, and who can blame him? Two people being able, or not being able, to look at each other after a grueling experience. *That* is his ultimate test for all our codes, manners, morals, spiritualisms, politics, economics, psychologies. And to give that test its due, he has totally reshaped the vocabulary of film.

Few people are more stupid about Cassavetes than the Hollywood film community. The run of them know so little about the vocabulary of film that they've inherited, and so precious little about the relation of technique to content, that they actually think Cassavetes' technique is sloppy.

To explain why it isn't, we have to get a bit technical ourselves and go all the way back to D.W. Griffith and the invention of the close-up: a means for looking at what one individual face is thinking. Back to Griffith's virtual invention of cutting (as opposed to just splicing the film): a means of comparing one person's reaction with another's, or with an overall event. To Eisenstein's montage: umpteen individual reactions or visions in a composition musical in nature, the harmonies of seeing. And to Griffith's invention of tracking and Murnau's sophistication of it: following one subject past a varied background, unifying background and foreground.

*These are all techniques of compared privacies.*

Through these techniques, a story is told by establishing each character's private reactions and meshing them together in terms of the storyteller's overview. They are techniques invented by people (Griffith and Eisenstein mostly) interesting in using film to tell the kinds of stories that novels and plays had been accustomed to telling -- and 19<sup>th</sup> Century novels and plays, at that. Griffith's and Eisenstein's special preoccupation was the telling of *epic* stories. In an epic, there is a huge amount of material to harmonize into a whole. Therefore, every bit of information was reduced to its smallest part. We all know the kind of screen-glance between two people that denotes a major silence between them; we don't see the whole silence, we see a shorthand for the silence. This shorthand

is fine when that silence is a small part of, say, *Birth of a Nation*.

But this shorthand has become so totally the *vocabulary* of the vast majority of films, of virtually every commercial film ever made, that as technique it is not questioned. This is assumed to be *film technique*, period, something that occurred because that's how film technique had to be -- and not because certain assumptions about reality and storytelling structured the very discovery of the technique.

When the silences between people are part of the essential *subject* of the film, then the shorthand becomes not only unnecessary but inappropriate. Bad art. Lousy technique. It is lousy technique to explore the awkwardness between people who love each other by defending the audience from that very awkwardness. Shorthand is inappropriate here. We are not about to cut to a cavalry charge. We have to watch these people. If we are uncomfortable about watching these people, *that* says something about us. Which is what the movie is for. What the technique is for.

Let the man speak for himself:

"What people usually do is trim a long film. But Al Ruban and I and Maurice MacKendry, who edited *Faces*, all sat there and discussed what would happen if we did make certain trims. We went through the same things that everyone else would do in a more professional way. And we came to the conclusion that each cut we made hurt the film... The timings of the people were real. And so, in altering the timings, we were altering the truth."

To express what he needed to express, Cassavetes had to pretend that there'd never been a Griffith, never been an Eisenstein -- much less a Ford or a Hawks. (Though I have complete faith that Cassavetes reveres these men as much as the fine artists who inherited their techniques; and more than the run of assholes who don't even know that their techniques *are* techniques -- are, that is, specific means to specific ends, and not universal laws.) Say that Griffith is Beethoven, Cassavetes is Charlie Parker. Say that Ford is Brahams; Cassavetes is Mingus. Say that Lubitsch is Mozart; Cassavetes is Louis Armstrong.

The Europeans know this. A well-known European director who will remain unnamed (the statement was made to me as a guest and not as a journalist), told me, "Cassavetes is my god!" And Rajko Grlic, the Yugoslavian director of *Bravo Maestro*, told me that seeing *Shadows* is what made him want to make films in the first place.

*Shadows* (1959) was very influential in Europe, and very popular. And I doubt it was a coincidence that it predated all of Bergman's innovations, and most of Godard's. In fact, I doubt it is a coincidence that Bergman's vocabulary of film leapt in its concerns after first *Shadows* and then *Faces* became so well known about European filmmakers. Say it loud: Bergman's work changes entirely after Cassavetes had widely circulated in Europe. I don't think *Persona*, *Cries and Whispers*, *Scenes from a Marriage*, *Face to Face* or *Autumn Sonata* would have been possible without Cassavetes -- they are very different from *The Seventh Seal*, *Wild Strawberries*, and other pre-Cassavetes Bergman. And so many moments of so many are now influenced by the sense of timing that Bergman learned from Cassavetes.

(I might be wrong, but Bergman himself would have to say so for me to consider it. The dates of the Cassavetes films jibe too perfectly with the changes in Bergman's work, and Cassavetes technique always, to my knowledge, predates Bergman's. All of which

doesn't mean shit to a tree -- and doesn't diminish by one iota German's magnificent achievement -- except to hopefully shake up the Americans who admire Bergman and put down Cassavetes.)

There is nothing in the vocabulary of Griffith and Eisenstein and Ford to convey the agony of awkwardness -- when this awkwardness has become not just a temporary embarrassment but a stance toward all of life. There is nothing in the Masters of film to convey the terror of silence between people -- the silence that cannot be broken no matter how hard a man tries to break it.

Archie in that bathroom: "It's -- a tremendous need -- an anxiety -- you see, that's what happens, I *forget* what it is -- what is it? -- it's gotta be important -- what are we supposed to be feeling?" He thinks a moment to himself, then: "*That* would be terrible. I'm not gonna say it. Gus, if I died yesterday, I'm clean." And then he pukes.

If this is grammar, it is the grammar of our lives. It's not recorded in any books, or any other films. There's nothing in literature or the cinema to convey a man going through that. Cassavetes had to invent it all on his own.

And when these people finally, finally, finally smile at each other, in a burst of love... oh my God, there is nothing in "standard film technique" to convey how far they had to go, how much they had to endure, the *texture* of their moments, for that smile to mean something.

Cassavetes discarded a cinema vocabulary meant for the telling of epics and melodrama, and invented all on his own a cinema vocabulary suited to intimacies, privacies. There is a great deal of Cassavetes in *Manhattan*, *Foxes*, *Kramer* (bless us) vs. *Kramer*, *Starting Over* -- go back to American film before *Shadows* and *Faces*, and you simply don't see moments like the major moments in these films.

So one day the outline of film history will read:

The Lumiere brothers and Edison invent the basic technology; Sennett makes film the first mass media with his ensemble, Dixieland-jazz style comedies; Griffith perfects close-ups, cutting, and tracking, for the telling of epics and melodramas; Chaplin applies Griffith's techniques to comedy, and Keaton refines the application; Eisenstein invents the montage; Warner Brothers makes the first sound film; Hitchcock, Lubitsch, and Hawks show what sound can do that silents couldn't; Ford consolidates every sound and silent technique into one consummate, overall vocabulary; Welles, Rossellini, Fellini, and Bergman create visual rhythms that everyone else makes use of for certain moods; Godard demonstrates where the vocabulary consolidated by Ford is inadequate to certain realities; Cassavetes creates a new vocabulary for dealing with intimacies; in the early '70s a new generation of filmmakers -- Scorsese, Altman, Lucas, Roeg -- work the innovations of Godard and Cassavetes tentatively, not definitively, into the vocabulary of the American feature film; by the end of the 70s, Woody Allen does the next major, Fordian work of consolidation, consolidating Cassavetes through Bergman with Ford through Ford-influenced Hawks. And that's where we are now.

Which is to say: Cassavetes is one of the *originators* -- the only one still alive. High time this town took its collective hat off to the man.

There is much more to say. About Cassavetes' humor. About his completely original scene structure, so that on first viewing no Cassavetes scene can be anticipated *at all*. (There are complaints that his scenes are too long, not because they are in fact too long

but because we are so incredibly spoiled. We know the variables so well of every scene we see in a conventional film, that the sense of NOT knowing drives us nuts now, and that cowardly discomfort comes out as “too long.”) About *Faces*, *Husbands*, and A *Woman Under the Influence* actually being commercially viable, and finding a wide, profitable audience. Et damn cetera. But this isn’t a book, it’s an essay, and it will have to content itself with sketches and outlines rather than details.

Only this: That I can’t think of any other American filmmaker but Cassavetes who can be compared to the most rigorous poetry. I am thinking of the Yugoslavian poet Vasko Popa, and a poem from his series “Games.” It is a poem called “The Wedding,” a poem before which *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Chapter Two* and *Starting Over* can only cringe, a poem worth quoting whole:

*Each takes off his skin  
Each uncovers his constellation  
Which has never seen the night*

*Each fills his skin with stones  
Each starts dancing with it  
By the light of his own stars*

*He who doesn’t stop until dawn  
He who doesn’t blink doesn’t drop  
He earns his skin*

*(This game is rarely played)*

This is the closet equivalent I can find in words to what Cassavetes is talking about. Although if Cassavetes had written the poem, the two people would have had to exchange their skins, would have had to earn each other’s skins as well as their own.

A game very, very rarely played. Still more rarely filmed.

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