

A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE: The Faces Are Somehow Ours
by Michael Ventura
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Walk out of almost any other movie and you go through a period of decompression. That reflection in the store-windows walking with you down the street ain't nothing, nothing at all, like Warren Beatty or Liv Ullman or Jack Nicholson. It takes a few minutes to adjust again to the friend you're walking with -- her face, or his face, is not so ideal or so expressive as the face you've been staring at for the last two hours. And what you have to say to each other is neither pithy nor profound. "That was really something, eh?" "I dunno. I liked when he... but that part when..." "You wanna cupa coffee?"

Nobody in the movie talked like *that*.

Looked at that way, even the best movies are lies. But after forty-five years of talking films we are so hypnotized by cinema conventions that we accept these lies without question. We accept that the characters we see will say nothing but what is pertinent to the situation and the plot. We accept an ideal of beauty so taken for granted, and so stylized, that even the best directors use it to enthrall us. Sitting in the dark for hours our attention has the quality of enthrallment: passive, immobile.

In live theater you never see the same performance twice: the vibration of the audience changes the timing and emphasis of the actors every night -- no stage actor can predict the performance he will give because he knows it is dependent on the special quality of the spectator's attention. In this sense movies exist almost independently of us. Even films that depict our seamiest lives use acting and technical conventions that smooth out all our rough edges. So, in this particular sense, our highest popular art proceeds almost without us.

There's some irate film buff out there who's already mumbling about how he's gonna write me a nasty letter. Gimme a chance. I like movies too. I've been stretching a point, but it is a point so largely ignored in film-writing that we can afford to stretch it just this once: We are people who have looked for decades into a magic mirror. We are most of us not very beautiful, but our image in the mirror is extraordinary. Our conversations are repetitive, cliched, always going off on tangents; but we listen to the mirror-people with their easy wisecracks, and their profound statements timed just right for the scene. (Our profound statements are usually too early or much too late.) Even when trying to show us how it *really* is with us, the mirror can't help saying: You are the fairest in the land.

Even the most virulent obscenity in our country -- I mean the Mafia -- appears on the screen with an attractiveness and charisma that it never (believe me) has on the street.

(America! The country where, short of war, the only way to make more money than the criminals is to portray the criminals beautifully.)

You are the fairest in the land. And we spend millions of dollars a year trying to live up to what the mirror shows us. And we waste every sort of energy -- from psychic to sexual -- in our pathetic mimicry of the mirror's ideal.

Because however much fun it is to have *such* a magic mirror, remember what the fairy-tales say: magic is always dangerous. And a woman who combs her hairs for years before a mirror that never reflects her is liable to look a little strange after a while. That we Americans are looking and acting stranger every year, might have something to do with this: we have almost no art that mirrors us as we are. We have no checkpoints but each

other, and we are each so confused that most of us aren't much use that way. We've almost nowhere to go for a reflection of our shaky realities.

No, Linear Reader, I've not been rambling in circles. All this seemed necessary to establish the context in which I see John Cassavetes' new film *A Woman Under the Influence*.

The filmic style of John Cassavetes is welded to what we *are*. "The most important thing," Chaplin once said, "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." And that's all Cassavetes' camera looks for. He follows his people around in their living rooms and bedrooms and kitchens -- where our real victories and defeats happen to us, where we undergo our breakdowns and break-throughs -- and keeps your eyes on their faces; sometimes he keeps the focus on their faces for longer than you want to look or can bear to look.

Cassavetes has a kind of reverence for the human face. It's not for nothing that his first great film was called *Faces*. He seems to think that a real face undergoing real things is more adventure than most of us can stand, and is more profound than our meanings can elucidate. Through his faces he exposes adventure merely as a way to keep from looking at each other. And the way too many of us are too often profound is for Cassavetes only a means to try to make what we see in each other's faces *manageable*.

What his films are about is how unmanageable it really is. When these characters scream it is not in a carefully constructed scene, with the scream pitching at the climax. Suddenly there is a scream or a slap and you flinch. Some desperation in the character has suddenly erupted and you are as unprepared as he is. And if five minutes later he's smiling, that's the way we are too, crazy one minute and calm the next, losing and regaining our balance in the continual tightrope-walk that living with each other has become.

Chaplin again: "Recently I saw a film called *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It's well done, but you can't tell me their relationship is real. It's too much in one key. Humans are not that consistently irksome to each other. Maybe he says, 'I'll get you, you bitch, so and so and so,' but a minute later he might be saying 'I've got a splinter in my thumb.'" And so this film, gut-wrenching and heart-wrenching as it is, yet uplifts you with their smiles and their laughs and the frank concern and bewilderment when they look at each other. Their love. Or suddenly a guest at a party, whom you haven't seen before in this film, and will not see again, says to Nick: "You really wanna know what I think. You're a shit." The suddenness and the frankness effects you as it effects him. Each moment in this film is new and fresh simply because the rhythms are the rhythms of what *happens* -- how we look at each other, the things we say.

As for *saying* things, they, like you and me, don't say much that's quotable. Where did the punch of the film really come across? In lines like this: "Sit down or I'll knock you on your ass!" And later, Mabel: "You know, I really think I'm crazy!" Nick: "Tell me about it." Or Mabel at the end: "We gotta get some food in this house." It's just Cassavetes telling us to open our ears. That woman talking about groceries might really be saying she loves you. That man threatening to knock you on your ass might be begging you to understand that he can't help you, he needs help as bad as you. We don't really know how to talk, Cassavetes says. The real messages come garbled, they're in code. And you

gotta learn to listen all over again. And look at the faces.

Screw all that ideal stuff. Even the best of it is cheap thrills after this.

The doctor is there and Nick's mother is there and the kids are upstairs crying, and they're about to commit Mabel to an institution. They're just as crazy as she is -- they almost know that and she *does* know it. But she can't handle that day-to-day, hour-to-hour craziness anymore, and she knows that too; she's fighting it but she knows it. She's on one side of the room -- of the world! -- and they're on the other and she's trying to tell them.

"I have five points, Nick. I figured it out... for me... for us... one is -- love... two is -- friendship... and three is... comfort... and... and four is... I'm a good mother, Nickie... I belong to you. Those are my five points, I have five points."

"Mabel I love you," but he knows as he says it -- it's in his face, look at the face even harder than you look at the situation -- he knows his love is a pitiful thing against what has been done to each of them. It's not enough to stop what's happening.

"I have five points... five... points," and he grabs her and holds her and just keeps saying, "Come back to me come back to me." But that's further than she can go. The doctor comes close with the tranquilizer injection, and Nick turns on him in some desperate attempt to protect Mabel even from himself and yells "YOU GET AWAY FROM HER OR I'LL KNOCK YOU ON YOUR ASS!" She breaks away and runs upstairs and the doctor runs after her and when Nick drags himself upstairs he sees his mother and the doctor wrestling with Mabel on the bed to give her the injection while the three kids are screaming and trying to pull these people off their mother. Jesus Christ. You think *The Exorcist* had horror? Dig Nick's face as he stands there, numb, watching it. *That's* horror.

Cut -- violently, so it hurts your stomach -- cut to Nick's pick-up pulling in at the construction site the next morning. I mean, it's about four hours later and this guy's gotta go to *work*. So far, in the enlightened discussions I've heard about this film, nobody's mentioned that. Watchers-of-the-social-scene, take note.

But do you know, this movie leaves you feeling good!

I know it doesn't sound like it, but most of the people I know who saw this movie felt good after. Stunned, but good. And is it just me, or are our eyes a little more open when we walk out, and do the faces we've grown used to seem more beautiful? Watching Dan talk about it, look at his face. Seeing Kay telling a story in her living room, and thinking if Johnny Cassavetes were filming this right now it would be beautiful -- because it *is* beautiful. Seeing Katherine walk in and thinking, My god she looks eleven years old today, what happened to her? Thinking it's going on in their eyes too. Hoping this sensitized state will last.

"This was about courage," writes Doris Lessing in her *Golden Notebook*. "It's a small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life, because injustice and cruelty is at the root of life. And the reason why I have only given my attention to the heroic or the beautiful or the intelligent, is because I won't accept that injustice and cruelty, and so won't accept that small endurance that is bigger than anything."

Mabel Longhetti is a woman under the influence. Of her husband, her family, her house, her desires, and so under the influence of cruelty and injustice. But there aren't

any villains. Her people are just as under the influence as she is. Just as crazy. Just as pushed and pulled by cruelty and injustice so pervasive that for these people there is no way out, no hope of change. Nicky understands her craziness -- not with his head, but in his gut -- and loves her for it, and panics uncontrollably whenever she expresses herself in front of anyone outside him and the kids. And every day they do what they have to do to stay alive; and the more they do, the more they're trapped. Under the influence.

"Just be yourself, just be yourself," he keeps telling her, the day she gets out of the mental hospital, "nothing you do is wrong in this house." And as soon as she tries, he panics again, he can't stand it. She can't stand it either, and she runs into the bathroom and cuts her hand the kids are screaming again and the blood is running. Nicky just plain freaks. And finally he's so fucking crazy he's running after the kids yelling, and slapping her, and running upstairs after the kids and downstairs -- three goddamned times! till the third time it makes your teeth hurt to watch it -- and then the kids are around Mabel trying to protect her from Daddy, and he sees it and stops cold. And kinda laughs.

Look at his face: Jesus Christ I'm just as crazy as anybody. "They wanna see how you are," he says, with a dumb smile on his face. Mabel, one bloody hand at her side and the other hand ruffling her kid's hair, starts to walk upstairs. Nicky follows. Such a sense of release. No great culmination. Only that they *do* love each other. Keep on keepin' on. "A small painful sort of courage." The love these people have for each other, and their never-wavering, dogged determination to keep on living. "That small endurance that is bigger than anything."

And it may yet save us... Or at least make life bearable. Worth it. Is what Cassavetes is talking about. A few of Mabel's points. Love friendship comfort. It's too late for a Shakespeare to say it good. It's too late for saying it good to matter. Look at the faces. Right now a small endurance may be bigger than anything.

Upstairs tucking in the kids. Nick: "We got through the night, it's a tough night, and tomorrow is gonna be better." A sense of relaxation. What did it come from? It's enough that it's there. Mabel's incongruous hand, the blood dripping. (Nick and Mabel I keep saying... Cassavetes' wife Gena Rowlands, his friend Peter Falk, who somehow look, I this film, like they live down the block, not Hollywood at all.) The blood drying on the hand. Mabel's voice the voice of a mother again. And a friend, a comforter. The points. Her kid: "I'm worried about you." "Oh, sweetheart, don't worry about me -- I'm a grown-up."

But when this world gets stripped down as it does in this film, you see that there's only a functional difference between kids and grown-ups. The grown-ups work. They're all just as helpless. Beautiful faces now, though. You can't let the word "helpless" or an interpretation of the situation throw you now. There's something beautiful coming from the faces. You'll feel it as you leave. Whether it'll last or not, Cassavetes doesn't say.

You walk out of most films wishing you were someone else. We didn't walk out of this film like that. These faces were somehow ours. It wasn't pretty, and you won't get plaudits as a philosopher thinking about it, their agonies were terribly real but their small, temporary victory was also real. And so: possible. Tangible enough to be shared. And yeah I know there are a lot of issues, and you can discuss them till your mouth dries up. But there's also something that you can't discuss. And I've talked enough. They clean up the mess. The phone is ringing. It's probably Nick's mother wanting to know what happened. "We gotta get some more food in this house," Mabel says.