



Irrationality as Everyday Poetry:  
Cassavetes versus the Method

The Actor/Director Relationship in American Cinema

John Hayden Mann

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These are extracts taken from a Masters of Art assignment

## Abstract

Marlon Brando could go “Wow” in *On the Waterfront* and Dustin Hoffman could limp to the kitchen sink in *Midnight Cowboy* and the lack of life in a conventional movie frame was replaced by ‘magical life.’

(Norman Mailer, 1972)

This paper will address the contrasts, similarities and legacies that exist between the Method and the more existential form of screen acting and direction as utilized in the films of John Cassavetes. Its aim is to bring forward evidence that the Cassavetes’ style ultimately produces more innovative, visceral cinema, bringing with it the most authentic forms of human representation outside of documentary film. It will explore theories within both systems, concentrating on arguments linked around; notions of actor as icon; ideas on director as facilitator (or manipulator) and the many contexts in which Truthful acting can be interpreted or identified.

Two examples from Method trained performances will be cited and two from the Cassavetes’ oeuvre. These are; James Dean’s role as Cal in Elia Kazan’s *East of Eden* (1955) which shall be compared to Peter Falk’s role as Nick Longhetti in John Cassavetes’ *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) - while the second chapter will concentrate on Ellen Burstyn’s role as Alice in Martin Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974), and its many relations to Gena Rowlands’ performance as Myrtle in John Cassavetes’ *Opening Night* (1978). This list not only forms an evolutionary process when arranged chronologically, but also provides a labyrinth of connections that will be examined throughout the paper.

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One

Protagonist as Anachronism

James Dean in *East of Eden*

Peter Falk in *A Woman Under the Influence*

# East of Eden

## Synopsis

Monterey, California, 1917. Cal, a rebellious teenager, follows Kate to the local brothel. He believes that she is not only the business' long-serving Madam there, but also his mother. He lingers outside the building until one of her henchmen forces him to leave. He then returns home, meeting up with his brother Aron and Abra (Aron's girlfriend). Cal has a crush on Abra, but is too awkward and shy to let his feelings be known.

Cal's father Adam is a local rancher interested in the refrigeration of farm produce. In contrast, Cal believes that bean production will eventually prove more profitable as the war comes to an end.

Cal then visits the brothel once again, but this time comes face to face with Kate. Upon seeing her son, she screams for help. Cal is thrown out and taken into the sheriff's custody. The sheriff shows him proof that she is indeed his estranged mother. This knowledge urges Cal to have a deeper love for his father, and he becomes more involved in the running of the ranch.

After Adam's refrigeration scheme fails, Cal attempts to pay back his father's financial losses by devising his own secret venture. He asks Kate for a \$5000 loan. She agrees, telling him not to let anyone know about the arrangement.

Cal then meets Abra at a fairground and they fall in love. Later that night, Aron and Cal fight, leaving Abra now feeling closer to Cal.

Cal's business scheme pays off. He gives his father the profits during a surprise birthday party that he and Abra have organized. But his father's refusal of the gift, together with Aron's declaration that he and Abra are to be married, forces Cal to tell them about Kate. Cal then takes Aron to the brothel. Sickened by his mother, Aron immediately leaves Monterey to enlist in the army. Adam suffers a stroke, leaving him paralyzed. Cal and Abra agree to nurse him during his last months. Adam and Cal are now finally reconciled.

# A Woman Under the Influence

## Synopsis

California, 1972. Nick Longhetti, a lower middle-class husband and father of two, telephones his wife Mable telling her that he has to work overtime at the quarry, therefore cancelling plans for their romantic evening together. Mable cannot handle this change well, showing signs of her emotionally unstable condition. After having sent the children off to their grandmother's, she decides to visit a local bar where she gets drunk. She then begins a conversation with a stranger. Mable then invites the man back to their home where he spends the night. After realizing her mistake, she throws him out the next morning. Nick returns from his night shift with his fellow workmates, unaware of his wife's adultery. Mable cooks a spaghetti breakfast for everyone and shows the first signs of losing control. This is an embarrassment to Nick.

Later that same day, Mable babysits her neighbor's children, but shows more signs of ill health. A scuffle ensues when Nick arrives home seeing his wife and their neighbor arguing over how she has allowed the children to play around the house naked. Nick then sends for a doctor to evaluate Mable's condition. She is then urged to spend some time in an institution.

Nick feels guilty for his wife's internment and this, together with his blame for a workmate's injury, compels him to pick his children up from school and take them to the beach for some 'fun.' The children feel awkward and sense that their father is acting weirdly.

Six months later, Mable returns home, yet shows little recovery during a welcoming celebration. After being reprimanded by his mother, Nick tells all the guests to leave apart from close relatives. Mable then attempts to make polite conversation, but this only appears uncomfortable and rude. Once everyone has left, Mable becomes more frenzied, attempting to slash her wrists in the bathroom. Nick intervenes, and tries to put a stop to her behavior by slapping her across the face. She falls to the floor, finally aware of her own disorder. The children are eventually put to bed by Mable, who now



appears to be more capable in coming to terms with her illness. The couple then begins to tidy up the leftovers from the party. They finally retire to bed both satisfied that Mable's acceptance of her condition will one day lead to recovery.

# Protagonist as Anachronism

James Dean in *East of Eden*

Peter Falk in *A Woman Under the Influence*

(sample excerpts)

Peter Falk's Nick Longhetti in *A Woman Under the Influence* is burdened with the responsibility of having to tackle the complexities of his wife's poor mental health. In doing this, he himself creates a language that seems inappropriate and inane.<sup>1</sup> This is the core dilemma. His naive nature in having faith in her recovery, especially during her convalescence, therefore appears all the more tragic, as he is the only one unaware of his wife's incapability to readjust. This is where the Cassavetes' approach to non-communicative behavior takes hold (as it is Nick's inability to fathom her illness that results in turmoil). Here, we see the Method actor's nuances of attributing his or her character with a greater desperation come into play. The desire to welcome an almost enveloping feeling of distress has absolutely no way to express itself intellectually, therefore its only form of expression becomes a physical manifestation, becoming symbolic of many Cassavetes' fictions. It is also where many of Cassavetes' detractors have vilified him for producing two decades of seemingly self-gratifying vacuity. But he is not necessarily seeking our understanding. We may attempt to decipher these strange worlds with their off-balanced sensibilities or we can choose to take the easy option and condemn the work for being self-indulgent. Even the most jovial forms of conduct, for example, a businessmen's party scene with sex workers in Cassavetes' *Faces (1968)*, are utilized as a substitute for clear talking. These are therefore temporary masks, concealing and disfiguring the true essence of each character (an area which Cassavetes was greatly fascinated by)<sup>2</sup>. And so the norm is substituted for a different form of dialectics, where odd movements and incomprehensible noises are chosen to describe more outré states of emotions and so it is *abstraction* (involving neurasthenic characterization) that is the main cause of this subversion.

Like Falk, James Dean's manipulation of the *East of Eden* script, favoring silent gesticulation over eloquence, allows for transference to occur within our prescribed

understanding of film narrative. This forces the dialogue itself to actually become the subtext, thereby allowing the actions to become predominant, projecting all the visual keynotes with which we need to translate a scene. As in watching a silent movie, these pictures overpower any text, bringing a unique vehemence to the 'dialogue as imperative' driven formula. This is unmistakably Cassavetes. The decision to engage by action is fundamental to the Cassavetes' model on what he considered to be a progressive form of social interaction (employing 'regressive' tactics). For instance, when Falk cannot persuade Rowland's to "get off the couch!" (*Fig.1*), he reverts to slapping her across the face, resulting in her crashing to the floor. His exhaustive attempts at reasoning, whether diplomatic or merely futile throughout the film, now prove insufficient, and the internalized frustration finally breaks out into physical brutality. Dean's Cal also communicates in similar fashion, externalizing vexed emotions in fervent acts of aggression, lashing out at his all too perfect brother (*Fig.2*).

Political and social implications also need to be examined when comparing these two male characters. Even though *East of Eden's* narrative takes place in 1914 Monterey California,<sup>3</sup> Dean's character is of the 1950's, embodying an antithesis of the Eisenhower ideal. Accordingly, Falk's Nick Longhetti is probably this fifties teenager twenty years down the line, as embittered, albeit sensitive family man, too old to be part of the sixties youth movement, too uninformed to be a radical within fifties Beat culture (or more wonderfully, too disillusioned by Dean's death to remain confrontational). He is the graceless, downtrodden everyman, incapable of reaching the heights of his once youthful idealism.

## Aggression as Mode of Communication



(Fig. 1) Acts of Misogyny

When Falk cannot persuade Rowland's to "get off the couch!" he reverts to slapping her across the face, resulting in her crashing to the floor. His exhaustive attempts at reasoning, whether diplomatic or merely futile throughout the film, now prove insufficient and the internalized frustration finally breaks out into physical brutality.



(Fig. 2) Inarticulate Enigma

Dean's Cal also communicates in similar fashion, externalizing vexed emotions in fervent acts of aggression, lashing out at his all too perfect brother.

As a blue-collar laborer, he (Nick) is demoralized by the system, yet even though possessing an unconditional love for his family, this affection cannot be expressed correctly (for example, conforming to what constitutes as 'normal'). In one dinner scene where he senses that abnormality is overruling social etiquette, he shouts "Normal conversation!" indicating not just his own brusqueness but as an order for his family to communicate in the expected, rational manner.

Similarly, Cal's incapacity to relate via thoughts and emotions to his estranged mother mirrors Nick's inadequate communication skills towards his wife. Cal's proclamation to his unresponsive parent (played by the Oscar winning Jo Van Fleet) "Talk to me, talk to me, please!" while being grappled to the floor by her henchmen, resonates with Falk's continuous attempts to tap into Mable's psychotic state, which ultimately culminates in violent intervention. 4

Cassavetes' attempt to allude Dean's mysticism into his own characters understandably failed, as their angst continuously overpowered any significant resonance with human spirituality. The poetically aestheticized James Dean icon is undoubtedly structured from various elements not inherently homogenous or transferable to Cassavetes' personalities. Youthfulness, fatalistic obsessions, ambiguous media hyped theories (on sexual orientation), three marketable Hollywood films and the mandatory premature death, all harmonize to bestow an actor cult status. But even though Cassavetes' stalwarts are bereft of such qualities, they are still the most alive creatures placed before the camera in post 1920's American cinema. I note 'post 1920's' American cinema, as both critic Morris Dickstein and Jean Luc Goddard (equal admirers of Cassavetes) have correctly equated the Cassavetes' style with that of early moviemaking.

His (Cassavetes) roots are with the independent filmmakers of an earlier period, when all 'technique' smacked of Hollywood slickness and artificiality, but a hand held camera and grainy close-ups were emblems of authenticity.

(Dickstein, 1979, pp. 55-8)

One thing I dislike about current French filmmaking is that when you go on set you are usually assisting at a very mournful operation, you laugh *after* the takes, never *during*, as it were. This is very serious, because in the days

of Sennett and Griffith, when everything was being invented, cinema was created by very jolly people. They had enormous fun. They worked in an atmosphere of wonderful spontaneity. But today, I think it is this verve and simplicity in filmmaking we must try to recapture.

(Godard, 1968, p.123)

However, this is problematic as even though Cassavetes' characters may be the most liberating before the lens, Dean embodies the entire 'truth' in regards to remaining an untouchable vision. The entourage of Falk, Ben Gazzara and Seymour Cassell therefore cannot fulfill this glamorous ideal in complete totality, as their instinctual, intellectual and physical attributes are not as universally appealing. In contrast, Dean curiously embodied the ideal Stanislavski model, in regards to his interests in the arts and general intuitive zest.<sup>5</sup> A comparison can be made with the then twenty nine year old Stanislavski actor protégé, Alexander Pavlovich Lenski, dated October 1876:

Not only the perfect example of the romantic lead, but, as a painter, sculptor and writer, a model of the literate, cultivated artist Stanislavski wanted all actors to become.

(Benedetti, 1988)

Paradoxically, James Dean automatically sanitized the Method<sup>6</sup> by performing within a package produced by and for the establishment (*East of Eden*). Some may argue that this is in the Method's best interest, allowing the actor to shine when presented within such a conservative context (as the surrounding participants take on an almost perfunctory or redundant participation)<sup>7</sup>. But it is usually more problematic. The most perplexing aspect of the Method actor situated within the 'middle of the road' environment (here being the Hollywood studio) may be found in one interpretation of how we believe, or perceive their Truth. Stanislavski's statement that "Truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or in our colleagues" is regarded by many as the official line. Another explanation can be found in 19<sup>th</sup> century realism, in which Truth was first acknowledged in the United States by the works of James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Thomas Eakins, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. A column that appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1871 entitled *The Truth*

*of Appearances* was one such recognition of this movement. The painting under scrutiny was *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*, an oil-on-canvas constituting an overall sense of the familiar and one that art critic Calvin Tomkin described as:

‘... an almost perfect realization of the pragmatic ideal – of the evocation of the general through the particular. By paying infinitely close attention to precise details – to the way these men in their boats looked at that moment, on that river, in that light – Eakins achieved an image that goes beyond the moment and into the collective consciousness.’

(Tomkins, 1982 p.103)



(Fig. 3) *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull* (Thomas Eakins) 1871  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

Obviously there is no one single truth that conveniently defines the Method, yet one could say the technique is as knowing and as old as the experiences in the viewer themselves, registering a profoundly recognizable understanding. This comprehension justifies our existence, not as sole entities, but as connected beings projecting our personal consciousness into others. It is therefore reasonable to read it as where an agreement on what is authentic is made between artist and spectator, again reaffirming the human need for a deeply pro-social familiarity. The philosopher William James wrote in 1907 “Truth is satisfactory to believe ... guaranteed not to conflict with

subsequent experience.” Whatever academic interpretation is chosen, it is most simply a form of acting that generates a sense of likeness to oneself – a rare instinctive ability to transcend merely a good performance, and in doing so, achieving greatness through honesty.

### Legacy as Progression or Regression?

In conclusion, it is worth briefly examining how the Method, including Cassavetes’ input, has infiltrated the mainstream on such a large level, via Peter Falk’s performance in a popular television series.

When confronted with the image of Falk in such an unconventional context, for example in *A Woman Under the Influence*, our association of this character automatically resonates with the TV icon. Therefore, we are not only seeing a change in what our perceptions of Peter Falk are, but more importantly, we perceive an uncomfortable readjustment of sensibility within a fictional character. The viewer is therefore dealing with a more interesting, allegorical situation where the existing baggage that we possess as a TV viewer, has to be re-evaluated. His embarrassing delayed reactions and inarticulate cries of confusion in Cassavetes’ films are in complete contrast to the rhetoric of the perceptive investigator. As *Columbo*, he is an anachronism, whose shabby elegance is a wonderful oxymoron for an incredibly astute mind. As Nick Longhetti in *Woman*, he is the reverse; a conventionally well presented ordinary man possessing an inability to express his frustrations and anxieties - in short, totally unable to place the pieces of the puzzle together. Therefore, we now have to plough through his performance in *Woman*, instead of being passively content (as in *Columbo*) while attempting to decipher these fractured semiotic codes. But it is these exaggerated telltale signs that are so paradoxically stimulating and simultaneously unnerving. The inconsistencies, fumbling’s, enigmatic gesturing’s and improvisations of *Columbo* are all Method, and prove universally appealing, resulting in an international plethora of parodies (here it is important to note that this iconography was also used to equally subversive advantage by Wim Wenders in *Wings of Desire*, 1987).<sup>1</sup>



Therefore, ironically the Method, once an avant-garde pedagogy adopted by the politically active Group Theatre in the 1930's, was now given a regular slot on primetime television.<sup>2</sup> Hence transference *was* achieved (via certain diluting processes), imitating Truffaut's statement on Dean's popularity with large audiences who also recognized him as an anachronism within a theatrical context. This undeniably illustrates our desires to observe and empathize with idiosyncrasy, taking therapeutic comfort in viewing the perfectly imperfect.

Two

Women on the Edge

Ellen Burstyn in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*

Gena Rowlands in *Opening Night*

# Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore

## Synopsis

Socorro, Mexico. As a young girl, Alice dreams of becoming a singer, but twenty-seven years later she finds herself being a housewife to a truck driver and mother to Tommy, her ill-behaved twelve-year-old son. When her husband is accidentally killed in an automobile accident, she decides to leave Socorro with Tommy to pursue her childhood dream of becoming a singer in Monterey, California.

After a few unsuccessful auditions in disreputable bars, she is eventually hired as a singer/pianist in a local saloon. Here she meets Ben, who turns violent during their brief courtship. This forces her to escape the area with Tommy. She finally finds work in a roadside diner, meeting a divorced farmer named David and begins a romantic relationship with him.

Tommy soon meets a girl named Audrey who introduces him to drink and petty crime. Tommy then has an argument with David at his ranch, forcing David to hit the boy due to his constant bad behavior. Alice despises him for this, and so decides to end their partnership. She then has a dispute with Tommy whilst driving home and stops the car, telling him to walk the rest of the way. Tommy then goes to Audrey's house and they get drunk before getting involved in a childish prank. Alice then fetches Tommy from the local police station, apologetic for her drastic act.

David returns to the diner the next day and he and Alice reunite, embracing amid the diners' applause. Alice and Tommy then decide that they are not going back to Monterey, and agree to settle in the area with David.

# Opening Night

## Synopsis

Myrtle Gordon (a famous stage and screen actress) prepares backstage for her entrance in her latest play *The Second Woman*. Once the play is over, she is mobbed by fans at the stage door, being particularly besieged by one female admirer. As Myrtle and her contingent of actors, director and playwright drive away in a limousine, a passing motorist kills the adoring teenage fan. Myrtle appears to be the only one disturbed by this, and voices her concern to her stage/real life lover Maurice and her director (the two closest men in her life), but they are unable to give her the consolation she needs.

Maurice then physically harms Myrtle during rehearsals. This, together with her guilt over the fan's death, affects the actress' psychological health. Myrtle then attends the girl's funeral, only to be harassed by the victim's family.

Myrtle's director and the play's author notice a change in the actress' behavior. They show their annoyance when she disrupts every rehearsal.

Myrtle has a hallucination, imagining fighting with the teenage girl. She then gets drunk before the play's gala opening night and turns the production into an improvised farce. Surprisingly, the audience warms to this change of course. The curtain goes down as Myrtle's friends and cast congratulate her on a successful performance.

# Women on the Edge

Ellen Burstyn in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*

Gena Rowlands in *Opening Night*

What does ... analysis consist of? Its purpose is to search out creative stimuli to attract (excite) the actor, lacking which there can be no identification with a part. The purpose of analysis is the emotional deepening of the soul of a part ... Analysis studies the external circumstances and events in the life of a human spirit in the part; and seeks out any spiritual or other material germane to creativeness. Analysis is not solely an intellectual process. Many other elements enter into it, all the capacities and qualities of an actor's nature ... Analysis is a means of coming to know, that is, to feel a play ... So that in the process of analysis one must use the mind with utmost caution.

(Stanislavski, 1926, p.20)

## Analysis

During the 1970's, John Cassavetes and Martin Scorsese chose contemporary representations of the 'star as protagonist' vehicle (whether indirectly referring to Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born* for Alice or Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* for *Opening Night*) to re-invent archetypal genre formulas. These female leads are still confronted with similar dilemmas (as wives, mothers, single women and movie stars) inherent within the traditional Hollywood melodrama. Yet due to the inclusion of subversion, whether it being psychotic forays into self-infliction or concerning themes of misogyny, they successfully and overtly distort tired expectancies. Death takes the form of the main catalyst in both plots, serving not only as a means to burden the protagonists with newfound anxieties, but also as a motivating factor for personal discovery. <sup>1</sup> This forces each woman to re-evaluate her existence (more specifically, her prescribed role within a conformist and restricting society). Alice does this by becoming less pedantic after her husband's passing, consciously deciding to break free

from the suburbanite existence and to follow her childhood dream of becoming a singer. She therefore seeks recognition as a performer, while Myrtle Gordon (the stage and screen actress of *Opening Night*) only wishes to hold onto her diminishing iconic status. In contrast, she possesses an inability to use her own trauma (the accidental death of a teenage girl from a passing car) in a similar 'life must go on' fashion, forcing herself to descend further into a journey of guilt and self-denigration, and in doing so, embodies a tormented individualist.

Each filmmaker can therefore be seen in a homogenous light. Despite professional collaborations, <sup>2</sup> their friendship grew from a mutual respect of thirties, forties and fifties Hollywood. Both Scorsese and Cassavetes were children who happily escaped into the tawdriness and theatricality of the Hollywood musical and comedy, to be later recharged by the electrifying naturalism of Elia Kazan's style. This, together with a healthy distrust of dogmatism (when used in an overtly political context) urged each filmmaker to omit stringent political issues out of material that, on first glance, would appear wholly appropriate.

Even though *Alice* was viewed by many as a milestone in depicting an unsentimental representation of female independence, Scorsese's decision not to project a staunch politico-moral stance (solely concentrating on a feminist perspective) was rightly justified. His explanation was that it was the "universality" of the story that lay in its appeal. Together with this, his open admittance that none of his previous work possessed the scope and sensibility required to fulfill such a politically charged film, are sufficient reasons on which to make a valid stand. <sup>3</sup> His tact is firmly rooted in the Kazan tradition where gender is usually superfluous <sup>4</sup> (Kazan expected an equally robust performance from Julie Harris in *East of Eden*, as he did from Dean) allowing Ellen Burstyn to become more instinctual, less open to categorization, accordingly providing a less stereotypically contrived depiction.

### Rationality via Psychoanalysis / Irrationality via Physicality

It should be pointed out that Ellen Burstyn (who was to later become co-Artistic Director of The Actors Studio) was one Strasberg disciple willing to undergo

preparatory therapy prior to embarking on a new role. Utilized to aid Affective Memory, this process would theoretically produce a state of performance in which the actor recalls emotion based on smell, color, texture, etc, to formulate a current genuine state of being. Footage of Strasberg tending over the rather distressed actress proves how willing Burstyn was to be subjected to such uncertified practices. (Fig.5)

These sessions were often employed to negate mental obstacles inhibiting the performance, or to attain a deeper level of psychological perception required for the role in question. Quite a debatable quote came from one of Strasberg's unnamed students "In order to really relate to a teacher, you have to make an analyst or a god out of him." <sup>1</sup> Whether Burstyn may or may not have gained an overwhelming increase in mental awareness is open to query. Yet these practices do however reverberate with Stanislavski's original teachings of acting via memory - but when compared to the more visceral work of Cassavetes, this technique is largely in vain.

On first viewing, Gena Rowlands' mentally unstable character of Myrtle Gordon in *Opening Night* is more emblematic of an animated Egon Schiele portrait or R.D Laing theorem, <sup>2</sup> than with the acceptable female of Scorsese's picture. Her progression is by exorcism, an excavation of the soul undeniably more contingent with a Strasberg psychiatric session. Cassavetes irrefutably denounced such preconceived tactics, (which he believed would encumber a performance) as immediacy, both physically and intellectually, formed his prime objective. Rowlands therefore declines to partake in now clichéd Method preparations; for example, visiting someone experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, as the very crux of the tale concerns Myrtle (therefore Rowlands) preoccupation with her own professional standing and mortality. Here, Cassavetes assumes that Rowlands will readily, albeit uncomfortably, empathize with such a character, as it is a fictionalized representation of Rowlands' own celebrity persona.

Curiously, Cassavetes was for intense on-set rehearsing. Therefore, artistic practice, including application, self-criticism and modification (not to mention a considerate amount of serendipity and exhaustion) occurs before the rolling camera. It is vital to point out here that Peter Falk has often commented that no adlibbing ever took place during any of the films that he appeared in, and that "that's the common

misconception.”<sup>3</sup> as Falk, like others, was fully aware of Cassavetes’ rule of adhering verbatim to the text.

In the case of *Opening Night*, Gena Rowland’s writhing and displays of self-induced violence (*Fig. 6*) (together with the use of intoxicants) are used to expose her inner concerns. It should also be pointed out that Rowlands also shows, no matter how sporadically deployed, wonderfully underplayed emotions as inner monologues. These excursions are few and far between, as the very idea of developing an internal soliloquy is rebuked by the director. These characters wear their inner most private feelings on their sleeves, but even though their actions are sometimes contradictory to these underlying emotions, it is their overall physicality that determinedly subverts the classic Method acting approach for contemplation<sup>4</sup>. For example, the closing shot from *The Godfather, Part II* shows Michael Corleone in an almost catatonic state of evaluation, whereas Myrtle Gordon’s most personal demons are dramatically over exposed to embarrassing effect. Hence, the Method is a progression from the Stanislavski system, whereas the Cassavetes’ theory is an avant-garde deviation from the Method. <sup>5</sup>



(Fig.5) Rationality via Psychoanalysis



Utilized to aid Affective Memory, this process would theoretically produce a state of performance in which the actor recalls emotion based on smell, color, texture, etc, to formulate a current 'genuine' state of being. *(photo of Ellen Burstyn)*

(Fig.6) Irrationality Through Physicality



... immediacy, both physically and intellectually, formed his (Cassavetes) prime objective ... therefore, the very 'truth' or 'being' should be retained, subsequently examined, displayed and re-evaluated during the actual shoot itself. *(photo of Gena Rowlands)*

## Battlegrounds

Both in *Alice* and *Opening*, it could be said that each female characters' motivations run in opposite directions. Alice is optimistic, while Myrtle is the realist, struggling with inward turmoil whilst attempting to retain her sanity. Both characters are therefore broken down to their most basic components, often abandoning etiquette for incongruity in order to progress or regress. This is the basis for innumerable comparisons to collide throughout both films.

Even though guilt is the crux of Rowland's tortuous performance, Burstyn is also subjected to a lesser instant of remorse that, as in *Opening Night*, is ironically surrounded in a scene of effervescence. Firstly, the fanatical star worshipper (of *Opening*) is killed only seconds after Myrtle receives a rapturous greeting by autograph hunters at the stage door. Similarly, the news of Alice's husband's death in an automobile accident comes at a time when she and a friend are mischievously fantasizing about Robert Redford's sexual prowess. Both deaths are therefore affiliated with the dubious world of actor/actress as iconic figure (an area that Cassavetes saw reason to explore in *Minnie and Moskowitz, 1971*).<sup>1</sup> Alice's reaction to her partner's death is of total physical breakdown, therefore Scorsese directs Lelia Goldoni (as Alice's closest friend) to automatically resonate with Burstyn's response, producing a mirrored interpretation of her performance. Goldoni's character is actually unaware of the news on the other end of the phone, yet responds emotionally to the physicality of Burstyn's reaction. Although this may seem to some as too charged a reverberation (a reaction *to* a reaction), it still rings true (in terms of Stanislavski's theory on the notion of Truth), fervently indicating these women's intimate relationship. Thereby, any need for verbalization is unjustified. This is undeniably influenced by Cassavetes.

The very next scene depicts the funeral aftermath, with mother and son arriving home contemplating their futures. In contrast, Myrtle Gordon's reaction is less easily definable. With *Opening Night*, Cassavetes chooses to prolong the event, eliminating all cinematic and reassuring shortcuts: to play it as real life. Upon attempting to deal with her grief, Rowlands' character seeks out consolation from her surrounding entourage of thespians. Unable to receive any signs of support (Cassavetes'

subconscious way of showing the falseness and emptiness of many actors' sensibilities), she retaliates to her inner self, blocking out any further need for physical and psychological contact. It is this insistence on non-communicative behavior that has garnered such staunch criticism, bringing to mind Michelangelo Antonioni's responses to his detractors' accusations that he too makes uncommunicative films:

I have the reputation of being a director of 'incommunicability', but if this lack of communication exists between people, it means that I communicate the incommunicability.

(Antonioni, 1985)

Both in *Opening Night* and *Alice* (to a lesser degree), eloquence is disregarded, as it is in the Method. Rowlands and Cassavetes (who plays the role of her lover and leading man in the play within the film) execute playful punch-ups that are wholly symptomatic of a Cassavetes' non-communicative relationship (note Ben Gazzara and Zohra Lampert's bedroom scene in *Opening Night*). These exhibit aggressively tactile ploys, adopting the more kinetic roles of Hollywood tough guys such as Bogart, Raft and Cagney (James Cagney's grapefruit in Mae Clarke's face springs immediately to mind) <sup>2</sup> in order to bypass a form of social behavior more reliant on, and accustomed to, civilized rhetoric.

This is echoed in the water fight scene in *Alice*, in which she and her adolescent son's congenial chat descends into a Laurel and Hardy type skit (the boy is played by non-professional actor Alfred Lutter, Scorsese's preference). Here, the Cassavetes' pragmatic notion to 'act on' rather than 'ponder over' pervades this semi-improvised set up, as Alice's ascetic nature is temporarily abandoned, indicating signs that the mischievous little girl is still an obstinate force within her (indicated in the films introductory sequence). Actually based on the previous night's conversations with Burstyn's own twelve-year old son, this scene allows Scorsese the chance to become involved in a more organic, less stringent process, where daily script alterations and the inclusion of non-professional actors would constitute a creative atmosphere more in tune with the Cassavetes' system. This improvisation not only allows for a confrontation between mother and son, but also with novice and professional. Alice's actions are obviously stupefying to the child, as well as to the on-set crew who are accustomed to script adherence. Therefore, Lutter perceives not only a change in tact

of his fictional mother's authoritarianism (even though, to us, she seems amiably liberal), but also within the demeanor of a reputable actress (and colleague). Hence, the son takes on our position as viewer to a Cassavetes' film. We also look on dumbfounded, albeit with a sense of fear, not at the violence of some unreal character's actions, but at the pure offbeat spontaneity and odd reality of their doings (we can easily decode what constitutes as 'undirected' reactions within an improvised scene in a mainstream film, but find it more difficult in a Cassavetes' piece. This is due to the fact that the latter's work has a universally improvisational feel, sticking whole-heartedly to its ideology of depicting the 'entire truth').

However, Scorsese disallows such irregularities or quirks to be prolonged. The direction and technical execution comfortably reassures us that we are within capable hands, therefore Alice's momentary lapse of maturity fails to intervene with our already confirmed perception of who she is. We have already assumed by her several nuances that she is capable of such an act when sufficiently motivated, without it being a totally alien personality trait. Her son only sees it as extraordinary as his perception of her is that of a matriarch. We can then empathize with their situation, understand it, accept it, and are even reassuringly humored by it, therefore prepared to continue with the aforementioned narrative flow. Scorsese does not let us down in this respect (neither does Cassavetes, he merely takes us on a trip awash with deluded semiotics, challenging our perceptions by willing us to be less conservative in our understanding and interpretations). It is worth noting that Alice's son then responds in a similar manner, establishing a contest of one-upmanship, culminating in a witty slapstick turn from Burstyn. 4

### The Camera – Socializing within a Fictional Reality

Together with forays into existentialism and comedy, violence has always been a heavily featured dynamic within the Method and the Cassavetes alternative. Most disturbingly, misogyny takes its form within both *Opening Night* and *Alice* as a regular occurrence. In the latter, Alice's abusive husband is unable to delineate affection, while Myrtle's abuse happens within the stage production itself (upon visiting her indomitable ex-partner who still views violence as perfunctory within domestic life).

In Scorsese's movie, Alice intervenes during her husband's aggression towards her son yet omits using any physical retaliation, whereas Myrtle, who is also slapped semi-aggressively by Maurice (Cassavetes) during rehearsals, *does* reciprocate in a far ardent fashion, keenly externalizing her true emotions. This act resonates with the later scenes of self-inflicted violence (in which Rowlands becomes temporarily disorientated, seemingly possessed by the spirit of the dead girl). Curiously, this brings to mind not Burstyn's role in *Alice* but DeNiro's portrayal of Jake LaMotta's incarceration scene in *Raging Bull* (1980). Here, the camera's immobility serves to heighten the viewer's objectivity, forcing the audience to take on a coldly detached standpoint. In this regard, we become the distant observer unable to move with or from the most private of moments. The protracted intensity of DeNiro punching the cell wall with hands, arms and forehead would presumably be more concurrent with Cassavetes' directions. Devoid of cutaways, it binds the audience to accept the rules dictated by its director; that one should concentrate on the enactment and disengage from the cinematography. Ironically, Cassavetes largely abolishes such restraints in his own execution, as his handheld camera is placed inches away from the characters' expressions, unwilling to allow any minor nuance or hint of serendipity to go overlooked.

For both Kazan and Scorsese, cinema often translates into spectacle. Cassavetes sees this as secondary, awarding the performances more emphatic treatment (ultimately elevating the actors' status) while demoting a cinematic style to a more perfunctory level. His camera is often versatile, constantly probing, capturing surface movements with an unmitigated intent to examine inner souls. He achieves this by an ardent obtrusiveness, which could be criticized as determinedly manipulative but is more of an intensely strategic tactic. Cassavetes is embracing the interactive idea of directing and shooting as a form of socializing within a fictional reality (*Fig.7*). This is tactile filmmaking, in which the cinema-verité style is utilized to such a heightened degree, that its involvement actually becomes oblivious. The actors receive this seemingly obtrusive agent onboard as an acting partner, willing to respond to its close proximity as they would a colleague within a love scene. Therefore Cassavetes is not a cool observer taking hierarchical comfort behind a megaphone, or if he were alive today, before a video taped monitor. He strives for the idealistic position of auteur in harmony with the people invited to execute his vision. Photographs taken on the set of

*Woman* (Figs.7 & 8) illustrate the procedure. Cassavetes' own volatile gesticulations correspond with his fictional characters' physical foibles. These stills show him working along fellow actors, motioning before them in conjunction to their posture and movement, mimicking and ardently initiating a highly personalized, responsive reaction between director and performer. In doing this, the actor has no choice but to take into account an underpinning and important factor within the act itself. This creates a unifying sensibility in which Cassavetes and crew converge to construct a mechanically emotive process and a strong counter-position to even the most liberal work by Altman, Cronenberg and the Coens. This sense that both parties (usually separated both spatially and intellectually) work in reverberation is wholly obvious within such work as *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Opening Night*.

### Homages, Post-Modernism and the Method Gone Awry

Both filmmakers eventually favor traditional Hollywood finales to pay homage and reverence to archaic formulas. Myrtle and Alice are each applauded (literally and quite cringe worthily) in a clichéd manner reminiscent of an MGM musical. Initially, Myrtle is awarded a rhapsodic ovation by the 'play within the film audience', then backstage amongst her 'real life' acting peers (reinstating the Godardian notion that what we are perceiving is a fictionalized interpretation of reality). Alice is rewarded in equal fashion, as she flings herself into the arms of her male lover amidst cheers from surrounding diners (a device that Cassavetes would categorically vilify in his earlier years and one which Scorsese probably included due to the studios intervention).<sup>1</sup>

Even though Burstyn's Alice is emblematic of Method acting within a production limited by conventional restraints, *Opening Night's* last scene can best be described as the Method gone awry, wondrously toying with blurring the divides between fantasy and fact. How Cassavetes tackles it remains problematic, as it raises questions on how we perceive that aforementioned reality and how we attempt to decipher and differentiate it from what we believe to be truthful (more exactly, what we consider to be The Truth). Therefore, Cassavetes has produced a scenario that is paradoxically challenging. To dissect such a concoction is in itself open to innumerable convoluted

theories, however, a synopsis would run like this; Cassavetes, both a stage and screen Method actor schools his wife, Gena Rowlands, in an acting style derivative from original Method teachings. Rowlands then appears in Cassavetes' ninth film, *Opening Night*, taking on the role of Myrtle Gordon, a stage and screen actress embodying the same sensibility of Rowlands herself (while Cassavetes also plays her lover and leading man within the stage production). Myrtle then suffers a mental breakdown, forcibly damaging rehearsals for the stage show that she is currently in preparation for. She finally brings the character's 'reality' onto the stage itself during its opening night, including Method 'acting for screen' nuances that are inadequate for such a theatrical performance. This breakdown affects Cassavetes' role as her onstage lover, therefore, he also decides to improvise on stage, in which he delivers a self-aggrandizing portrayal of a thespian aching for recognition, equal to that of his female counterpart. This scenario culminates in both of them producing an exaggerated comedy routine, where the theatre audience is surprisingly receptive (possibly indicating Cassavetes' attempt to convey how experimentation has its rewards). This seems like an almost extemporized performance, indicating Rowlands' and Cassavetes' ability to mix seemingly spontaneous dialogue with that of a scripted play (culminating in a tension tinged with embarrassing humor). The final pre-end-credit scene shows a backstage congratulatory group of friends including Peter Bogdanovich, Peter Falk and Seymour Cassell, all playing themselves. We, as a film audience are also receptive to this film within a film. We are fully aware that Rowlands and Cassavetes were playing roles within roles, and enjoy the continuing gag when Falk and Bogdanovich turn up on screen. Thus, we have witnessed the Method's system of 'personality' acting to celebrities who are, in essence, performing something that is non-performable (themselves). This is also open to debate, as many actors own an external celebrity persona with which they utilize to metamorphose from their true selves (however, these are so elusive that they can only be speculative to analyze their authenticity). As in Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), there is an ambiguity at work, where the lines between fact and fantasy become less defined (for example, where Malcolm McDowell is Malcolm McDowell within a scene in which Tim Robbins plays a character)<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, Cassavetes is toying with the pitfalls inherent in attempting to redefine cinema whilst adhering to genre expectations, and it is this acceptance and acknowledgement in regarding cinema as fiction, yet simultaneously retaining his iconoclasm and cynicism, that is so progressive. In *Opening Night*, it is the character

of Myrtle Gordon who is the work's main signifier; fraught with ambivalence and equally entertaining, she brings forward a 'reality' (what one perceives as being real within the context of the film) into a staged theatrical performance reliant on exaggerated gestures and voice projections (curiously, in complete contrast to Method schooling for screen acting). This is where innumerable factors converge to produce a perfect exemplification of a director and actress' willingness to attain credence via ambiguity. Thereby attempting, through the breakdown and dissection of the norm, at least one form of believability, by divulging in postmodern quirks and dismissing with traditional expectations.

Finally, it can be said that both Cassavetes' preference for instinct over contrivance and his strategy for interactive procedures *do* make for more provocative cinema. The theories behind Strasberg's preparatory exercises may make interesting anecdotes to fuel 'inside realities' within a performance, but only provide psychological jargon around Method performances within mainstream film. Cassavetes elevates spontaneity (risking possible inappropriate action) by exhibiting it on celluloid, thereby amalgamating the rehearsal and the actual shooting to make a reinforced, more substantial and illuminating result.





(Fig.7) Filmmaking as Interactive Process

This is tactile filmmaking, in which the cinema-verité style is utilized to such a heightened degree, that its involvement actually becomes oblivious. The actors instill this seemingly obtrusive agent onboard as an acting partner, willing to respond to its close proximity as they would a colleague within a love scene. Therefore Cassavetes is not a cool observer taking hierarchical comfort behind a megaphone, or if he were alive today, before a video taped monitor. He strives for the idealistic position of auteur in harmony with the people invited to execute his vision.



(Fig.8) Emulating the Performer's Physicality

Cassavetes' own volatile gesticulations correspond with his fictional characters' physical foibles. This still shows him working along fellow actors, motioning before them in conjunction to their posture and movement, mimicking and ardently initiating a highly personal, responsive reaction between director and performer.

Conclusion

Irrationality as Everyday Poetry:  
Cassavetes versus the Method

## Irrationality as Everyday Poetry

A lot of people know what they are doing. I don't know until the next day. If our films are supposed to be something like life is – some vague thing that life has that films can contain – how can you know what is happening (in advance)? Unless you have such a prescribed life that you're bored with it ... Even if you read a script, you don't know how somebody's going to interpret it. I'm not in that much control over the films we make. I'd like to think I am, like anybody else I'll take credit for it, sure. But I really have no idea from one scene to the next what 'it's' going to do. I feel this enormous sense of panic, of letting go ...

- John Cassavetes

Before evaluating the complexities of a Cassavetes' film character, it is valuable to consider what our perceptions of the Method truly are. With performers such as James Dean, Ellen Burstyn, Gena Rowlands and Peter Falk, there seems to grow a greater empathy with their characteristics with each re-screening. The accustomed viewer will smile at Gena Rowlands' very first nuance in a new piece of work, as it is so expected. Already familiarized to the actresses' various distinctive habits, they would warm to fresh ones accordingly (for example, when she is thrown into a new fictional situation). As an informed audience, we expect these idiosyncrasies and feel the need to question when they are absent or dislike them when they become sanitized. Therefore, this is more than a response based purely on empathy to a character on screen; it is a connection that allows us not only to admire the actors in the role, but to also be constantly attracted to this actor's own intellectual and physical demeanor (in much the same way as we are enthused on the idea of Christopher Walken's own interpretation of a mafia boss, as it is still the person's/actor's own peculiarities that we see on screen). With this in mind, it can be said that one of the key indications of a Method actor is that of a mannerism that is easily definable. In other words, the audience makes the link that this is Christopher Walken's interpretation of how *he* would react if *he* were placed in this world.

Must we use our own, same, old feelings ... in every kind of role from Hamlet to Sugar in *The Blue Bird*? What else can you do? Do you expect an actor to invent all sorts of new sensations, or even a new soul, for every part he plays? How many souls would he be obliged to house? ... Can he tear out his own soul and replace it by one he has rented as being more suitable to a certain part? Where can he get one? You can borrow *things* of all sorts, but you cannot take feelings away from another person. My feelings are inalienably mine, and yours belong to you in the same way. You can understand a part, sympathize with the person portrayed, and put yourself in his place, so that you will act as he would. That will arouse feelings in the actor that are analogous to those required for the part. Those feelings will belong, not to the person created by the author of the play, but to the actor himself. When a real artist is speaking the Hamlet soliloquy "To be or not to be" he puts into the lines much of his own conception of life ... For him, it is necessary that the spectators feel his inner relationship to what he is saying.

- Stanislavski

### Irregularity + Banality = Entertainment?

New methods of creativeness have produced new playwrights and a new kind of an audience, which knows not only how to look and be entertained in the theatre, but also how to listen, feel and reflect on what it sees. These new spectators do not expect writing or acting which is merely externally effective in external plot and action; they look for deeper feelings and great thoughts.

- Stanislavski, 1926

Illogical actions are acceptable in a Cassavetes' film, as there are no aforementioned rules in which to drive along a conventional narrative. In *East of Eden*, Dean's character *has* to adhere to Kazan's controlled directions and Steinbeck's plot lines in order to aid the film's cohesive structure. Cassavetes abandons all such techniques. Where the actor wishes to go, he chooses to follow, having complete faith in the performer as progressive vehicle. We, as viewers, should then continue this chain by following the director's insistence on being an onlooker in the same open-minded

way. The act of performing within a Cassavetes' film therefore constitutes a conscious change of tact for the actor *and* observer. The performer must now be willing to bring forth all of the rehearsal exercises and be eager to utilize them within their conversations and monologues, and accordingly, so too must the viewer in their own sensibility. Ordinarily, the conventional actor is accustomed to receiving prescribed guidelines as to where the scene is heading, yet in contrast, a Cassavetes' film has a certain degree of existential weight where aftermaths and consequences are still largely questionable and unknown. This allows for an atmosphere pervasive with pre-adolescent antics, where irregularities and banality can then mix with a prescribed script, to occasionally invoke sparks of pure originality.

Cassavetes' films are therefore the results of endeavors to bring the Method into question and also, on a more philosophical basis, stand as a model exemplifying a state of Truth being encouraged by the process of experimental cinema. Cassavetes brings these oddly fictionalized worlds into reality (reality being the lives of each actor/actress) making them the most genuine form of 'alive' cinema to come out of America in the 1970's. Concocted by recording the truest conditions of emotion (sometimes seventy takes would be needed for a singular shot) the sheer weight of this experiment process gives the final result its substance.

### Cassavetes as Maverick Icon

The current re-evaluations of John Cassavetes' work cannot be purely dismissed as being simply due to retro trends,<sup>1</sup> as his philosophy delves far deeper. Cassavetes' concern was to influence the viewer by exploring the complexities of human behavior via an aesthetic that is intimidating and often arduous. Cassavetes himself knew that his system never guaranteed Truth, yet his attempts always possessed a serious force, creating a danger of incommunicability towards the viewer. Some have argued that this need to uncover unpalatable realities merely presented random 'instants', unable to sustain an entire narrative. And yet it is these 'pieces of time'<sup>2</sup> that remain so continuously influential. They inspire artists into the realm of options on offer if one chooses to steer away from convention, ultimately creating more life affirming moments with a raw volatility that supersedes anything produced by any major

director of that era. In this respect, Cassavetes tells us how fictions can be enlightened through provoking audiences to consider human irrationalities as everyday poetry, using film as a means to inspire and enthuse those willing to watch and listen; to see a glimpse of the wide scope of possibilities inherent in depicting life as it is seldom perceived, but often lived.

J.H.Mann

This essay is an abridged version of the original academic paper

# Notes

## One

### Protagonist as Anachronism

Incoherence, Realism, Desperation

1. With Dean, it was dislocated nihilism that fueled the role of Cal in *East of Eden*. Falk on the other hand, is a cacophony of never ending faux pas brought on by mirroring (often subconsciously) his wife's behavior. Similar comparisons with these characters can be made during a specific scene in *Woman*; Nick orchestrates an overtly ambitious surprise party for his wife's return from a mental institution (only to be rebuked at the last moment by his mother's insistence on dismantling the set up, in keeping with his wife's best interests). A strong comparison can be forged between this mother/son confrontation (Cassavetes' real life mother) and Cal's conversation with his stoic father. Both protagonists aspire to succeed in covert plans, with the paramount aim to console a relative by devising elaborate solutions. Each strategy ultimately backfires, leaving a deeper sense of frustration and disillusionment with their own capabilities, thereby employing the festering traits symptomatic of a so-called stereotypical Method performance.
2. In 1956, John Cassavetes established his very own acting classes held inside the Variety Arts theatre in New York City. These sessions were open to anyone intrigued to witness his variations on the system taught by Don Richardson and adopted by the young filmmaker as the only significant opposition to the Method.
3. Curiously, Monterey is also the nirvana with which Alice is drawn to in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974)*, representing what she believes is the American Dream. In *East of Eden*, it also signifies a place where these idealistic notions may well once have existed, but are growing increasingly fractured.



4. To examine this even further, the pre-title sequence to Ray Connelly's 1974 documentary *James Dean – The First American Teenager*, specifically edits a series of clips in which verbal communication has become defunct. His pleas to be understood continuously fall on deaf ears, epitomizing not only the Dean image, but also Cassavetes' desire to emulate it. It should also be noted that the actress Carroll Baker remembers how she attended the Actors Studio at the same time as Dean, and yet they never had the chance to speak to one another. She remembers that this was probably due to encouraging the pupils to adopt an unconventional manner upon greeting their peers.

“One of the things that the students there were trying to achieve was a total unconventionality in their personal life, so that they could learn to be unconventional in their acting. So it seems, that one of the big things was not saying, “Hello, how are you?” because that's very conventional. So I really can't remember having more or less said anything at all (to Dean), probably we grunted at each other, (she laughs) I don't know.” Pleasantries were therefore discouraged, replaced by a more primal, irrational discourse.

- 5 Even though it is highly speculative, many who knew Dean believe he would have directed some of the most innovative American films of the 1960's and 1970's. His keen interest in keeping journals on set emulated Nicholas Ray's methodology of intellectualizing the filmmaking/acting process. The following section is taken from *Jimmy Dean on Jimmy Dean*, pg. 131: ‘(Jimmy) had become increasingly involved in the creative arts as a new source of inspiration and development. He was learning sculpture under the direction of Pegot Waring, and as well as practicing the bongo drums and violin, he was always widening his knowledge of music’ – Joseph Humphreys.

“I collect everything from twelfth and thirteen century music to the extreme moderns – you know, Schoenberg, Berg, Stravinsky.” – James Dean.

- 6 “If I let them dissect me, like a rabbit in a clinical research laboratory or something, I might not be able to produce again. They might sterilize me! That man (Strasberg) had no right to tear me down like that. You keep knocking a guy down and you'll take the guts away from him. And what's an actor without guts!” This was James Dean's remark on Strasberg's probing and

often-vindictive tactics. Staying true to his contradictory nature however, Dean later expressed: “That man’s a walking encyclopedia with a fantastic insight into human behavior. Most of what I learnt about acting comes from that man.”

- 7 The French critic Louis Marcorelles stated upon seeing *Giant* (1956): ‘James Dean, quite curiously, throws strange wrong notes into this concerto of images and emotions, arranged too skillfully. His style of acting is the very antithesis of the sober and well-controlled acting of the other actors in the film.’  
(*Cahiers Du Cinema*, 1957)

### Turning Psychology Into Behavior

1. Arthur Miller has questioned Lee Strasberg’s pedagogy, hinting that it veered on charlatanism. Miller’s justifiable reasoning is that Strasberg was fully aware of what he was looking for in an individual’s sensibility during the initial audition process at the Studio. With this in mind, the young actor would *already* embody the inherent nature (or psychological neuroses) needed for a Method actor. Being legitimized under his banner would bring him success via connectedness to their existing fully formed personas.
2. Dean loathed Raymond Massey’s ‘professionalism’, condemning the old-school approach as feigned when compared to the more aggressive and arbitrary alternative. Massey tainted Dean, declaring “The Method has encouraged this truculent spirit”, however Kazan had eagerly orchestrated this animosity, manipulating both actors to respond as true antagonists, as indicated within the Steinbeck novel. This insistent jarring from Dean to the peremptory Massey, exemplifies the ‘system’ at its most scathing.
- 3 These well-publicized remarks eschew the more intriguing virtues associated with the Method, however they do remain entertaining (Dean felt that if he could urinate before a crowd of spectators milling around on the set of *Giant*, then he could handle performing in the same scene as the then iconic Elizabeth Taylor).

## Legacy as Progression or Regression?

1. Wim Wenders' use of Peter Falk as an angel in *Wings of Desire* is one of the most profound examples of portraying 'actor as recognizable character.  
"In the end I got round to thinking of actors, and then, by necessity, of American actors. They are the only world famous actors. One evening I got Peter Falk on the telephone and told him this bewildering story of guardian angels, circuses, a trapeze artist and an American actor who charms his former colleagues. There was a pause, and then he asked me if I could send him a script. I said 'No, I can't. There's nothing in writing about this ex-angel. I can't even send you a single page: he's just an idea.' He liked that. If I'd have sent him a script he might not have accepted. But since there was nothing to go on at all, he said 'Ah, I've worked like that before with Cassavetes, and honestly I prefer working without a script.' (October 1987). However this is an anomaly for Falk, as he has always said that scripts were mandatory to Cassavetes.
2. The most ironic and entertaining episodes stem from involving a host of ex-Actors Studio pupils partaking in Falk's prolonged improvisations, usually culminating in a superfluous gag routine (Martin Landau being particularly successful in the episode *Double Shock*). This is a common trait in many *Columbo* episodes from 1971 to 1978, indicating how liberal certain Universal television producers were compared to the more stringent regulations that are common practice today. It is also important to note a major connection between John Cassavetes and the popular detective series. The episode *Étude In Black* was aired on September 17 1972, and starred Cassavetes as Alex Benedict, a conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra who murders his mistress. The scenes between him and Falk are undoubtedly strengthened by their past collaborations on *Husbands* and *Woman*. However, each actor knows the rules of convention, and so applies upmost professionalism in creating 'safe' performances for the popular network.

Two  
Women on the Edge

Analysis

1. “There was even thought of her getting divorced and running away from her husband at the beginning, but we decided to make it very different, that he died and she was left with no choice.”

Martin Scorsese describing the formation of *Alice*, taken from *Scorsese on Scorsese* (1989) Great Britain: Faber and Faber, p.51.

2. “I had finished work on *Medicine Ball Caravan* and I’d begged John Cassavetes, who had become a friend, to give me some work. He put me on *Minnie and Moskowitz* as a sound editor at 500 dollars a week for doing nothing! I even lived on his set for a week and, when he required sound effects for a fight, I held John while someone punched him!”

Martin Scorsese quote taken from *Scorsese on Scorsese*, p.31.

3. It is valuable to note that Scorsese deliberately chose Sandy Weintrub (associate producer) Toby Rafelson (art director) and Marcia Lucas (editor) in order to provide a substantial female input on the picture.

*Scorsese on Scorsese*, p.51.

4. However, his 1956 film *Babydoll* starring Carol Baker is one such work that consciously sets out to objectify its female character. This aside, his prolific output includes some of the most stoic female roles seen in 1950’s American cinema.

Rationality via Psychoanalysis/Irrationality via Physicality

1. Both Kazan and Strasberg have made no secret about their preference in hiring and teaching actors who have undertaken psychotherapy. Kazan has stated that one of the deciding factors in choosing the promising Natalie Wood for

*Splendour in the Grass* (1961) was due to her reliance on regular psychoanalysis.

2. The work of R.D Laing is often compared to Cassavetes' signature style. Pauline Kael made a valid and harsh point when she stated in 1974:

‘The theories of R.D Laing the poet of schizophrenic despair, have such theatrical flash that they must have hit John Cassavetes smack in the eye. His new film, *A Woman Under the Influence*, is the work of a disciple: it's a didactic illustration of Laing's vision of insanity, with ... Mabel Longhetti (as) the scapegoat of a repressive society that defines itself as normal. The core of the film is a romanticized conception of insanity, allied with the ancient sentimental mythology of madness centering on the holy fool and with the mythology about why Christ was crucified. The picture is based on the idea that the crazy person is endowed with a clarity of vision that the warped society can't tolerate, and so is persecuted.’

Pauline Kael, *Dames* (originally published in *The New Yorker*, Vol. L. No.43, Winter 1974).

It is worth noting that Cassavetes had never done any preparatory research into mental illness before shooting *Woman*. In referring to the character of Mable, he has said, “This particular woman, I don't think she's crazy ... I think she's just frustrated beyond belief. More than being crazy, I think she's just socially inept.”

3. Peter Falk was fervidly advised to stop explaining the theory of their filmmaking practices by Cassavetes himself during their guest appearances (with Ben Gazzara) on *The Dick Cavett Show*, September 1970. In later years, Falk fondly remembered how “He never wanted you to understand ‘up here.’ He was dreadfully afraid that if you understood it, you would translate it into cliché.” This is yet another description of Cassavetes' preferences for the instinctual. Ben Gazzara has also admitted that the only improvisation he knew of was used during a scene in *Husbands* (1970). This break from the script caused immediate shock from Cassavetes, but upon seeing its relevance and ingenuity, was included in the final print. It should also be noted that the appearance of all three men on the Dick Cavett Show (to publicize *Husbands*)

was a mix of deliberate rudeness, jocularly and general clowning around, at one point resulting in a pile up on the floor with each actor relishing the chance to be irrational and, in Dick Cavett's words "taking the theatre apart."

In addition, it is worthwhile noting a statement that James Dean (allegedly) made on his own unconventionality. Upon placing an armchair taken from Cromwells coffee shop in Rockefeller Center and placing it in the middle of a crowded sidewalk, he said:

"Don't you sons of bitches ever get bored? I just wanted to spark things, man, that's all. Look at you. Before I did it, we were all sitting quietly eating and drinking, and outside a lot of nine to fivers were going home to their wives, like they do every night. Now you're all juiced up, and so are they, man. They'll talk about it for years."

4. This stance of placing greater importance on the illogical, rather than cerebral, would be detrimental to many Method directors and this is where certain differences can be examined. A high profile actor such as Dustin Hoffman (renowned for his on-set insistence for intense probing into his character's *rational* psychological makeup) would never have considered Cassavetes as a potential collaborator. Therefore, it can be said that Cassavetes' characters are endemic, carrying an anomaly throughout the ten films that disallows them the generality of performance which would be more welcomed within a more mainstream context. For Cassavetes, the process of employing a heavy rehearsal period was mandatory (purely so the actors can memorize the text) and would be straightly followed by the actual shooting (where the actors physical being could be tested in various ways), bringing forward not only a degree of unexpectedness, but sometimes resulting in complete off center originality.
5. Dr. David Schneider's analysis of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* as "visualized psychoanalytic interpretation woven into reality" is wholly relevant. This pinpoints Miller's curiosity with the tragic deterioration of Willy Loman's 'common sense', mirroring Cassavetes' lifelong interest in such related subjects. It is also worthwhile noting that Miller's early plays deliberately contain ideally composed ingredients that can be easily rendered

by a Method performer. Thus unsurprisingly, *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* were used as paradigm texts at the Actors Studio. His craftsmanship for transposing what Robert Warshow dubs “mechanical realism” makes for an authentic portrayal of the common man without feeling the need to ennoble him to epic proportions. They embrace Ibsen’s notion of psychological realism “by presenting conflicts in the present as inevitably rooted in the past.” Contrasts are therefore easy to see with Mable Longhetti in *Woman*, in which the reasons for her psychotic state are omitted, as in Cassavetes’ mind (unlike Miller’s), the past is not our concern.

#### Battlegrounds

1. In this piece of dialogue from *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), Gena Rowlands’ character epitomizes the writer’s pre-occupation in depicting souls way too reliant on escapism (especially via the movies):  
“I never met a Charles Boyer. I never met a Humphrey Bogart. I never met a Clark Gable. Or a William Powell. They (Hollywood) set you up, you see? And I mean, no matter how bright you are ... and we’re bright, we’re geniuses compared to the rest of the people. I mean look at you ... and look at how tasteful you are. You’re smart and nice and I look at the sum total of your life ... and it’s a room and you’re alone with diminishing sexual returns. You don’t even have someone that’s just your pal. You know? Isn’t that crazy? Go to the movies and you see a man die for a woman just because he wants to see her again. That’s good. Kill the son of a bitch. If it could only be that way. You know?”
2. James Cagney’s role in *The Public Enemy* (1931) can be seen as a blueprint for Cassavetes’ more physical characters (particularly female protagonists). Gena Rowlands’ role as Gloria (in the film of the same name) being the most mimetic. Ray Carney, *Beating The System - The Films of John Cassavetes*, New York: University Of Cambridge Press, p.118.

3. I have included quotes from Norman Mailer throughout the piece as his 1971 essay *A Course in Filmmaking* (first published in *New American Review* and taken here from the reprint in *Existential Errands, 1972*) powerfully describes his involvement within his own existential exercises in *Maidstone (1970)*. This film includes many of the same semiotics found in John Cassavetes' work and this accompanying account still remains a seminal insight into the anxieties and rewards inherent within investigative filmmaking.
  
4. Paul Morrissey has indicated a valid point attributed to comedy and the Method, further reinstating this scene and Rowlands and Cassavetes' improvised comic routine in the finale of *Opening Night*:  
“(I hate) acting class acting, where you see all the effort behind the acting. Somehow it seems so appropriate an accompaniment to the phony liberal stories it usually presents. The phoniness of what passes for naturalistic acting nowadays is staggering. These affected ‘sincere’ efforts to be real, whether it’s the stumbling Method or even Tom Cruise’s gimmick of a ‘genuine’ big smile on cue, seem to me bogus and artificial. I just stay away from most ‘serious’ films now. But comedies in particular demand authenticity. Even to deal with contemporary life in a realistic way you need the artifice of comedy to succeed. I try to use spontaneous actors who never suggest to me that they are ‘acting’, at least not in what passes for contemporary acting.”

#### Homages, Post Modernism and the Method Gone Awry

- 1 Cassavetes employed this melodramatic cliché at the end of *Gloria (1980)*, however retained his eccentricity by substituting the male lover for a six year old Puerto Rican child, who ironically, embodies the same characteristics, whether they be dialogue or actions, of Bogart, Cagney, Robinson and Raft.
  
- 2 Howard Hawks used a similar device in *His Girl Friday (1942)* in which Cary Grant's character remarks about his old flame's fiancé. He states that he looks like the actor Ralph Bellamy (who did indeed play the actual role).



## Conclusion

### Cassavetes as Maverick Icon

1. It has been noted in several contemporary movie magazines that Steve Buscemi's *Trees Lounge*, Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth* and the entire Jim Jarmusch oeuvre have taken inspiration from John Cassavetes.
2. Peter Bogdanovich has used this term 'pieces of time' both in his film *Nickelodeon (1976)* and in several interviews. It was originally taken from a conversation the filmmaker had with James Stewart. His book *Pieces of Time* was published in 1973.

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## Film and Video

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*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* Warner brothers, dir. Martin Scorsese, 1974,  
112 mins.

*A Woman Under the Influence* A Faces Production, dir. John Cassavetes, 1974,  
147 mins.

*East of Eden* Warner Brothers, dir. Elia Kazan, 1955, 115 mins.

*Opening Night* A Faces Production, dir. John Cassavetes, 1978, 144mins.

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*James Dean – The First American Teenager* Argos Films, dir. Ray Connelly, 1975,  
75 mins.

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*Arena: Dear Antonioni ... (from a letter by Roland Barthes)*

A Memory Lane Movies Ltd production for BBC Television in association with rai  
Uno CCS Sri, dir, Gianni Massironi, transmitted\* January, 1997, 55 mins.

*Reputations: Lee Strasberg – Method Man* A BBC Arts and Entertainment Network  
Co-Production, dir, Clare Beavan, transmitted 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1997, 50 mins.

*The Dick Cavett Show* Aired on ABC, late night, 21<sup>st</sup> September 1970 (show no.191)  
45 minutes.

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/episode *Double Shock* transmitted March 25 1973.

## Filmography

### **East of Eden**

Warner Brothers (released March 1955)

Produced and Directed by Elia Kazan; Screenplay by Paul Osborn; Based on the novel by John Steinbeck; Cinematography, Ted McCord; Art Direction, James Basevi and Macolm Bert; Musical Direction, Leonard Rosenman; Editor, Owen Marks.

Cinemascope and WarnerColor. 115 minutes.

James Dean (Cal Trask); Julie Harris (Abra); Raymond Massey (Adam Trask); Burl Ives (Sam); Jo Van Fleet (Kate); Richard Davalos (Aron Trask); Albert Dekker (Will); Lois Smith (Anne); Harold Gordon (Mr. Albrecht); Richard Garrick (Dr. Edwards); Timothy Carey (Joe); Nick Dennis (Rantini); Lonnie Chapman (Roy); Barbara Baxley (Nurse); Bette Treadville (Madame); Tex Mooney (Bartender)

### **A Woman Under the Influence**

A Faces Production (filmed in 1972, released 1974)

Screenplay by John Cassavetes; Photography by John Cassavetes, Caleb Deschanel, Tim Ferris; Editors, John Cassavetes, Tom Cornwell; Producer, Sam Shaw.

147 minutes.

Gena Rowlands (Mabel Longhetti); Peter Falk (Nick Longhetti); Katherine Cassavetes (Mama Longhetti); Lady Rowlands (Mabel's mother); O.G. Dunn (Garson Cross); Eddie Shaw (Doctor Zepp); Mario Gallo (Harold Jensen).

### **Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore**

Warner Brothers (released 1974)

Director, Martin Scorsese; Producers, David Sussind and Audrey Maas; Associate Producer, Sandra Weintraub; Screenplay, Robert Getchell; Cinematography, Kent Wakeford; Editor, Marcia Lucas; Music, Richard La Salle; Production Designer, Toby Rafelson.

112 minutes.

Ellen Burstyn (Alice Hyatt); Kris Kristofferson (David); Alfred Lutter (Tommy); Diane Ladd (Flo); Billy Green Bush (Donald); Vic Tayback (Mel); Jodie Foster (Audrey); Harvey Kietel (Ben); Leila Goldoni (Bea); Lane Bradbury (Rita); Valerie Curtin (Vera); Harry Norhup (Bartender); Murray Moston (Jacobs); Mia Bendixsen (Alice aged eight); Ola Moore (old woman); Dean Casper (Chicken); Martin Scorsese and Larry Cohen (Patrons at diner).

### **Opening Night**

A Faces Production (filmed in 1977, released 1978 and withdrawn; re-released 1991)

Screenplay, John Casavetes; Photography, John Cassavetes and Al Ruban; Editors, John Cassavetes and Tom Cornwell; Producer, Al Ruban.

114 minutes.

Gena Rowlands (Myrtle Gordon); John Cassavetes (Maurice); Ben Gazzara (Manny Victor); Joan Blondell (Sarah Goode); Zohra Lampert (Dorothy Victor); Paul Stewart (David Samuels); Laura Johnson (Nancy Stein)