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0521388155 - The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies

Ray Carney

Excerpt

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Introduction

Thinking in Space, Time, and the Body

The minds of some of you, I know, will absolutely . . . refuse to think in non-conceptualized terms. I myself absolutely refused to do so for years altogether. . . . I went thus through the “inner catastrophe” of which I spoke in the last lecture. I had literally come to the end of my conceptual stock in trade. I was bankrupt intellectually, and had to change my base. No words of mine will probably convert you, for words can be the names only of concepts. But if any of you try sincerely and pertinaciously on your own separate accounts to intellectualize reality, you may be similarly driven to a change of front.

– William James¹

Truth is something which occurs when actions take place; not when phrases are contrived. . . . Truth is not a right word which can be printed. It is a right deed which can be done. . . . [When this is not the case, feeling] not only postpones, but *replaces* behavior in an exercise of calculated substitution.

– Jonathon Kozol²

The contention of the following pages is not only that John Cassavetes was one of the most important artists of the twentieth century, but that the originality of his work was precisely what doomed it to critical misunderstanding and neglect. It is a truism in the fine arts that the most profoundly original art may look ugly at first, and it would be hard to find a better illustration of the point than the initial popular and critical response to Cassavetes' *Husbands*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Opening Night*, or *Three Plays of Love and Hate*. Reviewers heaved brickbats at his work throughout his career. The gentler ones called it “unpolished,” “meandering,” “diffuse,” or “undisciplined”; the less charitable labeled it “pointless,” “self-indulgent,” or “out of control”; the outright dismissive wrote it off as simply “dreadful” and “utterly without interest or merit” (these last two

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appraisals are from John Simon and Stanley Kauffmann, respectively).³ Though it seems a near miracle to be able to keep one's sense of humor in the face of such a critical pounding, Cassavetes frequently joked about the resistance to his movies. On one occasion in particular, I remember him imitating an imaginary viewer watching one of his films. He slouched down in his chair and flailed his arms wildly in front of his face, as if shielding his eyes from the fury of an atomic blast, while chortling: "A new experience? Oh, no! Save me! Anything but that!"⁴

The formulation is a telling one. Cassavetes understood that his films offered new forms of experience. When we watch them, we are asked to participate in new intellectual and emotional structures of understanding. At least for the time of the viewing experience (and to the extent we yield ourselves to it rather than defending ourselves against it), our consciousnesses are altered. Our nervous systems are reprogrammed. Our range of sensitivities is subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) shifted. We are made to notice and feel things we wouldn't otherwise. But one doesn't get to a new place without leaving old positions behind, and, as the anecdote takes for granted, the process of being exposed to new ways of knowing can present a bit of a shock to the system. The films can only teach us new understandings by forcibly denying us old ones, and that can be bewildering. They can only freshen and quicken our responses by altering our habitual modes of perception, and that can be disorienting. Their stylistic defamiliarizations and assaults are their way of doing this, and it is only to be expected that they should make us more than a little uncomfortable at moments. That, of course, is where any artist of sufficiently large ambitions risks getting into trouble with his public.

It really is an old story in the history of artistic appreciation. Marshall McLuhan pointed out that "when they are initially proposed, new systems of knowledge do not look like improvements and innovations. They look like chaos."⁵ The genius of Cassavetes' work, as well as the special challenge it presents for criticism, is that it makes meanings in fundamentally different ways from most other American film. In fact, it seems clear to me that the ways of knowing that mainstream American movies accustom us to can actually get in the way of appreciating what Cassavetes is offering, which is why during his lifetime it paradoxically seemed the more "cinematically literate" the viewer or critic, the more likely it was that he would miss the point of his work.

Thus, by way of introduction to what I would argue is the most brilliant yet still most misunderstood body of work in American feature filmmaking, I want to attempt what is probably an impossible task: to characterize the

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reigning systems of knowledge within American film. In very brief compass (and with a certain degree of enforced simplification), I will describe what seems to me to be a pervasive system of cinematic understandings embodied by a dominant stylistic system of expression, as a prelude to indicating a few of the most important respects in which Cassavetes' work departs from it.⁶ In order to facilitate the most concise yet accessible presentation of such an enormous subject, I am going to use illustrations deliberately chosen from a small number of the most familiar films by canonical directors, but I would emphasize that the stylistic syndrome I am describing is not in the least limited to these works and filmmakers, but applies to the overwhelming body of serious American dramatic filmmaking in the studio tradition from around 1940 to the present. The only additional difficulty the analysis presents is that, as is the case with any dominant system of understanding, what I am going to be describing may not seem to be a set of artistic and intellectual conventions. It may seem more like the way life is, or the way movies simply have to be. When something is everywhere, it is always a little hard to see; and it usually takes work as different as Cassavetes' to make us aware of it at all.

The dominant style embodies what might be called a visionary/symbolic aesthetic, marked by a number of interrelated stylistic proclivities which, for lack of better terms, I am going to call its essentializing, metaphorizing, subjectivizing, visionary, and contemplative tendencies. In the limited space available, I will take them up in order and deal with each as briefly as possible.

The essentializing convention manifests itself in several different stylistic tendencies, all of which are premised on a surface–depth model of expression involving a systematic redirection of attention away from what are generally considered to be relatively unimportant expressive surfaces to crucially important depths of motivation, feeling, or belief. One moves from superficial, confusing, or accidental social expressions to enduring, explanatory essences.⁷ The movement inward and downward has become so much a part of the visual language of film and television that it is taken for granted by, and therefore seldom questioned by, most viewers. When “60 Minutes” intercuts a shot of an interviewee’s twitching hands to convince us that he is lying; when a climactic scene in a movie or television drama uses a mood-music orchestration or an expressive close-up or lighting effect to tell us what the characters are feeling even if they aren’t saying anything; when a narrative relies on “deep psychology” to account for why a character said or did something – in all of these cases, the effect is what I am calling an essentializing one. The viewer is encouraged to translate from superficial

public expressions to more important emotions or ideas; from fluxional or unreliable expressive surfaces to stable, constant, trustworthy underlying states of feeling and belief. (We bring this convention into our lives when we search for simplifying motives or purposes in people's otherwise puzzling or provocative behavior, when we tell ourselves that if we could only understand someone's intentions or feelings, their words or behavior would make sense.)

There are a number of ways the essentializing agenda manifests itself in film. In many movies the act of moving from surfaces to depths is facilitated by having the character simply tell us what his or her essential attitudes and feelings are. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Scotty Ferguson's acrophobia and its essential effect on all of his future behavior is made the explicit subject of several of his early conversations with other characters. In *Psycho*, Norman Bates himself describes his mother complex to Marion Crane in his first major conversation with her (though without using that term, of course). However, the presentation of intentional depths or motivational essences need not be so verbal. Characters frequently "perform" their essential states of being without directly talking about them at all. Roger Thornhill's tones of voice and physical mannerisms "tell us" that he is harried, frustrated, and put-upon, yet resourceful, urbane, and dashing in virtually every scene of *North by Northwest*. In *Strangers on a Train*, Bruno's simpering tones and narcissistic behavior "declare" his willful, warped dangerousness every time he is on camera.

In slightly more complicated cases, where the characters don't directly speak or act out their essential impulses, their films do the speaking for them, through the deployment of specific stylistic effects. Just as words or actions do in the other cases, the lighting, music, framing, editing rhythms, presence of significant props, or other aspects of the film's style translate the characters' essential feelings and beliefs into clearly visible or audible events. In *Casablanca*, a key-lighting effect on Bergman's hair and face tells us that she feels things for the Bogart character long before she says anything about it or dares to act on her feelings. In *Psycho*, the lighting on Norman Bates's face, the presence of the stuffed birds, the kick-lighting of them, and the looming angles at which they are photographed when Norman and Marion are in his office, all warn us about Norman independently of anything he says or does. Even if these characters don't know their essential feelings or states of being, their film knows; even if they can't or won't tell us how they feel or what they are, the style tells us. The mutable surfaces of life are anchored in stable, deep meanings.

The stuffed birds in *Psycho* suggest the second stylistic aspect of visionary/

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symbolic film. It is insistently metaphoric in its thrust. *Citizen Kane* is only the most extreme illustration of the tendency. At virtually every point in the film, the viewer is encouraged to make a quasi-allegorical move – to translate from the physical to the metaphysical, from worldly objects to imaginative significances, from external actions and events to indications of psychological and emotional states. The lowliest freshman in Film 101 knows to do this with *Citizen Kane* without even having to think about it. Even in the first few seconds of the film, she knows to turn mere, mundane experiences into grand, imaginative symbols of something else: From the scratched “No Trespassing” sign, to the languorous movements of the camera along the layers of fences, walls, and cages, to the desolation of the grounds around the mansion, to the snow-globe and the dying word of the lonely old man (all underpinned by lugubrious music and linked together by meditative lap dissolves), virtually every prop, piece of scenery, camera angle, lighting effect, and musical strain functions metaphorically. In this world, even the most pedestrian objects – a fence, a sign, a snow-globe – clearly don’t just mean themselves, they mean something imaginative. The fence is more than a fence; it speaks of the barriers to intimacy Kane erected during his life. The “No Trespassing” sign is more than a sign; it summarizes Kane’s state of self-imposed imaginative exile and its scratches tell us about his state of emotional dilapidation. The snow-globe is more than a snow-globe; it figures a youthful paradise lost. Welles locates us in a dreamscape, a world of imaginatively resonant metaphor and symbol, a realm of the imagination in which the most prosaic facts and events of ordinary life are transformed into emblems of profound spiritual realities.

Metaphors so abound in *Citizen Kane* that it is hard to find a scene, an event, or a prop that doesn’t function, at least partially, in a metaphoric way. In the Christmas scene involving Thatcher and the young Kane early in the movie, the match cut of the sled left behind in the snow and the sled being opened as a present is metaphoric. The way Thatcher towers over Kane is metaphoric. The depressed camera angle is metaphoric. In the scene at Mrs. Kane’s Boardinghouse, both the visual aspects of the scene (the overall background–foreground juxtaposition of the figure of the boy frolicking in the snow outside the window as the three adults whispering inside discuss his fate, and the detailed blocking of the various figures), as well as the verbal aspects of the scene (like the boy’s shout of “union forever”) are clearly and obviously metaphoric. In the Xanadu/jigsaw puzzle scenes, even the most naive viewer knows to read the cavernous architectural spaces, the small size of the figures, their distance from each other, and the echoic sound effects less for their manifest content than for their latent, symbolic

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significance. They signify Kane's emotional estrangement from Susan, and the loneliness and emptiness of their lives.

Citizen Kane may be the most thoroughgoing demonstration of this form of expression, but the metaphorization of experience is pervasive throughout most of what are regarded as being the major artworks produced within the studio system. In movies otherwise as different from one another as *The Saga of Anatahan*, *Psycho*, *The Trial*, 2001, *Apocalypse Now*, *Days of Heaven*, *Heaven's Gate*, *Blade Runner*, *Blue Velvet*, and *Blood Simple* (and even in mass entertainment like *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman Returns*), events, objects, and interactions are relentlessly shifted one notch to the side to signify something more abstract and general than the mere fact. Virtually nothing is simply itself.

The metaphoric turn is actually only an instance of a more general phenomenon that might be called the subjectivizing of experience in these works. The Hollywood studio tradition, especially when it is functioning at its most "artistic," is devoted to using external actions, objects, events, and sounds to figure internal states of feeling or awareness. Objects and events become outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual conditions. The contents of the world are systematically translated into the contents of consciousness. Scene after scene in Hitchcock's major American work (*North by Northwest*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, *Psycho*) functions in this way. When Hitchcock backprojects waves crashing on the shore behind Scotty and Madeline as they kiss in *Vertigo*, and edits their sound into the film, it's obvious that he is not interested in the ocean but in a visible and acoustic representation of Scotty's surging feelings. In *Psycho*, when Marion Crane drives to the Bates motel, the time of night, the rainstorm, the glare of the headlights in her eyes all function principally as expressions of her consciousness. She is in a storm at night but it is clearly not outer, but inner weather that we are seeing. The rainstorm is an external and, as a literal event, a relatively unimportant indication of her storm of emotion (which is why all signs of the rain can suddenly disappear as soon as her mood shifts or another character steps to the center of the narrative).

Although solitary or silent scenes favor it, the subjectivizing project is operant even in many scenes when more than one character is present. Consider the bravura concluding sequence in *Casablanca*, the final parting of Rick, Ilsa, and Lazlo on the airport runway (with Renault and another minor character looking on). Every bit as much as Hitchcock does during Marion Crane's drive and Welles does at the start of *Kane*, but with five characters present at once, Curtiz moves the moment out of the realm of worldly events and into a realm of interior imaginative eventfulness. In a

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standard stylistic pattern that is repeated at climactic moments in hundreds of films, four things take place: the characters are immobilized; the action of the scene is put on pause; the dialogue is more or less stopped; and the photography switches to a series of intercut tight closeups.⁸ In this particular instance, in more than thirty eyeline-matched shot–reverse shots, Curtiz has Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, and Paul Henreid exchange emotionally freighted glances with only the minimum number of lines of dialogue as a pretext to motivate them: Rick looks at Ilsa; Ilsa looks at Rick; Ilsa looks at Lazlo; Lazlo looks at Ilsa; Lazlo looks at Rick; Rick looks at Lazlo; all three look at the plane revving up; Rick looks at Ilsa again; Ilsa looks at Rick; Ilsa looks at Lazlo; Ilsa looks at Rick, and so on. The “action” of the scene is almost entirely interior. For two or three minutes, the expressive mode of the film shifts from worldly action to imaginative reaction, from halting, fumbling speech to richly eloquent, emotionally charged silences. Even the revving of the airplane’s propellers that punctuates the sequence at one moment really only functions as a kind of objective correlative for the revving up of the character’s and viewers’ emotions. To paraphrase a line Bergman speaks earlier in the movie, this is a world in which the sound of cannon fire *is* the sound of one’s heart pounding.

As the scene with Rick, Ilsa, and Lazlo illustrates, Hollywood’s subjectivizing stylistic project accomplishes a subtle but profound redefinition of the relationship of the self to the world. To the maximum extent possible within the formal constraints of a dramatic work of art, the “I” is turned into an “eye,” and life is made visionary (in both the optical and the imaginative sense of the word). Hitchcock’s works are virtually machines for creating narrative situations in which visual and visionary relationships take the place of physical, social, or verbal ones. That is to say, what *Casablanca* does only intermittently, Hitchcock does almost continuously. Throughout many of the major scenes in *North by Northwest*, *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, and *Psycho*, the main characters are placed in situations in which only a visual/visionary relationship with their surroundings is available. As much as possible, they are silenced, physically immobilized, moved to a certain distance from the objects of their attention, and confined to visual relationships with them: L. B. Jeffries sits in one place and looks through his telephoto lens at his neighbors across the courtyard; Roger Thornhill flees a crop duster in a cornfield or stands outside a house on top of Mount Rushmore staring through the windows, but unable to communicate directly with the people in the plane or the house; Scotty Ferguson rides around in his car watching Madeline travel from place to place and speculating about what it all means, but unable to interact with her; Arbogast and Lila Crane wander

through the Bates mansion turning it into a series of strictly visual experiences. In being socially or physically marginalized and denied possibilities of closer contact with or more direct involvement and interaction with what they see, these characters are prevented from doing anything other than looking, seeing, thinking, and feeling. They turn themselves into transparent eyeballs, living intensely through their eyes and in their minds and emotions, but relinquishing virtually every other way of being in the world.

The agenda is obviously a visionary one. These characters sacrifice possibilities of social relationship or physical interaction with the persons and objects in front of them to be freer to speculate, wonder, and think about them. They keep down their social involvements and expressions in order to enlarge their imaginative functions. In slightly contracting the character's physical presence (keeping him immobile), easing the requirements of social expressiveness (keeping him silent), and disencumbering him from physical involvements and social responsibilities (having him look at people he doesn't know or can't directly interact with), possibilities of purely imaginative relationship are enriched. In systematically substituting forms of vision (both optical and imaginative) for forms of action and practical social expression, the range of emotional associations and sympathies is enormously enlarged.

This expansion of imaginative possibilities is supported by the point-of-view shooting and editing convention. Point-of-view shooting and editing (which is almost universal throughout Hollywood filmmaking) is premised on the belief in truth expressible through seeing, and on the possibility of "looking" relationships and knowledge into existence. Seeing, feeling, knowing, and being are equated, so that to "see" something is to feel or know it; to feel or know it is to "be" it. Once this equation is made, characters are able to leave the complexities of physical involvement and practical expression behind. To "know" in this way is not to have to say or do anything. To "be" in this way is to liberate oneself from having to express one's being in a more practical way.

What is more important than a character's imaginative stance, however, is the viewer's. The viewer is placed in almost exactly the same imaginative position as one of the characters in these films. He is moved to a slight distance from what he sees in order to enter into a specially liberated and imaginatively enriched relationship with it. Like the character, he is encouraged to hold the world at an imaginative arm's length, as it were, the better to be free to speculate, wonder, and think about the objects of his attention. He takes one step backward, imaginatively speaking, from phenomenal events, and enters into a fundamentally conceptual or intellectual

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relationship with them. In a word, he assumes an essentially contemplative relationship with experience.

There are several ways this is accomplished. Hitchcock's work, and other films that rigorously employ point-of-view shooting and editing, make the viewer collaborate with the character simply by compelling him to see things through the character's eyes and therefore to some extent to see them in a way similar to how the character does. The viewer of *North by Northwest* or *Psycho* enters into the same intense, speculative, yet slightly intellectual relationship with what Roger Thornhill sees in the house on Mount Rushmore and what Lila Crane sees in the Bates mansion as do the characters. The viewer of *Vertigo*, held at the same visual and imaginative distance from Madeline that Scotty is, and therefore denied the possibility of entering into a more intimate or emotional involvement with her, wonders along with Scotty as he follows her across northern California. The viewer of *Rear Window*, kept at the same physical and emotional distance from what he sees as is L. B. Jeffries, is consequently compelled to assume virtually the same intellectual relationship with it that Jeffries has. In being held at a certain, crucial distance, the viewer's relationship with what is seen becomes somewhat detached and abstracted.

This point-of-view editing convention is only one way in which works in this tradition cultivate a fundamentally contemplative relationship with what is seen, however, and filmmakers entirely less devoted to point-of-view shooting and editing than Hitchcock create the same effect in many other ways. The visual sublimities of Kubrick's work, the metaphoric insistence of Welles's, the mythopoetic freightings of Coppola's, the photographic preciousness of Lynch's or De Palma's, the narrative mannerism of Joel Coen's, are all ways of moving the viewer to a slightly distanced imaginative position from the experiences presented. In fact, the entire narrative project of the visionary/symbolic mode of filmmaking, as I have been describing it, is a way of placing the world at a certain imaginative distance. Insofar as experience is aestheticized or generalized, the essentializing, metaphorizing, and subjectivizing tendencies each, ever so slightly, relax the claims of the visible and audible world and induce a moderate state of abstraction in the viewer. In being allowed to contemplate the abstract imaginative or psychological significance of events, props, and stylistic effects, the viewer is released from responding more intimately. He is moved to a slight meditative distance from experience. (I would note that in many films, *Citizen Kane* being only the most blatant example, even the characters themselves play the distancing game, repeatedly offering abstract or intellectual interpretations of their own and other characters' actions. After so

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many sermons about Kane's "need for love," it is hard not to have a fairly abstract stance toward specific scenes.)

The result, however achieved, is to change the nature of experience. In moving the world into the mind, reality is ever so slightly derealized. When concepts replace percepts, the world is subtly drained of some of its sensory content, its idiosyncrasy, its prickly particularity, its unpredictability, its mutability. In being made to illustrate abstract points, the edges of perceptual experience are rounded and its roughness smoothed.

Now it is of the essence of Cassavetes' oeuvre (and undoubtedly the source of many of his problems with audiences and critics) that it declines to understand experience in these ways. His films simply reject essentializing, metaphorizing, subjectivizing, abstracting, and contemplative forms of knowledge and relationship. Sensorily concrete ways of knowing replace metaphorical or abstract ones. Perceptions replace conceptions. A sweaty, assaultive, in-your-face intensity of involvement with experience takes the place of the contemplative distance that the other sort of film cultivates.

The essentializing and metaphorizing tendencies of films within the visionary/symbolic tradition inevitably clarify, tame, and stabilize the potential confusions of perceptual experience in certain respects: The complexity of surface events is able to be traced back to simplifying "deep" meanings. A character's fluxional expressions of himself are anchored in enduring intentions and qualities. Behavioral quirks are traced back to an essential, unchanging core of being. Cassavetes simply rejects that understanding of experience. Viewers are denied access to intentional depths, and asked to navigate shifting (and potentially bewildering) expressive surfaces. As an illustration, consider the scene near the beginning of *Faces*, in which two men, Freddie and Richard, vie for the affection of a girl named Jeannie. Rather than allowing the viewer to redirect his attention from surface events to clarifying imaginative depths, Cassavetes forces him to grapple with unanalyzed and unexplained expressive surfaces. The viewer is put in the position of not knowing quite who the characters are, why they are behaving in the way they are, or exactly how to interpret their specific expressions. Furthermore, the characters keep changing: They are nice one moment and nasty the next, considerate at one point, self-centered at another. The consequence is to force the viewer to abandon the attempt to trace expressive behavior back to a reductive set of "essential" intentions, feelings, and attitudes (that is, if it doesn't send him scurrying out of the theater in bewilderment). The viewing process is changed completely. While the other kind of film encourages us to tunnel under perceptual instabilities and expressive vagaries, Cassavetes holds us on the phenomenal surfaces of life