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

Ray Carney

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The Films of John Cassavetes tells the inside story of the making of six of Cassavetes' most important works: *Shadows*, *Faces*, *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, and *Love Streams*. With the help of almost fifty previously unpublished photographs from the private collections of Sam Shaw and Larry Shaw, and excerpts from interviews with the filmmaker and many of his closest friends, the reader is taken behind the scenes to watch the maverick independent at work: writing his scripts, rehearsing his actors, blocking their movements, shooting his scenes, and editing them. Through words and pictures, Cassavetes is shown to have been a deeply thoughtful and self-aware artist and a profound commentator on the American experience.

This iconoclastic, interdisciplinary study challenges many accepted notions in film history and aesthetics. Ray Carney argues that Cassavetes' films participate in a previously unrecognized form of pragmatic American modernism that, in its ebullient affirmation of life, not only goes against the world-weariness and despair of many twentieth-century works of art, but also places his work at odds with the assumptions and methods of most contemporary film criticism. Cassavetes' films are provocatively linked to the philosophical writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and John Dewey, both as an illustration of the artistic consequences of a pragmatic aesthetic and as an example of the challenges and rewards of a life lived pragmatically. Cassavetes' work is shown to reveal stimulating new ways of knowing, feeling, and being in the world.

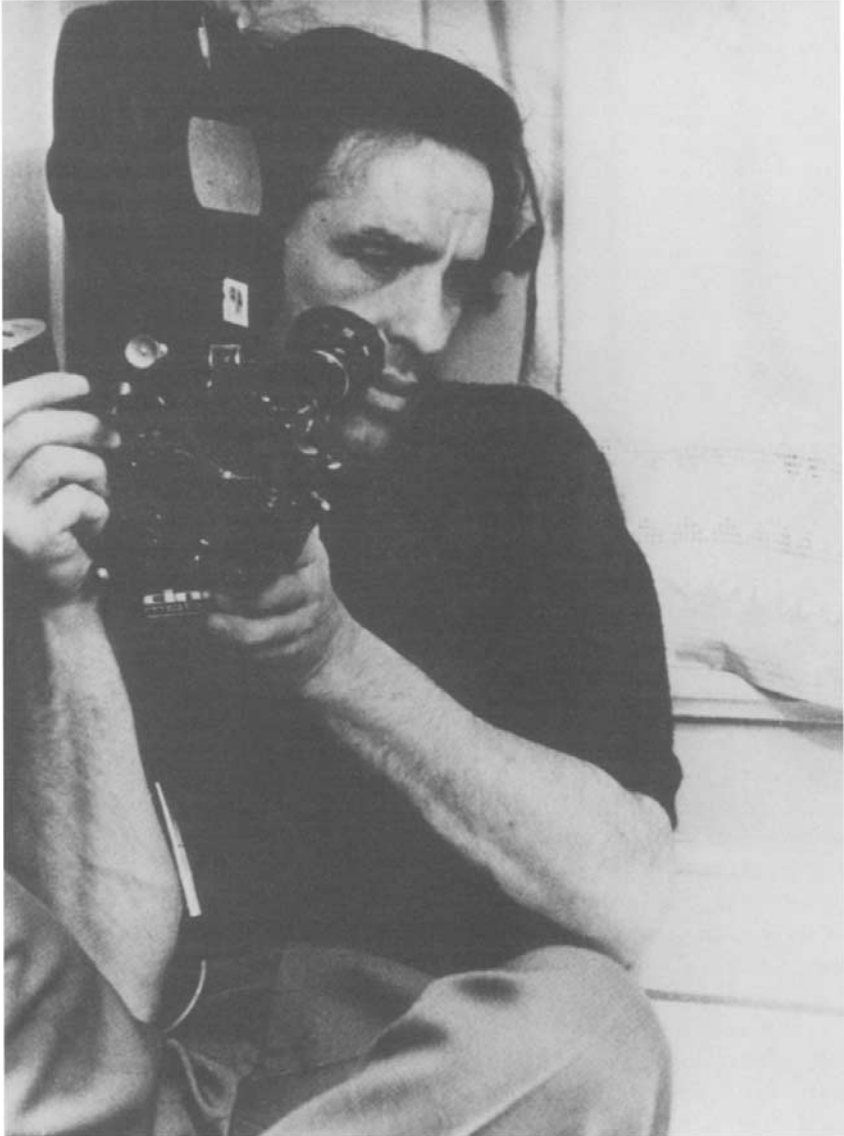
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“Film is an art, a beautiful art. It’s a madness that overcomes us. The artist is really a magical figure. The idea of making a movie is to pack a lifetime of ideas and emotions into a two-hour form – two hours where some images flash across the screen. And the hope is that the audience will forget everything and that celluloid will change lives. That’s a preposterously presumptuous assumption, yet that’s the hope of every filmmaker.”

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Photographs by
Sam Shaw and Larry Shaw



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For Diane

*Dream dreams, and write them,
Aye, but live them first.*

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Acknowledgments

This book takes its origin from two events with which I was involved: the fifteen-city American tour of the complete films of John Cassavetes, sponsored by the Walker Art Center and the Pacific Film Archive and curated by Bruce Jenkins, that took place during 1989 and 1990; and the comprehensive retrospective of the filmmaker's work presented in Avignon, France, in July 1989, at Jerome Rudes's French–American Film Workshop. In the course of organizing a series of lectures, panel discussions, and other special events to support the screenings in both countries, I had the unique opportunity to meet and get to know many of John Cassavetes' closest friends and artistic collaborators. They kindly came forward to share personal anecdotes and information about the making of the films, generously gave of their time (in scores of telephone conversations, numerous letters and written recollections, and more than two hundred hours of taped interviews), and provided me with access to previously unpublished plays, screenplays, and other writings by the filmmaker. Those individuals include: Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara, Elaine May, Seymour Cassel, Robert Fieldsteel, Larry Shaw, Sam Shaw, Al Ruban, Ted Allan, Jo Lustig, Jay Cocks, Jonas Mekas, Leola Harlow, Meta Shaw, Susan Shaw, Nancy Bishop, Lelia Goldoni, and Tim Ferris. This book could not have been written without their help. The photographs by my dear friends, Sam Shaw and Larry Shaw, which illustrate this volume and are being published in America for the first time, speak for themselves. They truly take us behind the scenes to watch this great artist at work. I am deeply grateful for their permission to use them.

Among my own circle of friends and colleagues, I would single out three individuals who helped substantially, often through their loyal opposition to some of the ideas presented here. Ara Corbett, one of the most thoughtful students of Cassavetes' work, shared many suggestive observations about

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the films, a few of which found their way into my argument. George Blue-stone, a friend and colleague at Boston University, helped me to refine many of my ideas, which were first presented to him in conversation. Scott Simmon of San Francisco State University kindly read the manuscript and commented copiously on it. At Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl, Michael Gnat, and Cary Groner made many useful suggestions.

Since Cassavetes' films have been largely ignored by academic film scholarship, most writing on his work still unfortunately takes place in a critical vacuum; however, I want to acknowledge how much I have learned from five scholars who have broken away from the pack: Maria Viera, Carole Zucker, George Kouvaros, Janet Zwierzynski, and my former student, Lucio Benedetto, all of whom contributed to a special "John Cassavetes" issue of *Post Script* magazine, which Gerald Duchovnay of East Texas State University had the vision to commission. When it comes to the writings of William James and Ralph Waldo Emerson, which figure prominently in my text, I am, as always, deeply indebted to the pioneering work of Richard Poirier, a friend and former teacher. My final, and most profound, debt of gratitude is expressed in my dedication.