

John Cassavetes and the Uneasy Conformism of the American Middle Class

Vrasidas Karalis

In September 1981, as I opened the door of my home in Piraeus, Greece, I came face to face with none other but John Cassavetes. It was early in the morning and I was heading to the university for exams. In broken Greek, Cassavetes told me that he was looking for the house where he spent some years of his childhood in the early thirties before moving to New York for good. “We lived in Larissa,” he said, “but we stayed here for some years before taking the boat to America, to Long Island, if you know.” Of course, the house was not there anymore. It had been demolished in the sixties. A new one was erected at its place which by then had become a derelict building of abandoned offices.

He told me that he was in a movie based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, directed by Paul Mazursky. He was very disappointed that he didn’t find his home; and then he asked me: “Do they know my work in Greece?”

“Certainly,” I replied enthusiastically. “You are one of the grand masters of cinema for all of us. Almost a cult figure.”

He smiled with satisfaction. “It’s good to know that you are not forgotten,” he added. I was very young and not articulate enough in front of such a legendary artist. As we walked down the street, he told me that he was in Athens with his wife Gena Rowlands and Susan Sarandon and they were going to Mani for the film. “Do they know Gena?” he asked.

“She is *the* diva of American cinema,” I emphatically stressed.

“Greeks seem to know everything,” he said and laughed.

“Yes,” I replied full of patriotic pride. “To give you an example,” only last week we had a retrospective of your movies at the Piraeus Cine Club. It started at 12 o’clock midday

and finished the next morning. And the retrospective became the reason for a split in its ranks, as the hard-line Communists decided that your films were reactionary and conservative, and didn't give a revolutionary perspective to the working class. He laughed. "This is how much we appreciate your movies here," I added proudly. "But still, your film *A Woman under the Influence* is a very popular film. And your other films too: *Faces*, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Opening Night*..." I rambled on, "But my favourite is your last one: *Gloria*. I watched *Gloria* four times."

"It's good to know that young people like your work," he whispered somehow embarrassed and slowly walked to his car. As he was leaving, he said: "*Eucharisto poly*. I am so sorry I have forgotten my Greek." And added: "My father who died recently spoke very good Greek till the last day of his life, although he had gone to New York very young." And he drove off discretely.

It was an unforgettable random meeting. I was talking to my friends constantly for month; they never believed me. But it haunted me for years, especially when I started studying his films more carefully and systematically. What in my early age was an intuition or a vague premonition became later a certainty, somehow a theoretical presupposition. The more I reflected on that accidental meeting the more I was discovering the romantic quality of the individual, or by extension, the romantic undercurrent of his films. Because it is deeply romantic to think that time had stopped, turn the clock back fifty years and search for the house of your childhood before so many wars and changes. This pervasive nostalgia, or the desire to reconnect with a lost home, always coloured my perception of his films even when they were about crisis, disconnection and loss, even when they were lost in the hyper-realities and the cryptic idioms of the American cinematic language.

His nostalgia for lost rituals of bonding, the search for the remnants of a forgotten language of communication, in other words this romantic communitarianism was the redeeming quality of his characters. Yet not in trite naïve "realistic images" about a "nice" human being. Niceness is probably the vice of the British and Australian cinemas but not of the American one. The viewer can immediately feel this nostalgia in the atmosphere and the mood of most of his films, as the hidden centre and lost symmetry of their world. Cassavetes represented what was lost and what that loss meant to people while making statements about what was present, active and somehow energetic. The energy can be felt everywhere diffused and suffusing all forms of communication. Most of his characters appear cruel, indifferent,

detached, almost sociopathic, but in reality, there is an almost morbid sentimentality in most of them. Even Gloria suffers suppressed and hidden sentimentalism, as does the film *Gloria* (1980) itself. The emotions are everywhere but remain unnamed although movements, gestures and scattered words struggle to frame them and liberate the characters from their *angst*.

I think that the feeling of the outsider, which tormented Elia Kazan so much, existed also in the dramaturgic imagination of Cassavetes. I found it puzzling that despite the enormous number of Hollywood directors from all over the world and from so many different traditions, these were the two people who epitomized the two pillars of the American cinematography after World War II: Elia Kazan and John Cassavetes. Both were of Greek origin and both were immigrants to the United States. Kazan tried to hide as much as he could about himself while Cassavetes struggled to the best of his endurance to reveal everything about himself. Kazan represented evasions, Cassavetes presented candor. Where the first visualizes connotations, the second frames manifestations. While the former fills his movies with undesirable subtexts, the latter enriches them with unequivocal objectivities. American cinema can be seen as an oscillation between these two modes of representation, of displacement and unconcealment.

Kazan struggled with the strictures of the studio system and the phobias of his own identity. Even in his last films, especially his little appreciated *The Arrangement* (1969) and his monumental *America America* (1963), the genuine concerns of his mind are never explicitly revealed. In a psychologically tense manner he used the Freudian *displacement* mechanism to transfer his deep personal conflicts onto collective mythologies or verbal networks. The main question in *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) is about masculine sexuality, but this is never addressed or explicitly mentioned. The question is repeatedly confronted only *metonymically*, through the father or a friend or the half-words of a lover. Kazan's cinema is the visual framing of social metonymies for what cannot be named, or what is unwanted: the feeling that you don't belong, that you remain a stranger, moreover a stranger to yourself, even at the moments of the most intimate realization or the seconds of the most extreme elevation. Kazan never dared to address the question of his own identity except in his last novels¹ and autobiographies:² he externalized identity through highly rhetorical scripts of self-dramatization and remained a strange enigma to himself and to his admirers, making cinematic images into the vestigial synecdoche of a deferred self-recognition.

The work of Cassavetes stands as the polar opposite to Kazan's. His cinema frames the realities and the consequences of characters that want, or struggle, to be true to themselves. If Kazan *de-realizes* experiences, Cassavetes *en-realizes* them by opening their field of representation and expanding endlessly their perceptual dimensions. The camera follows the trajectory of their quest which takes place in the familiar spaces of the city, or the backyard, the living-room, the kitchen even at the bedroom. In his most "risky" films, Cassavetes' camera wants to transport viewers onto the screen and make them active participants to the actual drama of searching for limits. For this reason, the temporal frame of his films is always the present, a present which is the result of an eruption, of a slow decomposition of the precarious balance that the characters have imposed upon their life.

In a way, this is an epic of the American urban middle class, in all its complexity, transience and fluctuation. If Kazan tried to study the working class, especially in his early films, it is rather obvious that his American working class is the image of an image. It derives from Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) and Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926). His diluted Soviet imagery tried to avoid the allure of the lumpen proletariat that always fascinated Hollywood producers and directors. But his working-class heroes, especially in films like *Panic in the Streets* (1954), *Viva Zapata!* (1952), and *On the Waterfront* (1954), lack reality. They are didactic, over-inflated, instructive symbols to be followed, not characters to be empathized with.

On the contrary, Cassavetes's characters and their cinematic images are mostly commensurate to the social realities they encapsulate. But they also have a life of their own as personal visions of that given reality. In that personal life, his movies are about what Barbara Ehrenreich captured with the title of her book *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1985). Despite their strong existential nature, most of his films are highly political: they address the fears and the panics of the American middle-class especially of immigrant background and the sacrifices they had to endure in order to be accepted by the social mainstream. The immigrant background is extremely obvious in Cassavetes. *Opening Night* (1977) culminates the process of depicting the origin of the creator-actor-director with gigantic photographs of Greek faces as a reconnection with a re-membered past. Similar to the father scene in Kazan's *The Arrangement*, Cassavetes in this film, which is probably his most accomplished modernist fantasy about the blurred borders between illusion and reality, "normalizes" its experimentation with cinematic syntax, as the camera frames fictional images which contain many autobiographical elements.

His last two films *Gloria* and *Love Streams* (1984) are his most innocuous, films closer to the Hollywood tradition than his *aficionados* could ever imagine. Yet by then Cassavetes had abandoned the poetics of fragmentation that we have seen in his early films. *Gloria* glorified the run-down, crumbling and dingy city-scape of New York. The camera runs through a dilapidated city like someone who celebrates its freedom. Beyond being a visual social documentation of New York in the late seventies, the film also offers a climactic catharsis to the exploration of open space that started with his first film *Shadows* (1959). It is a benchmark for his subsequent productions as it addresses the central postulate of his camera: the poetics of human forms as it moves through space. *Love Streams* is the rediscovery of the Aristotelian poetics, a *peripeteia* plus its *anagnoresis*, a moment that is when viewers confront their emotions and try to make sense of them by telling stories about them. As Cassavetes said during the making of the film, “We have to see the whole painful emotional thing—otherwise, it’s just a movie.”³

If the studio productions of the period privileged the highly scripted, well designed, almost baroque films of Douglas Sirk, Otto Preminger or John Ford, *Shadows* was the film that demolished the artificial, indeed the *artistic*, barriers between closed and open spaces. Its central compositional principle was not the improvised acting or the jazz-motivated plot but the limitlessness of the frame, the minimal editing, and the attempt to expand the confines of cinematic space with the unruly and rudderless movement of the camera through vast and depthless cityscapes. Therein lies the most permanent innovation of his visual language, which today is rather commonplace: unlike the symmetrical, rationalized and controlled spaces of *East of Eden* (1955), *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), or *Vertigo* (1955), Cassavetes seems to reinvent cinematic space by fusing together the B-movies of the fifties and the European neorealistic films from the same period. The Academy awards for best foreign films in the fifties went to films like Federico Fellini’s *La Strada* (1959) and *The Nights of Cabiria* (1957) and Jacques Tati’s *My Uncle* (1958). However, if some of the stylistic elements of these films can be seen in both versions of *Shadows*, a genuinely American exploration of urban space and urban visuality had already started with the Jacques Tournier, Jules Dassin, Samuel Fuller and Robert Aldrich. It was the time when the studio comforts started becoming too obvious and too artificial. Each shot in films like *Written on the Wind* (1956), *Giant* (1956), and of course *Ben-Hur* (1959) is so controlled that it becomes contrived, restrictive and ultimately manneristic.

Cassavetes' *Shadows* changed that singlehandedly; yet it builds on existing anomalies within the dominant style, even sometimes on the unintended deviations of the studio system. Furthermore, his style has been associated too much with the *cinéma vérité* which is not very obvious in the films themselves. His films are not pure observational or direct cinema with an omnipresent eye that supervises and overviews everything. His camera is the camera of the ignorant yet insatiable eye. It looks everywhere and captures every movement in the depthless space, even the movements of the bystanders who look confused by the camera. The visual idiom of his work is not a sudden explosion out of nowhere. For example, despite the striking differences, the central character in Dassin's *The Naked City* (1948) with its frantic running through a devastated city becomes in the *Shadows* the hand-held camera itself. In the *Shadows*, the cinematic eye tries to find its locality in the labyrinthine spaciousness of a sprawling and indifferent city.

One can easily detect the same approach in his other complete visual artefact of the period, certain episodes of the television series *Johnny Staccato* (1959-60). In episodes like "Solomon" and "A Nice Little Town," the camera seems to have lost interest in the story and wanders over the contours of urban architecture and the geometry of the buildings: the main quest is the establish not an originary point for the camera but a continuous field of points through which the multiplicity and the complexity of events and situations could be looked upon and visualized as a flowing pattern. In Cassavetes's first films, with the partial exception of *A Child is Waiting* (1962), human form is lost in the networks of constructed spaces, moving through and within the buildings. The image of bodies moving through open indeterminate spaces becomes the central mythographic pattern of his films until the seventies when his plots will be domesticated and he will discover the lethal isolation of the family living-room.

Open space is the ultimate catalyst in the representation of the human form, especially the human face in the *Shadows* and especially in the *Faces* (1968). The transition from the first film to the second must be understood within the context of his own development. The relentless exploration of space looks like an escape not from reality but as escape from a specific self-perception, which might be called here, an uneasy normality. Indeed, sometimes contemporary viewers are taken aback by the fixity of Cassavetes' characters and the very strong sense of heterosexual imagery that permeates his works, despite the most impressive scenes, in Sirkian baroque style, at the gay bar in *Love Streams* (1984). Only in this film, the

male face takes on female characteristics blurring the boundaries between the strict and irreconcilable binary oppositions in sex and gender.

While Cassavetes problematizes representation, he maintains an innocent, almost unsuspecting gaze, when he looks back at what is represented. His innocence becomes occasionally strange as in *Husbands* (1970) or *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). His gaze is the gaze of high modernist craftsman who is interested in form and composition. Form and image become for him the opposite of what Hollywood was asking from him to be: the actor Cassavetes in films like *The Killers* (1964), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and even *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) is totally different from the director Cassavetes whose color, *mise-en-scene* and music, and, of course, acting style, simply undermine all rationalized and controllable forms of representation. As an actor, he was self-conscious, labored and stilted even in his most memorable performances. Even in Brian De Palma's *Fury* (1978), in which he had the opportunity to exhibit his acting skills, especially when his character becomes insane, he seems to have his mind elsewhere. He looks confused within his own role, almost at odds with himself, a character split between the persona on the screen and the person outside the cinema.

Andrew Sarris, a constant critic of Cassavetes's films, has had only ambivalent things to say about him. He writes, "John Cassavetes remains an unresolved talent, not entirely happy with the Establishment or against it. His direction, like his acting, hovers between offbeat improvisation and blatant contrivance. Somehow his timing always seems to be off a beat or two even when he understands what he is doing. Too much of the time he is groping when he should be gripping. At his best, however, he makes emotional contact with his material, and transforms his humblest players into breathing, feeling beings."⁴

Despite the ungraceful first sentences Sarris offers Cassavetes a strange alibi: he is offbeat because of his emotions. Sarris's version of "auteur theory" privileged what he called "interior meaning" (based on Kierkegaard 'interior meaning') which to Sarris was more of "a critical instrument than a creative inspiration."⁵ But it was impossible to find such meaning as Cassavetes avoided infusing his films with such invisible films within his films, with implied texts or implied viewers. As Ray Carney concluded in Cassavetes' films, viewers find "not bodies of codified knowledge, not a series of views, messages or statements about experience, but examples of the experiences themselves."⁶ Nevertheless, Sarris observations about the tangled web of performance styles and directorial ambivalence are to be taken

seriously. If there would be an auteur in the American cinema for Sarris that person could only have been Cassavetes. In his work however there remained something incomplete and unformed which didn't escape the attention of Sarris' most ferocious opponent, Pauline Kael.

In one of her most bittersweet reviews of *Faces* (1968), Kael could not easily disguise her ambivalence towards the film but also towards the whole Cassavetes phenomenon. "His great commercial asset," she notes, "is that he thinks not like a director but like an actor. His deliberately raw material about affluence and apathy, loneliness and middle age, the importance of sex and the miseries of marriage may not say any more about the subject than glossy movies on the same themes, and the faces with blemishes may not be much more revealing than faces with a little makeup, but the unrelieved effort at honesty is, for some people, intensely convincing."⁷ Kael calls his film "psychodrama" which situates his work within the context of the existentialism that inspired many artists in the sixties. In some other reviews of his films, she finds his effort meaningless and, in its essence, a pretentious re-imagining of what was the norm in the mainstream cinema of the sixties: sex, more sex, or less sex.

A serious reading of his films, however, tends to rather reject such privileging of sexuality in Cassavetes. There is a very strong existentialist undercurrent in his films which relates to the crisis of meaning and communication that happened in the post-war societies but also in the United States with the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war. It is obvious that with Cassavetes' films the realm of interiority became the central theme of visual representation. If in the work of Orson Welles, Sam Peckinpah, George Roy Hill and eventually Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, existentialist questions became gradually prominent, Cassavetes also incorporates thematic lines from existentialism in his films, especially *Faces*, *Husbands*, and *A Woman Under the Influence*. Yet not in the way seen during the same period with the films of Ingmar Bergman, Michelangelo Antonioni or even Woody Allen.

For Cassavetes, existentialism was not only a way of being in society but a way of looking at reality, a different vision of the social space in its visual translation. In other words, Cassavetes even in his most existentialist films remained a modernist looking for formal consolidation of feelings of disenchantment and disillusion with the historical optimism that dominated the cultural imaginary of the Americans in the post-war period. George Kouvaros, following Jonathan Rosenbaum, calls this element "instinctive

modernism,”⁸ an approach without theoretical elaborations or ideological underpinnings to the construction of the cinematic image. As Ray Carney observed, “Cassavetes forces the viewer to live through a confusing welter of ungeneralizable perceptual events. He presents knowledge that cannot be disentangled from space and time.”⁹ What interests Cassavetes is the uniqueness of the experience and the unrepeatability of the event he depicts: the role of the director is to construct the pictorial space and give the appropriate angle to see the specificity and indeed to look at every character and every interactions between characters as existential singularities which is what all his mature films are about. In a way, this is what Jonas Mekas, another critic of his work, meant when he stated that the first version of *Faces* destroyed the artificiality introduced by *Citizen Kane* (1941) because “*Shadows* breaks with the official staged cinema, with made-up faces, with written scripts with plot continuities.... The tones and rhythms of a new America are caught in *Shadows* for the very first time.”¹⁰

In *A Woman under the Influence* or *The Killing of Chinese Bookie* (1976) the story-line is somehow extremely simple but there are always certain imponderable elements in their representation that make the difference. The grainy image, the unfocused camera, the lack of symmetrical frames, the irregular close-ups, the spasmodic rhythm, all indicate an intradiegetic commentary difficult to find again even in the French cinema of the period. Cassavetes dissolves the solidity of the frame in order to situate the individual case in its pragmatic environment. A hasty reading of his films would claim that most of his characters define themselves in terms of social alienation; in reality his films explore the realm of interiority as the realm of internal otherness. For Cassavetes a relationship in crisis creates the self-othering of individuals and therefore enhances the psychological tension within them. This is the reason why most of his films defy the traditional Hollywood poetics of happy-ending, and the Aristotelian way of closure and catharsis. The films end abruptly, somehow the story-line remains unresolved, the tension unredeemed. His most complex and accomplished film in that aspect is *Opening Night*.

The film brings together the main thematic lines of Cassavetes the man and Cassavetes the artist. It alternates between on stage and off stage action, his life as an artist and his origins as an immigrant, through the continuous juxtaposition between past and present, memory and hope, imagination and history. “I know that I am not me,” says the central character on stage. And her co-protagonist replies, “And I know that I am someone else.” Despite the funny intonation, theatricality and irony create a paradoxical space in which minimalism and conceptualism converge producing an astonishing visual experience

enhanced by vibrant colors, real audience participation and impromptu improvisations. The theatrical stage is dominated by huge photographs from old Greek women and men as keys to the identity markers that permeate the film. The central question is how you manifest your identity both as memory and experience. The film substitutes the one with other and then goes back to the original state of being sober and being drunk, in “a climax of pure Cassavetes psychic chaos,”¹¹ as Roger Ebert observed or as a younger scholar stated “a wholehearted return to charting the shifting patterns of emotional chaos.”¹²

Probably *chaos* is not the right word to denote the emotional complexities in his characters; but both statements indicate that there is something disordered and anarchic in the way he imagines, visualizes and depicts emotions. In reality, Cassavetes wants to leave emotions pure and untouched by the distorting lens of cinema. With this in mind, he subverts the expectations of the audience and invites them to empathize with the story of the disintegrating diva. Pedro Almadovar, one of the most perceptive viewers of the film, has stated, “I saw John Cassavetes’ *Opening Night* and I took the film like an intimate confession in which I played an active part. Seeing it was an active emotion. It was the most intense moment I’ve experienced in several months.”¹³ The inconclusive end to the film shows Cassavetes’ tendency to leave everything in abeyance, unresolved and in total suspension – which is one of his most significant contributions to the art of filmmaking, as cinematic images become fragments of a continuous and uninterrupted flow of events.

Against this we can see his middle-class fear of falling, as an attempt to salvage the world of complete unity, the world of the absent father. Father has to be taken here metonymically: it represents the point of convergence for all the ambiguities and the inconsistencies of the world both socially and psychologically. Cassavetes’ characters are parents who never ceased being children, essentially parentless children with children of their own. The absent father, in particular, also indicates a sort of metaphysical quest in the structure of his stories. Ray Carney suggests that Cassavetes “was a deeply spiritual artist – like Bresson, Tarkovsky and Dreyer, – a religious film-maker in a post-religious age. He was an artist of hope – a poet of the miraculous, transforming power of emotion to teach us things our minds are slow to learn.”¹⁴

Certainly, there is a religious element in fear, especially in the fear of falling from the grace of a given position in society. John Keats called this aesthetic element an enrapture with negativity and the numinous, without collapsing or losing its sense of its unique self:

“...I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason....”¹⁵ Another cryptoromantic Charles Baudelaire talked about “an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting....”¹⁶ This is indeed the concept of the modernist self: fragmented but searching for integrity, discontinuous and yet looking for cohesion and centreless while imagining a substantive identity.

In a sense this is what Michel Foucault called “limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself”¹⁷ and therefore every relationship in his films instead of instituting the unified subject of western metaphysics delineates the ontology of its demise. Quite correctly Foucault stresses the political aspect of such an experience: it tests the stability of the systemic discourses around the modernist subject and ultimately guarantees or cancels, the intelligibility of the real within which the subject defines and articulates itself. Cassavetes constructs his visual semiotics within the context of such radical de-stabilisation of the real, first with the rebellious sixties and seventies and then with the reactionary and stultifying eighties. Despite their pronounced individualism, his movies mean different things today from what they meant when they came out: we must stop seeing and dealing with them as documents of an era, whereas they were the era itself, precisely because they were marginal and visualised the contradictions and the contrapositions of an era with the all-seeing eye of an unsuspecting bystander. At the moment Cassavetes developed his own hermeneutics of suspicion, as it is obvious in the irony and the sarcasm of his last film *Big Trouble* (1986) which he disowned, we understand that he had entered a new world which was not entirely his and in which he couldn't really navigate himself. It is known that around the end of his life he approached more and more towards the theatre which seemed to solve some of the problems of his visual poetics in the era of blockbusters and movies made predominantly for adolescent audiences.

Today, the important thing is to situate Cassavetes's films within the context and dynamics of current cultural politics, and avoid seeing them as museum exhibits during antiquarian tributes at prestigious high-class venues. His death in 1989 brought an abrupt end to a creative life which till its final days was continuing unabated in many different fields. The eighties, the era of neoliberal hegemony, were the times when heresies became schisms, and what looked earlier as an experiment with form and thus an expansion of its potentialities, became an epistemological regime on its own right through the relativism of

postmodernism. Melancholia took over both left and right ideologues and thinkers: a particular kind of melancholia nevertheless, full of the fear of middle class not to lose its privileges caused by the growing tendency of the dominant oligarchy to get rid of its liberalism. As his work became canonical its decentredness became its central characteristic; and the idea of his “prevalence of emotions” simply emptied his cinematic form from its collisional and confrontational semiotics.

Cassavetes’ films locate the subversive and the rebellious within the ordinary and the common. They frame the epic battle of everyday humans against possessive individualism in order to realise themselves through meaningful actions. The possession of things through consumerism becomes possession of others through domination. In the end, it becomes alienation from the self through dependence on mechanisms of control that nobody can master or manage. With Cassavetes a new melancholia took over the creative imaginary of American cinema, which gradually evolved into a large-scale mourning about the frustrated visions of the sixties and the dominant conformism of the middle class and its inability to reclaim its political space.

If in European cinema such mourning was the immediate result of the collapse of socialism a social project, the American cinema followed a trajectory of escapism and evasions in order to deal with the mainstreaming and the conventionalisation of the old revolutionaries. Of course, we are talking about an American understanding of rebellion, indeed of revolt, as found in the Technicolor mythology of the *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which verges on the anarchist anti-establishment iconography going back to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and to Jean Jacques Rousseau’s natural man in direct contact with his emotions. In a way Cassavetes’ characters are looking for natural grace while being lost in their urban labyrinths. Nature appears triumphantly in the end of *Gloria* as they escape the dangerous grounds of the city and find each other and refuge in a remote cemetery full of trees and flowers. What does not appear however is the catastrophic or the self-destructive false messiah we find later in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976). Cassavetes’ alcoholics, womanisers or neurotics are not dangerous and never glamorise death. *Love Streams* is about the glorification of human brokenness and frailty, the painful exploration of human vulnerability under the shadow of dying. Yet the gaze of the director focuses on the human face with intensity and awe. The wrinkles and the lines of old age become monuments to the moral endurance of human presence: as he made his final films, corporeality becomes probably the most striking axial marker in the visual formations of his frames. Vibrant

colours, clear-cut contours, sharp geometries in *mise-en-scene* all work together to foreground cinematic temporality and human ephemerality. Indeed, the compressed cinematic time of *Love Streams* frames the passage of time in existential terms, becoming in a strange way the forerunner of Terrence Malick's Heideggerian cinema.

Pauline Kael observed that in the early seventies a major change took over American cinema. As her biographer Brian Kellow synoptically states, based on her famous essay on Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), "She believed that the Catholic fixation on guilt and sin and mystery had triumphed, in artistic terms, over the traditional Protestant obsessions with repression, self-denial, and an iron work-ethic."¹⁸ Other Catholic filmmakers, such as Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman, introduced the aesthetic of the Open Work, leaving the story somehow always unfinished or half-ended, in contrast to the strong and conclusive ending of the classical cinema of D. W. Griffith, Orson Welles, and Sam Peckinpah. Despite the fact that Hollywood was always dominated by Catholic or Jewish filmmakers the opening-up of form, the gradual variation from within the dominant pattern took place in the sixties and in a way, as Scorsese admits, Cassavetes was behind this since he had "...the energy and the audacity to pick up a camera, a 16 millimeter camera at the time, the Éclair, and shoot a movie right here –on the East Coast, where there were no movie studios."¹⁹ The technical innovation created a new visual field of unpredictable connections. With Cassavetes irregularity becomes a prevalent situation for self-presentation: the story invents itself as it progresses and the characters change themselves as the story evolves.

This is something that we find in the French Nouvelle Vague as well as in the Czech New Wave, or even Danish Dogma. The implications of Cassavetes' rebellion against Hollywood can be seen even today: it was a creative rebellion that wanted to elucidate, democratise and indeed communize the cinematic medium. His trajectory fused his immigrant background, his middle-class social position, and his peripheral stand within the film industry. Despite the attempts to appropriate and thus neutralise his rebelliousness by mainstream producers, the unique vision of a troubled normality within a society that is afraid of losing its privileges is framed by his movies. The trouble and the fear are transformed by strong positive emotions through images of transparency and purity that has not been achieved frequently since. As he noted about his own works, "The characters in my films display a lack of comfort and find themselves in petty and embarrassing situations, but this is only so because they haven't yet come to grips with their emotional natures."²⁰ His whole work is how viewers can come to grips with their repressed emotional nature, which has

become elusive, confusing and incomprehensible, therefore almost impossible to be visualised and imagined.

Cassavetes's movies are about the re-education of the senses through the recognition of the fragility and vulnerability of human presence within the political landscape of middle-class conformism. His movies are about what happens after the removal of masks and alibis takes place as the individual comes face to face with its own conscience. They framed a dialogue between individuals and their interiority through the phenomenal revelation of images. So, he transformed the screen into the romantic topos of an ultimate revelation, of "how," as he said, "people fool themselves, not how they fool others."²¹ In an era of post-cinema and digital effects, his films are more political than ever.

¹ All his novels are listed in *The Selected Letters of Elia Kazan* edited by Albert J. Devlin with Marlene J. Devlin. NY: Alfred A Knopf, 2014, page 626.

² A complete account of all of his directed films, acting, stage work, and other writing is available in *ibid.*, pages 615-631.

³ Michael Venture, *Cassavetes Directs: John Cassavetes and the Making of Love Streams*, London: Kamera Books, 2007, page 151.

⁴ Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema, Directors and Directions, 1929-1969*, New York: da Capo Press, 1996 (1st 1969), page 206.

⁵ *Ibid.*, page 278.

⁶ Ray Carney, *The Films of John Cassavetes, Pragmatism, Modernism and the Movies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, page 280.

⁷ Pauline Kael, *The Age of Movies, Selected Writings*, ed. By Sanford Schwartz, Library of America, 2011, page 192.

⁸ George Kouvaros, *Where does it Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pages 86-88.

⁹ Ray Carney, *Films*, page 13.

¹⁰ Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal, The Rise of a New American Cinema 1959-1971*, New York: Collier Books, 1972, page 11.

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¹⁴ Ray Carney, *Shadows*, London: BFI Publishing, 2001, page 69.

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¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Power*, ed. By James Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley, 1964-1984, vol 3, New York: The New Press, 1998, page 241.

¹⁸ Brian Kellow, *Pauline Kael: A Life in the Dark*, New York: Viking, 2011, p. 225

¹⁹ Richard Schickel, *Conversations with Scorsese*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011, p. 72

²⁰ Ray Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, London: Faber and Faber, 2001, p. 303.

²¹ *Ibid.*, page 387.