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### John Cassavetes: A Pioneer of Independent Filmmaking

In 1963 with two directorial credits on his resume, John Cassavetes directed his first major studio film *A Child is Waiting*. The film starred Burt Lancaster and Judy Garland, and was produced by the well-known and well-respected Stanley Kramer. Producer and director did not get along well, and in post-production the tension between the two escalated into physical violence. Unhappy with the film, Kramer went behind Cassavetes' back and had the film re-cut to suit his own tastes. After screening the film Cassavetes told the producer to, "take my name off of it" (Charity 50). An argument ensued and ended with Cassavetes grabbing Kramer by the throat and throwing him violently up against a wall.

*"I discovered something about myself. I could no longer compromise. I wasn't about to make another film where we didn't say something real. After the noise I made I couldn't have gotten a job with Loony Tunes," - John Cassavetes (Charity, p. 51).*

In one swift movement Cassavetes committed career suicide. He went against Hollywood protocol in three important ways. First, he expressed his unhappiness publicly, when these behind-the-scenes issues were to be kept private. Second, he would not compromise with the producer (and therefore the studio), the people who ultimately hold the power. And third he had this stubborn idea that the work mattered more than the career. No one in Hollywood would have anything to do with him. And so the pioneer of

independent filmmaking was born. After *A Child is Waiting* Cassavetes would go on to not only break the rules, but to abandon traditional Hollywood conventions altogether.

*“Now the big question is, ‘Can a picture make 100 million dollars?’ Who the hell cares? If you’re thinking that way, you’re not making films, you’re making money. If that’s what it’s come to, let the audience look at pictures of money, put money on the screen and then rape it, shoot it, defecate on it, because that’s basically what everyone is doing,”* (Charity, 133).

Cassavetes loathed Hollywood for its monetary greed, and for its lack of interest in the human condition. It was unthinkable to him to work on a film that lacked meaning, revelation, truth, or honesty. He believed that filmmaking should be about individual expression and that without that expression, all there was was “irrelevant fantasies,” (Forge). His films are about people and how people make fools of themselves, embarrass themselves, and humiliate themselves. His films are about love and commitment; our need for them and the obstacles that get in the way of those essential needs. He was an artist and a storyteller, and he told his kind of stories the way he wanted to tell them. After a screening of *Faces* he remarked, “This is the best movie I’ve seen in my life,” (Charity 65). His films satisfied *him*, and that was a truly independent and original philosophy. He saw human beings as complicated, confusing, contradicting, diverse and awkward creatures, and that is what he wanted his audience to think about. If a film made the audience uncomfortable then he had done his job as an artist. Getting the viewer to think, that was his motivation.

*"It doesn't matter whether they like it. It matters whether they feel something. We only have two hours to change people's lives,"* (Charity, 110).

A common misconception of Cassavetes' films is that they were an experiment in improvisation, when in fact they were carefully scripted. "The emotion was improvisation, the lines were written," (Charity, 61). He wrote *Faces (1965)* as an "attack against contemporary middle-class America, an expression of horror at our society in general," (Charity, 58). *Minnie and Moskowitz (1971)* was written at a time when sexual liberation and freedom was blossoming in American culture, and the film was an attempt to explore why people continued to get married. *A Woman Under the Influence (1974)* was written specifically for his wife, Gena Rowlands when she told him that she wanted to do something, "relating to women and a problem that women have always struggled with," (Charity 114). Where a Hollywood script is poetic and comprised of memorable lines, a Cassavetes script is written in real-life conversation, and the result is often that of clumsy dialogue. An excellent example is the comparison of the script from the classic *An Affair to Remember* and *Minnie and Moskowitz*. From both sections a man is declaring his love to a woman,

*"Oh, it was nobody's fault but my own. I was looking up. It was the nearest thing to heaven. You were there"* An Affair to Remember.

*"I think about you so much I forget to go to the bathroom"* Minnie and Moskowitz.

In order to get the finances to produce his films Cassavetes took acting jobs in commercial films, and on at least two occasions he took out a second mortgage on his

home (Forge). It was not unusual for the cast and crew to reach into their own pockets to contribute, and in most cases they worked on a Cassavetes film without being paid in advance (Charity 59). For *Woman*, Peter Falk offered Cassavetes a co-starring role on his hit show *Columbo* so that Cassavetes could invest more money in the project. Falk also offered to match whatever Cassavetes put into the picture (Charity 115).

Cassavetes did not plan camera angles, his films were shot in chronological order and he used a hand held camera. He did not like to yell, “cut,” often shooting until the camera ran out of film. In *Woman* he shot a remarkable 700,000 feet of film (Charity 123). He did not give blocking to the actors and he used natural lighting, which lends a documentary-like feel to his films. If a scene had to be re-shot he always began at the beginning, never where the actors had left off. He believed that this technique would allow the actor to lead up to the emotion required (Forge). If the shot was not very good technically but the emotion was there, Cassavetes kept it. He often shot in extreme close-ups; almost as if he was literally trying to get inside of the character, this is especially effective in *Faces* and in *A Woman Under the Influence*. He never shot on a studio set; he shot *Faces* in his own home and he rented a house in California to shoot *Woman*. He did not employ “stars” in his films, often calling upon family and friends when he needed cast and crew. Three of his best friends, Ben Gazzara, Seymour Cassel and Peter Falk appear in many of his films; family members such as his wife, Gena Rowlands, his mother and his mother-in-law were also staples. There is nothing glamorous about any of his films or any of his characters. In *Faces* Lynn Carlin as Maria is bathed in harsh light, mascara streaking down her face as she attempts some semblance of composure after just vomiting up the pills on which she tried to overdose. In *Woman* and in *Minnie and*

*Moskowitz* neither Peter Falk nor Seymour Cassel are the traditional handsome and charming leading men we expect to see in films. His editing style was rather unique in that he would cut away in the middle of a sentence, where a Hollywood film traditionally cuts away after the sentence has been completed. Usually he would cordon off a room in his home for editing purposes, and he invited ideas and critique from his cast and crew (Forge).

The editing process was not the only area in which he encouraged a collaborative effort. In the case of *Faces* and *Woman* Cassavetes would hold meetings to discuss the promotion of the films. Once advertisements were made, everyone would drive around putting up posters (Forge). In the case of *Minnie and Moskowitz*, Cassavetes was not happy with the poster Universal Pictures created, so he made his own. He and Seymour Cassel rode around Manhattan in the Cadillac provided by the studio putting up their own posters (Charity 109).

A true independent filmmaker, Cassavetes distributed his films on his own (again with the exception of *Minnie and Moskowitz*). For *Faces*, Cassavetes found a couple of theaters in Canada that would run the film for free at midnight (Charity 64). For *Woman* he rented two movie screens in a Columbia Pictures theater (Charity 134). Cassavetes did what he could to get his pictures seen, including making phone calls, and in one instance he lugged his film around in a box going from theater to theater trying to get it shown (Forge).

If Hollywood created and promoted the “American Dream,” and defined the roles that men and women should embody, Cassavetes exposed that dream as a lie, and broke the mold of those prescribed roles. His characters were not heroic, there

were no good guys defeating bad guys for the common good, because he did not see people that way. He saw that we come in shades of gray. Sometimes we are great, but most of the time we are not, and this is what his films are about. He grabs us by the collar and forces us to look at the ugly parts, the parts we hide behind our façades, our *Faces*. Cassavetes' films make you squirm in your seat, they make you think, and it is impossible to get swept away in them the way you can in a traditional Hollywood film. I think he hated the Hollywood machine for its simple plots, its obsession with money, and especially for expecting so little from its audiences.

*A Woman Under the Influence* was nominated for Best Actress and Best director. Upon hearing this, Bo Harwood (who did the music for *Woman*) paid Cassavetes a visit at his office, which was located across the street from a theater that was playing *Woman*. Cassavetes threw a blanket on the fire escape so that he and Harwood could sit. He poured 2 glasses of cognac, looked at the line of people waiting to get in to see his film, tipped his glass towards Hollywood and said, "F\*\*\* 'em" (Charity 136).

I have seen a lot of movies, but no movie has ever made me feel the way I felt the first time I saw *A Woman Under the Influence*. It was intense and overwhelming, it made me feel very uncomfortable. It was awkward, I was embarrassed for Mabel, I could not sit still, I was heartbroken, and I felt ill. I thought, I want to learn how to make films. This is the kind of film I want to make. A film that tugs on more than a heartstring, that affects you physically without the use of special effects or sappy dialogue and music. Hollywood can keep Julia Roberts, and its plethora of assembly line directors. I would prefer John and Gena any day. Just like the sign in Lester

Burnham's cubicle in *American Beauty*, John Cassavetes suggests, no, insists that we "look closer."

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