

Roundtable 2: Proceedings from the 2013 CEA Conference in Savannah, Georgia

Mise-en-scène and Kinaesthetically Charged Atmosphere in John Cassavetes' *Faces*

Ian Dixon
Qantm College

Editor's note: In a presentation for the 2013 CEA Conference in Savannah, screenwriter, director, and actor Ian Dixon gave a multi-media presentation titled "The Actor's Nature in *Mise-en-scène*: Chekhovian Kinaesthesia and Cinematic Performance." Part of that presentation involved showing some scenes from John Cassavetes' 1968 film *Faces*. What follows is that part of his talk, which we present here with video links as at once a stand-alone view and in reference to Dixon's talk published in the Proceedings issue of *The CEA Critic*.

In my talk at the 2013 CEA Conference in Savannah, I focused on the theory and practice of Michael Chekhov by using his ideas of *kinaesthesia*, *atmosphere*, *psychological gesture*, *spontaneous groupings*, and *the actor's nature* in an overall interdisciplinary and lateral approach to the creation of filmic *mise-en-scène*. This approach places the actor as fundamental tool in understanding the principles of dramatic art and consequently generating dramatic material. In part, I exemplified American independent filmmaker John Cassavetes (1929-1989) as unwittingly utilizing Chekhov's notions within his own acting and through his parallel methodology for the creation of textual narrative. Here, I wish to explore (through video links) a

concrete example of the resulting *praxis* by examining certain scenes from Cassavetes' film *Faces* (1968), especially in light of how such work affects the formation of his maverick *mise-en-scène*.

The audacity of a filmmaker such as Cassavetes, who ignored classical form, focus, line-crossing rules, and the limitations of technology and instead concentrated on the pain and flawed beauty of the human face in close-up, was groundbreaking in 1968. Further, despite his star status as an actor, Cassavetes made his major works with little financial help from the mainstream Hollywood film industry. Although curiously aligned to Hollywood sensibilities, Cassavetes' milieu stood largely outside this mainstream approach. In particular, he was influenced by the *Cinéma Vérité* movement, which grew by the close of World War II out of documentary-based filmmaking practices, relied on new technology, and was designed to achieve greater screen realism. The 1960s innovations of *Cinéma Vérité* also derived from the influence of television and inventions such as lightweight cameras and transportable sound-recording equipment. By the end of the decade, film school graduates had access to affordable, portable film equipment and could therefore finance and make films more readily (Gelmis xiv 81). *Cinéma Vérité* gravitated toward the use of hand-held cameras, grainy 16mm-film stock, and non-continuity editing practice in both practical and stylistic decisions. The new technology allowed greater realism in subject matter and delivery, and this is most assuredly the domain of Cassavetes films (Issari and Paul 3).

In his adaptation of various elements of narrative to *Cinéma Vérité*, Cassavetes rejected elaborate camera moves in favor of an exploration of character and emotional situation. The result is that, in his films, Cassavetes' aesthetic and thematic concerns disturb and unbalance the

viewer and create an overall effect of what Dianne Jacobs refers to as unwavering myopia (39). Even on the level of narrative, there is disquieting disorientation. *Faces*, perhaps more than any other film by Cassavetes, has been hailed by critics for its ability to infuse narrative cinematic writing with the unsettling qualities of documentary form. By this process of formal (and emotional) upheaval, Cassavetes contributed to the evolution of *Cinéma Vérité* as a style primarily by drawing on his own actor's nature.

By utilizing Chekhov's principles, we may analyze Cassavetes' filmmaking within two conjoining scenes from *Faces* as exemplifying, especially, the concept of the actor's nature. As a filmmaker, Cassavetes engages a kinaesthetic process—not only as a director relating to actors as another actor might and therefore engaging his actor's nature, but in his famously kinaesthetic camera movement. If we observe the nightclub scene from Act Two of *Faces*, we can see this kinaesthesia as a confluence of performance and camera technique. The following clip synthesizes the gestures of the actors within a seamless flow of the technology of film:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9595kcSEc4A&list=PL4D497AD70DB1ED02> [2:22-6:41], or on the *Faces* DVD [1:09:15 – 1:13:58].

In this clip, we can see just how much the looks, the emotions, and the gestures of the actors are received by the camera and, in turn, how the camera affects the actors' performances—all in a distinct *Cinéma Vérité* style. The *mise-en-scène* here, the choice of location, the performers, and gestures alike all interrelate with the camera atmospherically and architecturally on the grainy texture of 16-mm film stock. Actors *become* architecture, moving architecture, and the architecture in turn defines the actor's space and guides their kinaesthetic relationship and gestural language. The *huis clos* itself contributes to and is informed by a Chekhovian

understanding of atmosphere, which, as this scene demonstrates, is a Cassavetes mainstay within his conception of filmic drama.

When he discussed his work, Cassavetes frequently would describe how drama emanates from atmosphere rather than the other way around (Carney *On Cassavetes* 168). In turn, he theorized, the audience derives a kinaesthetic interrelationship, thus engaging in the filmed atmosphere. In Cassavetes' practice, camera operators and editors (including Cassavetes) are often actors themselves, which brings a distinct kinaesthetic awareness to the making of his films. The gestural life of the performers thereby holds a character-based specificity—their psychological gestures interacting in an extended, Chekhovian spontaneous grouping (a heightened form of interactivity where a group of actors read each other kinesthetically and intuitively in order to form tableaux of physical shapes). All these gestures can be traced back to Cassavetes' psychological gesture—the pushy, advancing/retreating body-centeredness of the man himself. Since Cassavetes does not act in *Faces*, I have chosen the following clip from *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971) to demonstrate his psychological gesture in action. Note how, despite the forward thrust of his head, his eyes retreat (inwardly and contrapuntally) from his estranged lover (played by real life wife, Gena Rowlands):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZpC5ILg7EM> [0:00-1:35]

Thus, when attending to other actors in *Faces*, Cassavetes' direction and camerawork allows kinaesthetic performance to contribute to visual language in a manner that draws upon his own psychological gesture. In the screenplay version, the nightclub scene relies on dialogue in emphasizing on the brittle leadership of Louise (Joanne Moore Jordan) (Cassavetes *Faces*). However, in transferring from screenplay to edited film, the visual language takes primacy.

Cassavetes obviously decided that the nightclub segment read more efficaciously as a silent movie (with overarching music track). Thus, Louise's body-centered performance shows us all that we need to know of her character and place in the group dynamic without elaborate character exposition. Louise displays disparate gestures, yet, indicative of her psychological gesture, she penetrates and retreats in contradictory motion and with animal threat, just as Cassavetes' does in the above excerpt from *Minnie and Moskowitz*. Louise's outer self-confidence contrasts with the sheepish insecurity of the obedient Maria (Lynn Carlin). Like Cassavetes, Maria's psychological gesture also holds a dual movement in shrinking back whilst paradoxically gliding forward—i.e., atmosphere manifests as visual language as she move[s] inwardly to the objective (Chekhov *Lessons* 32). Thus, for Cassavetes, visual representations of story, power dynamics, character, and situation can be a result of Chekhov-like kinaesthetic engagement. It also involves the constant dance of movement and cessation in emotionally representative tableaux within the filmed atmosphere. All this exchange occurs under the sensitive eye of Cassavetes, a director prepared to allow his actors to own their dramatic parts bodily via near invisible communication. This is the spatially orientated story Cassavetes is most interested in telling. Cassavetes, as an actor, frees himself with this inner action, and the other actors under his direction in *Faces* follow suit.

After the nightclub scene, the next scene in *Faces* can be viewed as a protracted Chekhovian spontaneous grouping beginning with Maria (sans husband) opening the door to her group of friends and Chet (Seymour Cassel), the boy they have picked up at the nightclub. In still leading the clan, Louise fixes her eyes (in contrast to the containment of her body) to command attention, and the result is a sense of taboo as she views Maria with a possessive and controlling

gaze. In the next clip, note how Maria's response is subtle, but her shoulder makes an infinitesimal shift away from Louise in a manner that betrays the older woman's status, as if in response to the kinaesthetic dominance of Louise. She claims status by force of her personality despite Maria's status as owner of the house. A second status battle occurs as a result of Chet's rowdy entry. Pushed by the inebriated Florence (Dorothy Gulliver), Chet is propelled face-to-face with Louise, who remains strong and radiates her powerful gaze, but in that moment makes an infinitesimal retreat in response to Chet's kinetic energy. The two characters almost collide then yield according to their status within this spontaneous grouping, according to their actor's nature. Chet's fluid form almost bounces off the aura of the still and contained Louise (his momentum not sufficient to penetrate the taboo of physical contact). After the stand-off, Chet backs away, only to be whisked away by an excited Florence. We then proceed onward with a clear sense of the hierarchy enclosing the interloper, Chet. In this manner, Cassavetes' process allows the actors to register status relations like a spontaneous grouping—the result of their kinaesthetic interweaving motion and subsequent arrest rather than the imposition of externally manipulated choreography.

This clip can be viewed on the DVD of *Faces* [1:13:58 – 1:14:27].

It is unlikely that Cassavetes blocked the next beat because he believed formal blocking and 'hitting marks' to be limitations on the actor (Carney, *On Cassavetes*). Nevertheless, whilst the inebriated group converges on its first architectural arrangement or tableau, Louise leans on the doorway, taking up a power position. The moment grants her a voyeuristic privilege, which Cassavetes exploits by crossing the shooting line *Vérité*-style, thus reorientating us within the new space of the lounge-room. The movement then comes to a critical stasis in the next tableau.

Like Chekhov's naturally evolving spontaneous grouping, Cassavetes arrests the movement by propelling us from one dramatic beat to the next. The atmosphere is effectively charged for performers and audience alike, riveting the audience to the lounge-room scene's psychological potential with kinaesthetic momentum.

Cassavetes' tendency toward spontaneous groupings in his *mise-en-scène* also means that characters interact informally rather than creating any artificial "frontality" more suitable to mainstream cinema (Bordwell, ctd. by Naremore 41). Nevertheless, he now has his architectural arrangement of bodies in a formalistic shot reminiscent of the theatre's proscenium arch. This scene represents a unique and asynchronous balance between performer and space, which continues seamlessly from beat to beat, shot to shot. After an extended interchange during which Chet uses sexual play as emotional improvisation on Billy Mae (Darlene Conley) at the stereo, we move to a series of gestures incorporating embarrassment as an aspect of atmosphere. In terms of gesture, Maria's hands are folded across her heart (in counterbalance to Billy Mae's hands folded across her groin), her lips taut, and her eyes observant of the interloper Chet. As the music begins, Chet chooses bodily freedom in contrast to the women's rigidity. His hips move in dance, his back to camera as he lets the music dictate his motor-movement. We the audience are free to respond with irksome discomfort, as if we are sitting in this lounge-room watching the progress of social intercourse fuelled by alcohol.

It is the older Florence, herself well inebriated, who moves first of the women. Her bodily movements arrive as a kinetic wave from Chet, tentatively at first, but the elongated nature of the shot emphasizes the embarrassment. This moment embodies a flux of kinaesthetic movement virtually indistinguishable between instigator and respondent. As Chekhov illustrates, Cassel and

Gulliver respond internally before externally. Their internal movement remains unseen but fluid, acquiring an aspect of another tableau. Then, as if 'permeated by streams' of kinetically interchanging forces (Chekhov *Lessons* 108), Florence gains alcohol-induced confidence and moves freely, unceremoniously shoving herself off the cabinet with her bottom. Billy Mae responds physically, her foot twitching then freezing again, her forced enjoyment and subsequent involuntary swaying of limbs serving to veil her previous ill-confined desire. Maria, in the meantime, throws an insecure look (forehead low, flitting, unblinking eyes) to Louise, who straightens herself disapprovingly (mouth set firm, eyes mirthless) in a silent command. The physical tension of the group draws to a climax with the sensitive violence of a Chekhovian spontaneous grouping urging the individual to act. After several false moves, Maria responds to Louise's unspoken insistence by lunging forward breaking the paralysis. She turns off the stereo and intervenes with a typical Cassavetean slap across Chet's face. Maria's movement not only breaks the rigidity of the composition but also explodes the physical tension, kinaesthetically involving all the characters, thus breaking into the next beat.

This clip can be viewed on the DVD of *Faces* [1:14:27 – 1:16:26].

As we have seen, the actor's bodily gestures emanate intuitively from within the actor to tell a visual story. For Chekhov, this effect is generated by the performer's psychological state, which is an internal pre-condition also dependent on kinaesthetic relations to others (*Lessons* 108).

The atmosphere created by Cassavetes in the various scenes of *Faces* highlights how much he respected the actor's space and refused to have actors share their anxieties as mere abstractions or Stanislavskian "table work" (Naremore 72). This approach pervaded Cassavetes' career, his sense of *mise-en-scène* growing organically in each new project from his sense of

timing and gesture. His actors, for their part, found their gestures, too, to grow organically from their orientation within the atmosphere generated and their relationship to architectural restriction. As such, Cassavetes directed in both visual and spontaneous manner best articulated by Chekhov (Leonard *Playwright* 8-13; Watson 55-68), and *Faces* is an excellent illustration of the degree to which Cassavetes used the tenets of Chekhov's theatre as instruments for the construction of his cinematic *mise-en-scène*, a view that I explore in some depth in my essay for the 2013 Conference Proceedings issue of *The CEA Critic*. In that longer piece, I argue (and will conclude here) that Cassavetes' filmmaking stands as nothing less than crucial groundwork for future directors and the evolving face of screen performance in *mise-en-scène*.

Works Cited

Carney, Raymond, ed. *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2001. Print.

Cassavetes, John. *Faces - Original Version* (compiled by Ruban, Al). New York: Signet, 1970. Print.

Chekhov, Michael. *Lessons for the Professional Actor*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985. Print.

Chekhov, Michael. *To the Actor*. New York: Harper & Row, 1953. Print.

Faces. Directed by John Cassavetes. Distributed by Faces International Films, Inc. & The Criterion Collection, 1968. DVD.

Gelmis, Joseph. "John Cassavetes." *The Film Director as Superstar*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1971: 75-87. Print.

Issari, Mohammad, and Paul, D. A. *What is Cinéma Vérité?* Metuchen, N.J. & London: Scarecrow, 1979. Print.

Jacobs, Dianne. "John Cassavetes." *Hollywood Renaissance*. Cranbury, New Jersey: A.S. Barnes, 1977: 35-61. Print.

Leonard, Charles. *Michael Chekhov's To the Director and Playwright*. Westport (CT): Greenwood, 1977. Print.

Minnie and Moskowitz. Dir. by John Cassavetes. Distributed by Faces International Films, Inc. & The Criterion Collection, 1971. DVD.

Naremore, James. *Acting in the Cinema*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988. Print.

Watson, Stephanie. "Spontaneous Cinema? In the Shadows with John Cassavetes." *The Naked Lens: An Illustrated History of Beat Cinema*. Ed. J. Sergeant. London: Creation Books, 1997: 55-68. Print.