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**ART2012-0216**

**The Body in John Cassavete's  
Filmmaking and its Consideration  
for the Performance**

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ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: ART2012-0216

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URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)

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**ISSN 2241-2891**

13/09/2012

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This paper should be cited as follows:

**Desider Fischer, R. (2012) "The Body in John Cassavete's Filmmaking and its Consideration for the Performance" Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: ART2012-0216.**

## **The Body in John Cassavete's Filmmaking and its Consideration for the Performance**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper intends to investigate the body in John Cassavetes' filmmaking under the perspective of Gilles Deleuze and identify its contribution to the craft of the contemporary actor. Considering the craft of acting as a fundamental factor in a piece of art, this work attempts to rethink the affective potentialities of the body, especially, in the cinematographic structure conceived by Deleuze as *time-image*, in which Cassavetes' work would be part of. Within these boundaries, Brecht's concept of *gestus* will allow us to find a new meaning for the body in a cinematographic work, surpassing fixed or disciplined social postures and presenting itself in a latent state, where the *gestus* exceeds the individual and reaches the collective. In this sense, the actor's body will be seen as a generator of fundamental instants for the development of a piece of work, regardless of the character, but what this character and this body can achieve. The *pregnant moment* will be painted by the actor's *gestus*, which pulses life and poetry.

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Mabel is standing on a sidewalk, apparently, restless and anxious. She is looking toward the end of the street, probably waiting for something. Cars are going by, endlessly. People are passing along the sidewalk. She seems nervous. She looks happy. She walks from one side to the other, but always looks back towards the end of the street. She starts approaching some strangers that are simply walking by. “Hey, what time is it?” People ignore her. She seems lost, odd. “Hey, what time is it? Hey, I’m talking to you! Have you got the time? I’m waiting for my children, tell me the time!” Mabel insists with the people strolling by, she walks after them, makes strange and bizarre noises with her mouth, but the pedestrians keep on their way. They ignore the question asked by Mabel who is a stranger to them. She seems amiable and harmless. She looks again to the end of the street. It seems that she sees something, she raises her arms, but it is nothing. She lowers her arms and puffs disappointedly. She starts to walk on the street, very close to the cars. Suddenly she raises her arms, and hops happily and soon she sees a school bus approaching. She jumps even more. She doesn’t mind who is observing her. She is happy and euphoric. She leaps and punches the air with joy. The bus stops. She cheers. “Come, come my darlings.” She hugs her three sons strongly. One by one. She and her children go home on foot. They run and have fun along the way. They arrive home tired due to the race and sit down on the door way. They talk a bit about the sprint they had just done and then the mother asks a question. “Can I ask you a question about me? When you see me, do you think: Ah, it’s mum or do you think I’m a fool or a bad person?” One of the sons answer “No, you’re smart, pretty and nervous.” She hugs him and thanks him kindly.





Gena Rowland in the film *A Woman under Influence* by John Cassavetes

The description above of a scene from the film *A Woman under the Influence* (1974) by John Cassavetes<sup>1</sup> was written with the intention to show that the story in Cassavetes' films are not determined only by the plot or script, but also by the attitudes of the actors in relation to their roles. The acting is also a determinant factor in the discourse of the work, materializing other ways for a visual, sound, kinesthetic, imagery, and cognitive reading. When we watch a whole work or just an isolated scene from Cassavetes' films it is possible to make countless readings not only because it is considered a complex piece of work, of a bold language or a well developed script, but overall because he privileges the work of the actors, leaving a wide space in his films for the characters to fill it in with attitudes and actions.

In the example cited, the situation could be summarized simply as a mother who is waiting for her children to return from school, but the director of the film together with the actress Gena Rowlands, who played Mabel, amplify the scene to other possibilities and textures. The scene is at the same time tense and delightful. Mabel is at the same time a super mother and an insane woman in the middle of the street. She is at the same time anxious, nervous, and happy with the waiting. Of course, just the description of the scene is not sufficient for us to perceive all these distinctions. Anyway, I opted for the use of some adverbs such as possibly or probably, besides the verb seem, to try to bring to the narrative description of the scene a bit of complexity, ambiguity, and to open the narration beyond a closed reading, just like the film is.

In Cassavetes' films the characters, from the perspective of their bodies, are responsible to take meaning, feeling, and story to the works. And the most ambiguous attitudes of the characters are precisely the ones that make it possible for the film to amplify its meaning. We will see ahead that Cassavetes' filmmaking would be inserted in a modern cinematography developed from a structure that Gilles Deleuze calls the *Time-Image*.

In the case of the description of Mabel's scene in the introduction of this article, it does not really matter what came before or what comes after, because the scene itself holds a meaning and efficiency in its own. Mabel's attitudes, or better, Gena Rowlands' attitudes reach a potentiality that is unattached to the narrative, to the action, and they are in a non-historical time, without past and future. These attitudes or postures are materialized from the actress' body, which represent Mabel. And it is from determined actions, or

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<sup>1</sup> John Nicholas Cassavetes (1929 – 1989) is an American actor, stage director, playwright and screenwriter. He is mainly acknowledged for his production as a filmmaker.

better, physical attitudes from Mabel that the situation of the scene gains complexity.

***The pregnant moment and the potentialities of the body in the Cinema for Deleuze***

It is from a perspective of unusual gestures, or as Eugenio Barba prefers, extra-daily<sup>1</sup> ones, that Gena Rowlands' character becomes unique. A shallow reading of the scene would be a non-acceptance of her "strange" postures, seeing Mabel just as a mad woman who walks in the middle of the street, gesticulating grotesquely and making weird sounds with her mouth. But it is precisely this strangeness that enriches her personality and enhances her actions in relation with other characters, with space and mainly enlarges her own character. When one of Mabel's gestures, independently from the story of the film, reverberates in a unique, multiple and affective way it resembles what Lessing, when speaking of painting, called the *pregnant moment*. To Lessing (1998, p. 222):

The freedom of extending itself to the past as to the unique moment which follows the work of art, and thus, the faculty of not only showing us what art shows us but also what it can make us suppose.

To the German thinker of the Enlightenment period, the *pregnant moment* would be the one in which the image itself would be enough on its own, in which this image would contemplate the past and the future and would not depend on them. An crucial instant that would make us think and feel beyond the represented image, though without historical or temporal determinations. It is as if an image would be worth on its own without historical, narrative or thematic dependence. It is to be affected by an image, be it in painting, in the theater or in the cinema, simply because it was capable of arising affections and not because it was inserted within a context or a narrative. Roland Barthes (1986, p. 96) is able to synthesize more clearly the definition of this concept:

To tell a story a painter disposes of just the instant that he will immobilize on the canvas; he will have to choose properly this instant, assuring previously its potential of meaning and of pleasure: necessarily whole, this instant will be artificial (irreal: does not mean of a realistic art), will be an hieroglyph which will be read with an only glance (with an only perception, if we pass to the theater

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Barba, used the term extra-daily in the context of the Anthropology Theatre, to identify gestures and behaviors that were not usual.



or the cinema) the present, the past and the future, that means, the historical sense of the represented gesture. This crucial instant, completely concrete and completely abstract is what Lessing will call (in Laocoon) the *pregnant moment*.

Barthes also perceived that Lessing's *pregnant moment* echoed in the thoughts of Denis Diderot who called it the *perfect instant*, in the concept of *gestus* by Bertolt Brecht and in Eisenstein's shots. At least this is the starting point of the text "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein" (1986) by Barthes, which identifies common points in the discourses of these artist-thinkers. Barthes thinks the representation as fragment not only in painting, but also in the theater and in the cinema. And a fragmentation of *pregnant moment* or *perfect instants* is what artists such as John Cassavetes did in his films.

It was thinking on the possibility of the theater and the cinema of reaching these *pregnant moments* that I found, in the reflections of Gilles Deleuze (2006) about the body in the cinema, precise and instigating data about this theme. Deleuze identified the body as the main medium to reveal instants that are disconnected to a historical time. When he asked himself, what the possibilities of a body in the cinema are, Deleuze identified several questions that, definitely, contribute to thinking the actor's body and its interpositions in the cinema as well as in the theater. Thus, the objective established here is to identify these reflections elaborated by Deleuze in the cinema and think how they can simultaneously contribute to the theater. Actually, how it collaborates with the actor's language, independently if it is in the theater or in the cinema.

Deleuze identified that certain cinematography, specially the one produced from the *Neorealism* and the *Nouvelle Vague*, worked the body in a way that its expression was already a thought on its own. Not that the body thinks, but its presence animates thoughts that are disconnected to a rational logic. When the body is able to free itself from rational bonds, it reaches a state of sensation, feeling and of living that amplifies the thought and the expression. It is in this way that Deleuze, from the cinema, starts thinking of the potentialities of the body.

Give me a body: this is the philosophical downfall formula. The body is no longer an obstacle which separates thought from the self, what must be surpassed in order to be able to reason. It is, on the contrary, what dives in or what one needs to dive in, in order to reach the unthinkable, that is, life. Not that the body thinks, but, stubborn, disobedient, it forces to think, and it forces to think what eludes from thought, it will take thoughts to the categories of life. The categories of life are precisely the attitudes of the body, its postures (...) It is by the body (and not through the body) that the cinema

realizes its wed locks with the spirit, with thought (DELEUZE, 2006, p. 243).

Based on Espinoza's thought, Deleuze saw the body not as an obstacle for thought or imagination, but a mean to flourish both of them. Note that he considers the body as something in which thought dives into and transcends its logical reasoning. Therefore, the body is no longer a refuge of history and reason, achieving this way, a potentiality capable of an expressiveness, which carries thought, memory, history and feeling. For Espinoza (1983, p. 150) "If the human body was once affected simultaneously by two or more bodies, later, whenever the soul imagines one of them, it will immediately remember the others". It is worth remembering that Espinoza denies the idea of a substantial Cartesian union as much as the Platonic idea of the soul being the pilot of the body, and also the Aristotelian thought of the body as an instrument of the soul (CHAUÍ, 1995, p. 58). For Espinoza, it is not a matter of a hierarchical relation between the body and soul, but both are "isonomic, that is, they are under the same principles expressed differently" (Ibdem, p.58). For Chauí:

The body, besides being imaginative, it is capable of memories, making our soul assume as present images what is absent and with them it represents time, that is, associative sequences and generators of instant images recorded in our flesh (1995, p. 62).

Thus, we can think that the actor's body as well as any other person's body carries memories, imaginations and sensations that can be transformed into creative material for the actor's craft or be converted into expressiveness.

Deleuze, then, came to the conclusion that it is not a matter of who the character is, but, what this character is able of, or better, what its body can perform. For Deleuze, to think the body is to think of life, it is to think of art. In this sense, it will be by means of what a character is able or not of doing that the plot will be able to be developed. This does not exclude the plot, but amplifies its possibilities of development. This idea makes us rethink the theater and the cinema drama, in which a theme or a plot are not the conductor of the affective possibilities of a piece of work, but that the body, with its innumerable ways of affecting and being affected initiates other dramatic possibilities.

In the cinema, Deleuze had this perception from a concept within certain cinematography that he called *the time-image*. Deleuze observes that a cinematographic image would be governed by two distinct systems: *the movement-image* and *the time-image*. The first would consider mainly the classical cinema which is operated by a sequence of images, thus subordinating the cuts to this sequence (DELEUZE, 2006, p. 273). In this classical cinema of the *movement-image*, time always depends on the movement, being shown

only in the montage of these images, where the successive shots give us the idea of time and logic. For Deleuze (2006, p.273):

According to the mathematical analogy, the cuts which separate two series of images are rational, in the sense that they constitute either the last image of the first series, or the first image of the second series (...) In short, the rational cuts always determine commensurable relations between series of images and constitute this way all the rhythm and harmony of the classical cinema, at the same time that they integrate the associated images in an open completeness. Time is essentially the object of an indirect representation, according to the commensurable relations and the rational cuts that organize the sequence and the chain of movement-images.

It is from this logical idea of composing organically and rhythmically the images in motion that the classical cinema delimitates its sense-motor layout, a scheme that tries to deceive the spectator by means of a continuity of movement from the rational cuts and the sequence of narrated events, where “the *movement-image* is fundamentally attached to an indirect representation of time” (Ibidem, p. 346). It is with this disposition of *movement-image* that the majority of the Hollywood and commercial films, also, structure themselves.

On the other hand, the modern cinema would have its basis on a scheme that Deleuze called the *time-image*. According to the author, this system would have been inaugurated with the Italian *Neorealism* and the French *Nouvelle Vague*, in which the essence of this cinema would be to temporalize the image. The images would not depend on the succession of shots, but would have autonomy individually. A cinema that does not define itself by the whole, but by each isolated part. Each image is capable of generating meaning, or better, generating affection.

There are no longer rational cuts, only irrational. There are no longer associations by metaphors or metonymy, but a re-concatenation upon the literal image; there is no longer a sequence of associated images, but only a re-concatenation of independent images. Instead of an image after the other, there is an image and another; and each shot is not framed in a relation to the next frame (Ibidem, p.274).

The question in the classical cinema is “how do the images link themselves?” whereas in the modern cinema the question is “what does the image show?” In the *time-image* cinema the time analogies are the ones that

determine the montage and “instead of a physical movement, it is above all a shift in time” (Ibidem, p.59). Therefore, the time of each frame is capable of amplifying its form of perception, making the image affect not only for what it is showing, but above all for the questions and perceptions that arises beyond the frame.

Within this cinematographic thinking in which the *pregnant moments* are reached mainly by pieces of work that prioritize the non-historical time of each frame, the body becomes the principal ally to capture this *time-image*. The body itself would already be a natural expression of *time-image*, because it sustains an affective and timeless potentiality in which time does not need a rational chain reaction. Thus, the character’s background, or even, its psychological justification, becomes dispensable. The actor’s body naturally stores time dimensions in which attitudes can reach *pregnant moments* filled with affective potentiality.

Truly, the images can be conducted by physical attitudes of the characters in which the expression does not need a previous intrigue, but in an isolated way they can be able to affect. More than simple body attitudes, the actions of these bodies in space gain the force of a happening. For the philosophy professor Cláudio Ulpiano<sup>1</sup>, “a happening is something that carries [on its own] the before and after. The *happening* is the body thinking as *pregnant moment*. The body thinking as utter instant, always, includes in itself the before and after”<sup>2</sup>. The concept that best presents the body and its attitudes with the proportion of a happening is the concept of *social gestus* by Bertolt Brecht, which was also appropriated by Deleuze to talk about the body in the cinema.

### **The updating of the *gestus* in the contemporaneous cinema and theater**

For Deleuze (2006, p. 251), the attitude of the body in the cinema should be “as a *time-image*, the one that holds the before and after in the body, the series of time; but the *gestus* is another *time-image*, the order or ordering of time, the simultaneity of its bridges, the coexistence of its choices”. Within the *time-image* cinema, the action of the body in space should be thought as a happening, as a *gestus*. Introduced firstly by Brecht, the concept of *gestus* would have a more social and political dimension, therefore *social gestus*. For him not every gesture is social, but only the one “significant to society, which permits to come to conclusions that are applicable to the conditions of this society” (BRECHT, 1978, p. 194). In the case of Brecht, the importance of *gestus* would be more bound to show the contradictions of society, instead of a

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<sup>1</sup> Cláudio Ulpiano (1932 – 1999) was a Brazilian philosopher who developed a wide research on Deleuze’s work and who made countless reflections about cinema from a Deleuzian point of view.

<sup>2</sup> Text available at: <http://claudioulpiano.org.br.s87743.gridserver.com/?p=130> . Accessed on January 15 2012.

gesture or phrase from the character that could bring a meaning not observed in the work as a whole.

Brecht differentiated gesture from *gestus*. Every *gestus* can also be a gesture, but not every gesture can be a *gestus*. For him:

By *gestus* one should not understand a simple gesticulation; it is not about the moving of hands to underline or comment any passage of a play, but yes, global attitudes. Every language that is based on 'gesture', which shows certain attitudes of the person who speaks in relation to others, is a language of gesture (BRECHT, 1978, p. 91).

The author's explanation makes it clear where the *gestus* stands in his work, not reducing it to plain gesticulation. What can also be characterized as *gestus* is the withdrawing of an attitude within a specific context and transport it to another context, reaching this way a state of strangeness and consequently of contrast, making us reflect upon that attitude. It would be like a clash of values. *Gestus* is an impersonal expression of the body beyond the story. For Deleuze, "*gestus* is the development of the own attitudes and, at this level, a direct theatricality of the bodies operate, many times in a discreet manner, considering that it becomes independent from the role" (2006, p. 247). The important thing here is to think that the *gestus* can generate meaning and affection, independently of being inserted in a context, or being coherent with pre-determined character or plot. By itself, the *gestus* can contemplate the necessary expression for a *pregnant moment* in a piece of work. For Barthes the "idea of the *pregnant moment* is the *social gestus*" (1986, p. 97).

The most interesting about the notion of *gestus* is its possibility to go beyond obsolete social postures and propose states in which the bodies are no longer manipulated or disciplined, finding this way, *gestus* that represent, at the same time, the collective and the individual. Those would be expressions of feelings and intimate thoughts, which somehow, would reverberate in the collective. That main function of the *gestus*, for both contemporaneous theater and cinema, is to ensure that the bodies find their human and intimate becomings, invalidating any disciplined and automatic posture. Thus, the actor's body would open space for thought, and consequently, time would go through it in a non-historical way, so the represented scene or the shot could reach a *pregnant moment* potentiality.

It is this way that the body in Cassavetes' cinema also presents itself. The actors in Cassavetes' films are clearly open to a possibility of going beyond automatic or daily expressions. The relation of bodies, actors and consequently of characters is in a zone of affection that generates an absolutely intense, ambiguous and vivid expressiveness. The physical *gestus* intensifies the way that the bodies affect themselves and from this encounter the spectacle is born. The characters gain life from this meeting, considering that in a Cassavetes' creative process, the characters are not constructed only from the

plot or from a psychology implicit in the script, but overall by the engagement of the bodies with space and therefore with time.

Although there would be a script to determine the plot, Cassavetes would leave space so that from the dramatization of the bodies other possibilities would arise in his film. The scene in this cinema is born when the bodies, which experiment a variety of postures, independently of any established codes, meet, reaching this way a continuous, ambiguous and fluctuant state of becoming. As we have seen, time in this cinema is in the body, which is, simultaneously, past and future. Unwinding the story, what prevails in Cassavetes' cinema is the body in an altered state, in a spectacular state which predisposes the happening of the *gestus*. Before being a character, it is a body with competences of inferring and interfering. That means, if a story is born from the characters and they are restricted to their physical attitudes as in a happening, possibly it will provoke the spectacularity of the *gestus*, which will serve to compose an image characterized by a *pregnant moment*.

The cinema of Cassavetes is interested in capturing the beauty of the moment in which the bodies encounter. If the photogenic is linked to a special moment which is inexplicably beautiful, Cassavetes' most photogenic shots are exactly those in which the *gestus* is revealed. An example, which clearly synthesizes how Cassavetes left space in his work for the actors to search for happenings that were more than what was determined and the *gestus* could be revealed, is an improvised scene from the film *Husbands* (1970), a scene of chants and drinking in a bar.



John Cassavetes, Ben Gazzarra e Peter Falk in the film *Husbands*

The situation of this scene synthesizes how the cinema of Cassavetes cries out for life, feeling, heat, truth, passion and fundamentally love to invade the relation between the characters in his films. His characters were searching for this passion and Cassavetes' function as a director was to promote this encounter. The actors' actions should be guided by passion, in its broadest and complex sense. If the actor's craft did not, constantly, have the heat of passion for life, it was not useful for his film. Not only the discourse of the scene insists in this search, but also its own structure, considering that it was completely improvised, as Cassavetes himself reveals to us.

In the case of this scene, as an intrinsic characteristic of improvisation, the improvisation itself made it possible for the attitudes of the actors to become freer and more spontaneous, making it possible for the actors to concretize more intimate and truer gestures as they were not rationally established. Cassavetes created a structure in this scene that promoted the actors' reaction, who could not delimit the point in which it was a reaction of the scene or of the actor himself. The main researcher on Cassavetes' work is the American Ray Carney who says that the actions in the scene were all doubtful. When the actors, Cassavetes (who, besides directing, was playing one of the friends), Peter Falk or Ben Gazzarra, who were playing Gus, Archie and Harry, criticized or complimented the actors-singers, it was not possible to say exactly whether the comments were from the three actors or their characters. This was the interesting part of the process; the real feelings were not far from the character's feelings (CARNEY, 2001, p. 230).

Actually, Cassavetes assumed that the emotions, the feelings, and thoughts were always from the actor himself, independently of the character he was playing. For him (Ibidem, p. 210):

An actor cannot, suddenly, deny or reject a part of his own self even under the pretext of playing a particular character, even if he would like to do this. You cannot ask someone to forget oneself in order to become someone else. If they ask you to play Napoleon in a film, for example, you cannot really have the emotions and thoughts of the character, but only your own.

In this sense, Cassavetes' work prioritizes the spontaneity of the actor and his reaction in relation to the other actors and the space. It was the actor's *gestus*, moved mainly by the spontaneity of the actor that made the most beautiful images of his cinema appear on the screen. He would say: "I believe in the spontaneity because I believe that if you predetermine things too much, it can be destructive to the work, because it kills the human spirit" (Ibidem, p. 231). The beauty of his method of work with the actors consisted exactly in not distinguishing between the real feelings from the "artificial" ones produced in the scene, because it was that which gave authenticity to the work of the actors making it possible for their bodies to react, revealing this way the *gestus* of his

cinema. This was the way that Cassavetes opened space in his cinema so the actor could occupy it and would tell a story that only the body is capable of:

When Cassavetes says that the characters do not have to come from the story or from the plot, but that the story should be segregated by the characters, he summarizes the demands of a cinema of the bodies: the characters are reduced to their own physical attitudes, and what comes out of it is the *gestus*, that is, a spectacle, a theatricality or a dramatization that is worth for any plot (DELEUZE, 2006, p. 247).

This is how Cassavetes accomplishes a cinema of the body and permits that the craft of his actors fosters and produces the stories of his films. Cassavetes is one of the few filmmakers who are rigorously concerned with the craft of the actors, at least in the sense of finding a way to make them feel free to create and to allow their bodies to awaken feelings, memories and thoughts.

To analyze the body in the cinema, mainly Cassavetes' work, from the point of view of Deleuze, amplifies countless possibilities of thinking the actor's craft in our contemporary time, be it in the theater or in the cinema. Not only the directors, but above all, the actors should place themselves better in relation to their craft, they should become aware of its importance to a piece of work and they should find a way to prepare their bodies to reveal itself, to find their ideal *gestus* for their expression.

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