Improvising Cinema

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I. Writing and improvisation

A selection of models... and their limitations

The works highlighted in this study share a number of specificities that might tempt analysts to group their respective directors into a single fictional family – indeed, innumerable works and treatises have already linked the names of Renoir, Rivette, Rouch, Rozier, Pialat, Cassavetes, Ameur-Zaïmeche and Faucon. It would be difficult, however, to interpret this as a trend spanning the history of the cinema, except in its questioning of the dominance of traditional scriptwriting. The refusal to overemphasise the value of the written word may take a variety of forms, but it is always an expression of the desire to turn the shoot into a moment of experimentation. Filmmakers may consequently be divided into two camps: those who defend preliminary structure and the immutability of the written word versus those who are determined to view the shoot as a performance. This approach brings two stages in the cinematic process to the fore: on the one hand, the writing (the screenplay, shooting script and sometimes the storyboard) with its controlled, rational dimension; and, on the other, the shoot, which is seen as a forum for improvisation. The analogy with music is revelatory here: the desire of the art music composer to work through writing and the layout of preordained signs finds its counterpoint in the approach of the jazz composer, to whom writing is merely a starting point, a framework that will enable the performers to express themselves freely and together. It would be risky, however, to claim an incontrovertible duality between determination and indetermination – in the cinema, as in music, reality is less cut and dried. The proportion and nature of the written word can vary tremendously and even in the most faithful renditions of preparatory composition, the performance retains an inevitably random dimension. Despite the aspirations of Adorno, it is impossible to ‘protect’ an art of performance from the unpredictable vicissitudes of the human body, unless it is put in the hands of a robot... which extinguishes its life. In the cinema, filmmakers who pride themselves on their power and expertise know that something has to elude them if they want to produce the gesture, look or intonation that will lend the images their most profound meaning. The preparatory work then gives way to the mise-en-scène, which focuses on bringing about this creative surge as the ultimate achievement. With impro-
visation, however, the creative surge is not viewed as a culmination, but as a launch pad, the implementation of another type of creation in which invention in the moment acts as the driving force.

While the supremacy of the written word in art music went from strength to strength during the twentieth century, a new lease of life in so-called ‘creative improvisation’ was provided by another kind of music, this time belonging to the oral tradition. Jazz, which had first appeared in the Deep South at the beginning of the century in the guise of New Orleans folklore, went on to become a key artistic discipline in the Western world, restoring the status that had gradually been lost to improvisation with the advent of written musical composition. Consummate musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, based their whole musical technique on their mastery of improvisation, defined somewhat idealistically (as we shall see later) by Jean-François de Raymond as ‘the act that contracts in the moment the usual time frame from conception (or composition) to external performance, the hiatus being eliminated by the immediacy of this act.’ Jazz – and this is precisely its strength – is not set against art music or against the written form; it is elsewhere, and it is from this elsewhere that jazzmen can invent new creative expressions and discover new potential in the creative gesture.

As jazz took hold, artists from across the board joined the improvisation bandwagon to invent new and original forms according to their own particular field. Stage directors proved to be the most determined, finding in these techniques new ways of involving the actor in a creative act underpinned by collective ambition. Each line of research became an exploration of the powers of improvisation, based on the body’s willingness and on lived time, as shown in Jacques Copeau and Jacques Lecoq’s experiments with collective creation, the improvised exercises and productions of Peter Brook and the improvised sequences of Jerzy Grotowski. In the second half of the twentieth century, choreographers also turned to individual or collective improvisation in a bid to discover the untapped potential of the body, released from the narrative depictions required by classical ballet in particular. A number of 1950s musical experiments, largely from the United States, could also be cited here, as composers devised ‘open’ works – mobile or containing an indeterminate element – in which a ‘tendency towards improvisation’ could be perceived. The musician’s free hand, however, was circumscribed by the composer, and it is difficult to assimilate this indeterminate element into improvisation in the sense applied here. Finally, one cannot exclude manifestations in the visual arts such as happenings, although the issue of improvisation could surely be tackled just as viably in the work of Jackson Pollock or Auguste Rodin.

Of all the arts, the one that has delved most deeply into improvisation and seems most akin to the cinema is theatre. With few exceptions, improvisation
features as a form of preparatory exercise for the actors,\textsuperscript{4} a process that has been explained in detail in a plethora of manuals. These productions seldom run the risk of improvising in front of an audience; however, at the pre-production stage, this is a collective approach, which is designed to pave the way for a closeness between the actors and their characters, characters they have themselves helped to ‘invent’. The period of improvisation and the period of performance therefore remain quite separate, improvisation representing a mere stage in the creation of a fixed entity that can be iterated with every performance. These multiple performances do not exist in the cinema, in which the camera records a specific instant on film or on some digital medium and then modifies it if necessary at the editing stage, before reproducing it technically. The difference between theatre and cinema, therefore, is self-evident. And yet all, or almost all, improvised films betray a close link with theatrical performance.

In a theatrical vein, some filmmakers work, or even invent, scripts from the starting point of improvisations with the actors, either during rehearsals or, in the more radical cases, during the shoot itself. The script and dialogues of John Cassavetes’ \textit{Shadows} (1959) were written this way, as were a number of sequences in Jacques Rivette’s \textit{L’Amour fou} (1969). Both directors were also affected by theatrical improvisation at another level. In their own way, they both highlighted the ‘theatrical exercise’ in a number of films, demonstrating in a fictional context the element of invention sparked by the actors at the moment of performance. In \textit{L’Amour fou}, Rivette films (or, as we shall see, ‘films by proxy’) the rehearsals of \textit{Andromaque} directed by the main character, while the heroine of \textit{Opening Night} (John Cassavetes, 1978), a renowned theatre actress, finds herself incapable of performing on stage a role specially written for her. One should add that Cassavetes had an opportunity to prepare another of his films (\textit{Love Streams}, 1984) by putting on an apparently largely improvised play in 1981 in Los Angeles. In a less direct manner, Nobuhiro Suwa featured a number of strikingly theatrical locations in \textit{Un couple parfait} (2005), in which improvisation also plays a significant role. Theatrical venues of a different kind crop up again with filmmakers as diverse as Maurice Pialat (in some sequences from \textit{À nos amours}, for example) and Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, particularly in \textit{Dernier Maquis} (2008), in which the courtyard of a small pallet manufacturing business is filmed as though it were a stage, with the actors largely improvising their roles. These few examples, which raise the question of collective creation (in its ‘theatre company’ sense), are adequate proof of the importance of theatre in a study of this nature. Other names will also be making their valuable contribution to this work. Indeed, the links between theatrical improvisation and film can no doubt be ascribed to the ‘boss’ Jean Renoir, who acknowledged the theatre as a source of inspiration and improvisation as a working method.
The relationship between cinema and dance is not that different. Improvisation plays a significant role in contemporary dance, but this also serves to create ‘a fixed entity from something that only exists through a time of enactment.’ Here, again, are the two stages of theatrical composition, from conception inspired by improvisation through to public performances from which improvisation has disappeared. The difference lies perhaps in a form of radicalism that characterises dance improvisations as the initial moment of creation. As Anne Boissière puts it, ‘The danced gesture, in its freedom, no longer seems to require a model, it is self-motivated, its impetus and inner energy having shaken off all props and exteriority.’ In fact, such unmitigated emancipation is as improbable as absolute improvisation released from any predetermined agenda. Nevertheless, one should put forward the hypothesis that the improvised gesture in dance is an extreme case, the one that most closely resembles improvisation as an act of freedom. ‘Once the true signifier of dance can only be transmitted through the body, it becomes inconceivable to impose psychological antecedents on this body, which are liable to ruin the pertinence of a decision that would, for its part, no longer belong to the body’, writes Laurence Louppe, who has entitled her article ‘L’Utopie du corps indéterminé’ [The Utopia of the Indeterminate Body]. The title shows the illusory nature of a ‘zero level’ of improvisation, although this does not detract from the experiments of Merce Cunningham or Trisha Brown, who strived for the total absence of intention. If this ‘fantasy of radical autonomy’, as Catherine Kintzler phrases it, means little in the narrative cinema, it does allow one to reflect on the presence of dance among improvisatory filmmakers. The many ‘danced’ episodes are moments of physical exertion experienced as times of exultation, explosion or liberation, moments when the body seems to take over from ineffectual speech. The nightclub dance in Faces (Cassavetes, 1968) or the one that concludes Beau travail (Claire Denis, 1999), the dance of the young lead in the cowshed in L’Apprenti (Samuel Collardey, 2008), the numerous recurring dance scenes in the works of Johan van der Keuken and Jean Rouch: the questions of the body’s freedom and gestural invention are crucial and these reflections on improvisation in dance have proved extremely valuable in analysing improvisation in the cinema.

Finally, music, which is not far removed from dance, will be making a vital contribution. Jazz is the only artistic practice in which improvisation, even if it is not a prerequisite, certainly plays a decisive role. All the great jazzmen were great improvisers and the amazingly swift development of jazz in the twentieth century can be ascribed to the extraordinary way in which these musicians were able to constantly renew their improvisation techniques. The quintessential difference between jazz and experiments in theatre and dance is that here we no longer have two succeeding stages – improvisation and performance – but a merging of the two, the public performance of the jazzman being a performance
in improvisation. While art music was honing its command of an increasingly complex written form, jazz was inventing other models in which the performer was the creator and the score (when there was one) merely the raw material through which the musician could express his own personality. In jazz, creation only exists in that moment of play and performance and the only way to preserve that moment is through recording. The remarkable influence of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and others on twentieth-century artistic practices can be attributed to their natural interpretation of a revolutionary idea: improvisation is neither a rough draft nor a rehearsal exercise, it is not the first stage in a composition rooted in the written. Improvisation is creation in the moment, it has its own rules and requires different models of analysis. It must not be judged by the yardstick of writing; its place is elsewhere and imposes unprecedented creative practices.

Experiments with improvisation in the cinema had at least one thing in common with jazz: filmmakers were aware that improvisation could trigger emotions, gestures and exchanges that were impossible to predict or put in writing. As they only occurred once, the only way of fixing them for posterity was to record them with a camera. This faith in the moment altered the habits of filmmakers. Broadly speaking, we will be studying two approaches to filming here: the first, which is akin to art music, is illustrated by the hierarchy on set and a reliance on the predetermined nature of composition – in this case the screenplay and shooting script – with the actor being the interpreter of a minutely written ‘score’; the second is similar to jazz, in which the script is simply a matter that enables the actor to contribute toward the invention of his character. A contrast has often been drawn between the ‘script’ filmmakers, who view the shoot as the implementation of a work whose core is already contained in the written word, and the ‘shoot’ filmmakers, who believe in on-set team work and are prepared to leave much to collective invention. This over-systematic and somewhat fruitless dichotomy does at least show one thing, however: by making a conscious decision to opt for improvisation, the filmmaker is accepting the unpredictable nature of the task ahead. Theoretically, he therefore belongs to the second category, but this does not mean he is against the existence of a script, which may even be meticulously detailed. The difference lies far more in the nature of the writing and the way it is used during the shoot.

If jazz can help in the first instance to dispel this sterile comparison, it is through the refusal of its musicians to see their art as anti writing. Jazz always contains an element of the written, in its orchestral compositions, in its themes that pave the way for improvisation, in its chord charts enabling boppers to perform together, or in the admittedly minimal rules that foreshadow performances of free jazz, although these can also be invented during the actual performance. The only thing at stake during the performance is the free expression
of the musicians, and it is the quality of this expression, rather than the fact that it conforms to a pre-existing written form, that will ultimately weigh in the balance. This attitude to the written word is therefore far removed from that of art music performers. Over and above the performer’s independence in relation to the written, jazz is also instructive in terms of its wide variety of forms of improvisation. From the honed paraphrases of Louis Armstrong, the orchestral explorations of Duke Ellington or Charles Mingus, the ability of Charlie Parker or John Coltrane to rethink their music individually or the apparent chaos of free jazz experiments, every stage in the history of jazz is underpinned by the invention of new forms of improvisation, new balances within the collective experience, new ways of devising chord sequences, dissonance, tension. Improvisation filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, John van der Keuken, John Cassavetes, Claire Denis or Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche have stressed their tangible interest in jazz as a creative act. Although this striking interest in jazz will certainly be a topic for discussion, this will not be the only frame of reference. Indeed, in Le Jazz et l’Occident Christian Béthune rightly refutes an over-implicit analogy between the filmmakers’ art and the art of jazz musicians: ‘Whether or not it is implemented,’ he writes, ‘improvisation is somehow immanent to jazz. In film, on the other hand, the use of improvisation can only be transcendent.’ The ‘creative heterogeneity of jazz and the cinema’ therefore, stems from a difference in the nature of the two disciplines, improvisation being a prerequisite in the jazzman’s expression, whereas in the case of filmmakers it is the result of a deliberate choice. This is borne out by fact: in the cinema, these practices, however diverse, are in the minority and should be regarded as such. Furthermore, the act of improvisation is less direct, less immediate than in jazz, which requires minimum props: just a musician and his instrument. In the cinema, improvisation is only one of many factors, a stage in the filming process. It is therefore difficult to talk about ‘improvised cinema’, whereas it is possible, even if this is a slight misnomer, to refer to jazz as ‘improvised’ music. Improvising filmmakers, however, even if they cannot claim the creative immediacy of jazzmen, tend to turn the shoot into an event, the take being a time of density akin to that of jazz improvisation, with the same unpredictability and invention in the moment. Jazzmen and filmmakers become united in a common desire, considering the creative act as a moment of experimentation, of collective research. In the cinema, this commitment does not only apply to the actors; it extends to the whole crew, whose aim is to capture the unexpected, the word, gesture or look that will launch that moment of truth. This conception of the cinema implies a certain number of choices that will determine every stage in the filmmaking process, with the ultimate consequence being the invention of unprecedented forms.
Emptiness or overflow

Improvisation depends on original, or ‘open’, forms of writing. The philosopher Michel Guérin claims, however, that one ‘senses writing as a hardening, a tensing-up of meaning. Because it engraves, it is seen as a stop.’ In order to understand improvisation, however, it is surely indispensable to come up with a form of writing that does not serve as a stop, but as a start. Numerous studies have pointed out two types of improvisation: one, enclosed in a pre-existing format, is considered merely as a form of variation; whereas the other, released from all the formats reckoned to hinder authentic invention, emerges as the only creative improvisation. In her remarkable analysis on the subject of dance, Catherine Kintzler takes up this contradiction between what she terms ‘the improvisation of proliferation’ and ‘constituent improvisation’. According to her,

improvisation, in its initial sense, can be understood as a renewal of models, of motifs. It is rooted in a powerful matrix from which it radiates and extrapolates. This is a sheltered form of improvisation, which assumes the constituted moment of an art, depending on it to proliferate to the point of saturation. There is nothing more traditional than this kind of improvisation, which perpetuates a model of oral culture.

Kintzler goes on to argue in favour of the second type of improvisation, in her view the only one to engender true invention: ‘When we talk about improvisation, we are referring particularly to the second meaning, the one that involves open improvisation, which, seeking a constituent moment, proceeds not through proliferation but by unlocking.’ She concludes that in the first perspective,

the same grids, the same polarizations symmetrically nourish, guide and magnetize the action of the improviser and the expectations of his audience: although virtuosity and fluidity engender pleasure linked to this freedom of performance, they are by definition bound to produce an effect of recognition and not an effect of unfamiliarity or rediscovery. They cannot give rise to the slightest reform.

Improvised creation therefore requires one to ‘create a blank slate in order to begin’ and, quite logically, Kintzler distances herself from any form of writing: ‘As a general rule, the global nature of any mode of fixation tends to perpetuate the oral model and bring about an attitude that is closer to recognition than to reform.

In view of the stumbling block formed by the widespread notion that improvisation can only stem from a tabula rasa, this is a crucial debate. It would be easy to contest Kintzler’s demonstration on the basis of a single example, jazz, that she appears, like Adorno, to brand as ‘stereotypical and sterile’. Without
going into the Adornian theory of jazz, which is itself a subject of debate, it is probably sufficient to recall how a number of ‘reformers’ like Charlie Parker, Kenny Clarke, Dizzy Gillespie or Thelonious Monk managed to develop their music extensively, without challenging earlier practices based on improvisation within pre-existing chord charts. The same could be said of the precursors or inventors of free jazz, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane or Ornette Coleman, whose radicalism also stemmed from the jazz tradition. The appalled reactions of fans who refused to consider bebop and free jazz as real jazz, proved, though this was hardly necessary, that their comfort zone had given way to a cauldron of new practices, in which invention was conditioned by an entirely familiar context that only existed in order to be challenged, overtaken and endlessly reinvented. Unlike Kintzler, for whom ‘proliferation’ and ‘unlocking’ are antonymic, proliferation seems to us to be the path always chosen by the improviser to reach – if he is lucky – that final unlocking. He is not satisfied with using his freedom to weave a comfortable web within a set framework. On the contrary, his position encourages him to step beyond it and use the clues provided by a few notes, a gesture or a phrase to attain the unforeseeable, the revelation of a form of truth. Miles Davis endlessly repeating the opening notes of *The Man I Love*, Coltrane who seems to be abandoning his soul to the theme of *My Favorite Things*, Cassavetes on the set of *Husbands* forcing an extra on the verge of tears to sing before a group of drunken men, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi accusing her husband in *Un couple parfait* of being a ‘socialite’ and then building the whole sequence around this accusation. All these moments of improvisation are heartbreaking in the chasms formed by a few notes of Gershwin or Richard Rodgers, an end-of-dinner song or a seemingly innocuous remark.

Invention through improvisation is therefore only possible in both jazz and the cinema from the starting point of writing, of a pre-existing idea. Musicians and actors work from a common base and through impromptu exchanges gradually build up conditions for creative overflow. This is where we agree with Kintzler, who claims that ‘A kind of real is indeed banished here, the real of evidence, immediacy and transparency, but this is only in order to call in more effectively the real of insistence and resistence.’ In the cinema, in order to reach the real that resists, one first needs to address the appearances, the evidence of the real; this is the only way to ‘banish the real’ and reveal the complexity and ambiguity of the world. This is the goal shared by Rossellini, Cassavetes, Rouch, van der Keuken and Ameur-Zaïmeche. All of them turned to improvisation in order to invent new forms but they never built on sand. Resisting the sirens of abstraction or ‘experimental’ cinema, they favoured a cinema of experience, relying on the body’s energies and the inexhaustible potential of the narrative. For an actor, improvisation only means something when the situation has been set, however tenuously, and this situation cannot be confused with a mere
pretext, given the amount of preparation involved. The most intense moments in the films of Cassavetes were reached after innumerable takes, only some of which survived the cutting-room, and the exhausted bodies remain the only clue to the colossal effort that went into them; the famous scene of the improvised meal in Pialat’s À nos amours represents the culmination of weeks of a gruelling shoot, with the conflicts between Pialat and some of his actors actually adding grist to the mill in some of the scenes; the sequence featuring the song in the asylum in Constantine, in Bled Number One, was the result of the mutual trust gradually built up between staff and patients. Improvisation in the cinema cannot always be satisfied with emptiness because it so often stems from an overflow: an overflow of longing and exhaustion in Cassavetes, an overflow of tension in Pialat, and an overflow of suffering in Ameur-Zaïmeche.

Writing the unpredictable

The appeal of the cinema, but also its complexity, resides in the multiplicity of operations that go into the creative process, from the first draft of the synopsis to the final cut. These successive stages shed light on the way the director implements his choices and determine the nature of the work to come. In other words, every technical decision, in the broad sense of the term, is also an aesthetic one. If one stays with the notion of writing as fixing on paper, improvising filmmakers display a number of common characteristics. First and foremost, they are themselves authors or co-authors of the script and, with very few exceptions, this script is an original work or at the very least one vaguely inspired by a pre-existing text. The only two adaptations that will feature here are both different and unique and both demonstrate the quintessential freedom of the director. The Connection (1962) is a film by Shirley Clarke, adapted from Jack Gelber’s famous play, created in New York in 1959 by Julian Beck and Judith Malina’s Living Theatre. The film, like the play, tackles improvisation by depicting a group of people in one venue simulating improvisation, while a jazz quartet pepper the performance with their own authentic improvisations. Clarke was not attempting to improvise from a text she had not written, her aim was to juxtapose the actors’ simulated improvisation and the musicians’ free improvisation. In Entre les murs (2008), François Bégaudeau’s book served as the basis for a script that was then reinvented from the perspective of situations improvised by the young actors. The approach adopted by Bégaudeau and Laurent Cantet during the weekly preparatory workshops, and during the shoot itself, involved ‘keeping the book at a distance’ to allow the students/actors to appropriate the subject matter for themselves. Bégaudeau’s involvement
as author, co-scriptwriter and lead actor acted as a kind of guarantee of freedom for the director: the film was structured in the shape of a year-long workshop from the matter of the book itself.

Being the author of an original screenplay enables the filmmaker to stand back if necessary and even introduce a radical new slant according to circumstances and the inspiration of the crew. Despite the carefully written script of Bled Number One, for instance, Ameur-Zaïmeche’s violent confrontation with his mother country on the first few days of the shoot quickly convinced him that he should only retain the dramatic template (Kamel returning to his birthplace following his deportation and his rediscovery of a country he hardly knows) and use the work-in-progress to forge new sequences. Each situation was therefore reinvented in accordance with unexpected events and meetings, the director’s intuitions and the crew’s suggestions. The extreme example of Rivette’s Out One: Noli me tangere (1971) is another case in point, with Rivette taking the pretext of an adaptation of Balzac’s L’Histoire des Treize, which only takes up a few pages, to produce a twelve and a half hour film. This is an exception, however, and fictional films rarely emerge from such tenuous precepts. Even the most improvisation-friendly filmmakers rely on frequently elaborate scripts, out of a sense of necessity rather than for production purposes (the putative financial backers being little inclined to throw themselves into a project of a few lines on the director’s say-so). Writing does not simply (or necessarily) mean forecasting, organising, planning and controlling; it also implies thinking, implementing the creative process, a process that will nourish the choices that will need to be made during shooting. To leave the improvised channels open at the writing stage implies an acute awareness of the project, even if the filmmaker only gradually discovers the sinuous paths that will lead to a conceivable form.

The films in which the improvisation aspect is of paramount importance are all by unclassifiable filmmakers whose work is innately consistent (Cassavetes, Pialat, Rozier, Rouch). In opting for improvisation, the role of the director is not only unchallenged but reinforced. Whatever the degree of unpredictability and collective creation, the director remains the author of the film, the one responsible for its ‘composition’ and ‘direction’. Jacques Rivette is unequivocally the author of Out One: Noli me tangere, in the same way as Charles Mingus is the composer of every work to which he put his name, even if his instructions to his musicians were limited to a few pointers on harmony and (or) structure.

‘This is where the paradox or conjuring trick occurs’, comments Hélène Frappat in her essay devoted to Rivette, ‘because he plays on his authority, his responsibility, the director, in his own dialectical way, is also the author; and he reveals himself, discreetly (or deviously), as the master.’ But it is only paradoxical on the surface; if one opts for improvisation and draws on its potential, the prerequisite must be to define a creative world that is not only homogenous but firm.
Reading the script before the shoot\textsuperscript{26} provides insight into the amount of freedom that will prevail on set. In the vast majority of films with a partial or total emphasis on improvisation, the choices of mise-en-scène are not explicit. The only pointers relate to the situations or to broad outlines for development, along with a few clues on the dialogue, location or set. Most of the technical decisions – movements, gestures, frames, scale of shot and so on – are made during the shoot. The crux of the mise-en-scène will therefore be invented on set, possibly after rehearsals. Such open scripts are incompatible with the shooting script, the locus of the programmed and mastered. Improvising filmmakers consequently avoid them and prefer to improvise the shot breakdown \textit{[découpage]} on the set, the script thereby becoming a work-in-progress. Defined by Vincent Amiel as ‘a preliminary intellectual process for breaking down reality, with the narrative in view,’\textsuperscript{27} découpage is the element that brings the filmmakers closest to art music composers, who with the advent of the written score continually expanded their indications for performance (sounds, movements, nuances, attacks, phrasing…), in an attempt to protect themselves from any untoward deviation. Découpage no doubt involves other constraints, technical and economic in particular (the need to rationalize the shooting process, for example), but it also serves to underline the director’s intentions through the choice of frame, movement or gesture; in short, everything that \textit{composes} each shot. It is tempting to interpret, as Amiel does, a lack of découpage as a \textit{refusal} – but it is really more accurate to see it as a conception of the script, which excludes this process: what would be the point, after all, in using découpage to cancel out the inherent potential of the script? Amiel goes on to say that ‘découpage entails predicting the limitations of each shot and ordering them – in both senses of the term.’\textsuperscript{28} The improvisers’ desire for creative disorder is incompatible with this need for order.

A number of scripts among the films under discussion here serve to illustrate this point, while also highlighting the diversity of the ‘writing strategies’. The script of \textit{Adieu Philippine}, for instance, comprised a series of situations that were to evolve considerably during the shoot, with Rozier unhesitatingly deleting scenes and coming up with others according to his inspiration and chance encounters, the personalities of the cast members nourishing the writing day by day. Rivette was often satisfied with just a few pages of synopsis: the script of \textit{L’Amour fou} ‘is a tale which unfolds over about thirty pages, […] compiled in the wake of his conversations with Marilù Parolini.’\textsuperscript{29} The sequences were liable to be written each evening by one or more of his accomplice scriptwriters or even by the actresses, as in \textit{Céline et Julie vont en bateau} (1974). Suzanne Schiffman, who co-directed \textit{Out One}, gave a detailed account of Rivette’s method:
During the pre-production stage, we wrote down the meeting points of the characters on a large sheet of squared paper, and then I drew up a kind of chart, which more or less collated the narrative continuity [...]. We followed that chart—we planned the shoot around it and used it to prepare the actors, to tell them when they were going to meet whoever.30

Ameur-Zaïmeche’s scripts represent a serious sounding board for reflection before shooting begins but on set little (or no) reference is made to them, although this does not mean they have been cast aside. His method involves a writing stage, which allows him to pinpoint the possible trajectories, sketch out some of the leads and imagine what the different phases of the shoot will be; he then resumes oral communication with the participants as a whole. In each of his films, Ameur-Zaïmeche evokes very concrete worlds (the high-rise housing project outside Paris where he lives, his family’s home village, a few African workers from a pallet manufacturing business a few miles from Paris) in which the relationship to the written word, often with poor command of the language, is an uphill struggle. The lack of the script-object during the shoot is a prerequisite for establishing the dialogue that is essential to collective creation. Any involvement with the written word would be seen as a way of introducing a balance of power with the actors, many of whom are playing their own characters. It is hardly surprising that Ameur-Zaïmeche will only acknowledge Jean Rouch as an influence, as the latter’s method was founded on dialogue, on the leitmotiv of free speech, with no room for the immutable authority of the written word. Nobuhiro Suwa’s project for Un couple parfait, however, was of a totally different nature. From the starting point of a brief script, the successive sequences were mapped out with a series of drawings to indicate the frame and scale of the shots, the atmosphere being expressed in a variety of colours. These drawings, known as the ‘score’, illustrate the extent to which the methods of improvisation or, more accurately, the ways of writing the unpredictable vary from project to project. In Ameur-Zaïmeche’s stories of small communities, as in the intimate exchange between Suwa’s couple, the dialogues are invented by the actors and the movements are unplanned. These remarkably similar choices, however, produced works that are unlike each other in every other way: improvisation is the only common ground between the two films.

In ‘open’ scripts, dialogues, if they already exist at this stage, are just drafts or frameworks, subject to major change. ‘We would have lunch together and everyone would invent his own dialogues’31 recalls André S. Labarthe on the topic of L’Amour fou. The broad outline was drawn but the words themselves were invented during exchanges with the cast in rehearsals or even – and this is not an exceptional case – during the actual takes of Un couple parfait or, to quote another totally different example, L’Apprenti (2008), the strange fiction/
documentary directed by Samuel Collardey. The intimate exchanges between Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini are as improvised as the dialogues between all the ‘amateurs’ in Collardey’s film. Again, the only common aspect of Suwa’s urban fiction and Collardey’s rural experiment is the use of improvisation. The choice of improvised dialogue is not alien, however, to the impression of reality that emanates from both films. The fact that actors are using their own words to express an idea enables them to experience the situation from the same standpoint as musicians working from an ‘oral’ score by Ellington or Mingus: they have become far more than interpreters of the written word; they are now ‘filmmakers’ in their own right, sharing the fiction that is being played out with the director. The latter needs to call on all his skills to ensure that the words do not move away from what is really at stake in the scene, while allowing – or even encouraging – discord and excess, which lend an unprecedented weight of truth to this viewpoint. Allowing the characters to ‘fabulate’ is one of the major challenges of improvisation in the cinema and filmmakers have invented a plethora of more or less deliberate strategies to contain the limits of this fabulation from within.

There is a striking contrast between the quiet self-confidence of Suwa, Collardey or Ameur-Zaïmeche and the wariness of the previous generation of improvisers. Jacques Rozier, for example, is cautious, not to say reticent, when he refers to the improvisatory element in his films. One should not forget, too, that even Cassavetes, who had probably been put off by the negative connotation of improvisation (despite the fact that his first film, SHADOWS, ends with the words: ‘The film you have just seen was an improvisation’), would respond when any allusion was made to this subject that the script of FACES, the most improvised of his films, actually comprised over two hundred pages, an argument designed to dispel any ‘suspicion’ of improvisation. The most contemporary examples – far removed from Suwa, Collardey or Ameur-Zaïmeche – illustrate perhaps a change of mood: by openly acknowledging the importance of improvisation in their films, they are recognising that the choice is of paramount importance in the process of cinematic creation. Other equally serene improvisers will also be featured here, such as Philippe Faucon with SAMIA and Maurice Pialat with À NOS AMOURS, summed up by chief cameraman Jacques Loiseleux: ‘We try to do things without formulating them, based on the principle that once they are formulated they are dead, whereas we want them to emerge alive from the actors and from the characters in the film.’

These few words show the importance of what we have called ‘open writing’, which tirelessly strives to find a balance between reflection, inevitable planning and an unwavering belief in the shoot as the cradle of creation and invention, and maybe even of improvisation. In improvised cinema, the film certainly ema-
nates from a written text but it is not an ‘application’ or ‘execution’, more a praxis.

The script as matter

Although there is certainly a time for writing and a time for shooting in the cinema, they interweave in a completely different way when improvisation is on the menu. In order to write while knowing that a degree of invention will intervene on the set, one needs to take into account the actor’s potential for invention. This form of writing, which does not aim to limit or restrain, but rather to encourage emergence and revelation, harks back once again to the position of the jazz composer. Making no concessions to the strictures of composition while being prepared to share the creation not only with the performers or actors but with the entire crew; welcoming the other into the composition with enough generosity to enable him to reveal something in turn: all this goes to show that writing and improvisation are not in contradiction, as is so often claimed, but can both come into their own through the invention of ongoing forms of exchange.

From this standpoint, one can attempt to reach a definition of these open scripts. Their underlying dual dimension of openness and control is best termed a device, and this device implies a global approach, a modus operandi capable of achieving its target, explicit or not. Ten, by Abbas Kiarostami, is a striking example of such a device, with each of the ten sequences taking place in a car, with two small digital cameras on the dashboard filming the passengers. The director, seated behind the actress, cues her during the take through a headset. There is no written dialogue; Kiarostami intervenes in real time and directs the actors from the inside, thereby becoming the only improviser on the set. Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche’s (many) devices are less sophisticated and less cunning. In Dernier Maquis for example, a sequence is improvised in a room being used as a place of worship for a small community of Muslim workers. Ameur-Zaïmeche uses the rules of the religious ritual as a device, smattering them with embryos of fiction, which he uses as a basis for improvisation. The bedroom in Un couple parfait is equally conceived as a device. The hotel room, discovered by Suwa and his chief camerawoman Caroline Champetier, is divided by a door into two distinct parts. The two actors, playing a couple on the verge of breaking up, use these two spaces to enact the strains in their relationship. The wide-angle, static shots contribute to the impression of the room as a dramatic space in which the characters are free to do their own thing. In Quatre Jours à Ocoee, a remarkable documentary depicting the preparation of a jazz album,
Pascale Ferran uses the two separate rooms of the recording studio in Ocoee as though they were two communicating dramatic spaces, one occupied by the technical crew and the music producer and the other by the two musicians, the two cameramen and a sound engineer.

Although perfectly at home with these kinds of devices, improvisation can also be applied to more light-hearted contexts. For instance, the two young women who take up the attractive sailing instructor’s invitation to spend time on his dinghy, in Rozier’s Du côté d’Orouët (1969), seem to be just out for a good time. They agree to act on camera as though they are (genuinely?) afraid, an improvised sequence that turns into one of the most powerful in the entire film. Fun and improvisation crop up again on the beach in Bled Number One, with the women rediscovering sensuous pleasure in the waves of the Mediterranean, and in the extraordinary sequence of Wesh Wesh, qu’est-ce qui se passe? (2001), Ameur-Zaïmeche’s first film, in which a group of youths find an outlet for their boredom by improvising a game of golf on the lawn of a suburban housing project. The game may require rules, as in many of Rivette’s films, but these are kept more or less under wraps and can change as the game progresses, according to the inspiration of the players. ‘The child becomes himself by forgetting who he is – the game – and the actor finds his place by taking over someone else’s – the role,’ writes Hélène Frappat. Rivette reinvents this form of entertainment through a multiplicity of plots and mysteries that require solving together, a pleasure and challenge to the actor and a sometimes gruelling path towards the truth of a person and character: the improvised adventure of the shoot becomes a way of playing out one’s own life.

Over and above these devices or games without rules, however, scripts represent matter. ‘One no longer writes a phrase but matter,’ writes Frédéric Pouillaude on the topic of improvisation in dance.

Composing a phrase usually means fixing the physical trajectory of a gesture and turning it into abstract ideality, which can be endlessly renewed. Writing matter is restricted to determining the general parameters of the identity of the gesture (which kinesthetic theme, rhythmical structure or accompaniment for the imaginary[...]) without actually fixing its form.

In the cinema, these ‘general parameters’ are basically very dissimilar but share a receptivity to improvisation or to the unexpected. This is another facet of writing, which dismisses its fixed, predetermined aspect, its command over the events on set. It is no coincidence that such a script, or matter, is often transmitted by word of mouth, with no reference to the authority of a written document. Speech, as opposed to discourse, means exchange, the possibility of discussion and argument; in short, the onset of improvisation.
At this point, scriptwriting involves providing actors with the wherewithal to invent their own itinerary, ensuring they are open to a given situation or to unexpected solicitations. Creating the conditions for improvisation implies giving everyone the means to accept a degree of responsibility in the development of each situation and proposing a singular interpretation, a personal response. This does not mean that matter should be reduced to a mere succession of events with no one pulling the strings, even if the aims are expressed to a certain extent in the flow of the shoot. On the contrary, the project contained in this script-matter should be particularly firm, so that a form can gradually emerge during shooting (when the composition actually takes form) and be finally integrated at the editing stage. Although the script-matter may not impose any pre-determined form – unlike most film projects – it does require virtual forms, one of which will materialise in the cutting-room. This reversal, with each stage of the shoot playing a part in engendering form rather than applying the form created during the writing phase, enables us to understand the influence of improvisation on these films, which revealed other cinematic strengths. The forms taken by Faces, L’Amour fou and Maine-Océan were not established by an all-powerful script, they were triggered by improvisation. Cinematic improvisation entails putting one’s faith in the power of the events that are about to unfold in the heat of the action in order to bring about other representational forms of the real. Form, therefore, stems both from the potential of the script-matter and from the creative process set up during the duration of the shoot, which is a lived experience. The forms of improvised cinema are invented between open composition and improvisation, between script-matter and invention in the moment, before being fixed at the editing stage.

It is clear that what is being questioned here are the functions of writing, as we saw earlier with jazz, whose composers were not setting themselves against the authority of art music writing but elsewhere. The written word does not establish the norm, an ‘indelible witness that precludes any wandering’; but, on the contrary, enables speech to come alive thanks to a form of writing whose ‘throat has been widened’, as Frédéric Pouillaude so aptly puts it. Cinema improvisation always goes through a writing phase – this is a way of keeping alive and refreshing writing’s potential for invention – but the writing preserves the treasures that have been revealed through improvisation. The borderlines of composition and improvisation may be challenged but they do not disappear. Filmmakers have succeeded in bringing the two together in a common aim, already formulated by Alain Bergala in relation to Roberto Rossellini: to make the cinema ‘the instrument of revelation and capture of a truth that he merely needs to bring to light’. Improvisation is one of the ways of quenching that Rossellinian quest.
This ‘capture of truth’ does not simply depend on the scriptwriting. Improvisation is just as reliant on other choices, which can be summed up in a single founding principle: to allow actors greater freedom, which to a large extent – although not exclusively – implies limiting the constraints of the cumbersome technical apparatus. If improvisation has become such a vital and truly significant benchmark in modern-day cinema, it is because filmmakers now aspire to another kind of cinema, freer and more in touch with the real world. This quest for another truth stems from a reversal of priorities, highlighted on numerous occasions by Renoir and Rossellini. Although in the context of classical cinema actors were forced to bow before technical constraints, something that was further exacerbated by the arrival of the talkies, it became vital to release the actor from such hindrances; in other words, to make the technical constraints bow before the actor. In the wake of Renoir and Rossellini, this reversal of roles naturally put the spotlight on the New Waves, but also, and perhaps most of all, on those quintessentially inventive mavericks Jean Rouch, Agnès Varda, Jacques Rozier, Jacques Rivette, John Cassavetes, Maurice Pialat, Johan van der Keuken, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche and Philippe Faucon. For these filmmakers, the first step was to free themselves from the over-obvious clichés of classical drama, thanks to what we have termed the ‘script-matter’. The second was to implement, on set, the conditions that would enable improvisation to exist as a possible pathway to truth.