2. Creation in action

A collective adventure

The reluctance of many filmmakers to be branded as improvisers results from the confusion that surrounds any attempt to define improvisation, wavering between the mystical consecration of a quasi-divine source of inspiration and a damning indictment linked to its supposedly unprepared nature, denoting a lack of creative thought. By claiming it not only as a choice but as a practice, we hope to dispel a romantic and supposedly facile reputation that has been systematically belied. Every act of improvisation, in whatever discipline, is based on working knowledge, on mastering techniques that first have to be learned. The improviser is not satisfied with turning his technical know-how into a virtuoso performance, he needs to go beyond it. Every improvising actor is, first and foremost, a skilled professional, prepared to set aside his honed technique – as John Cassavetes required Peter Falk or Ben Gazzara to do – because he knows this is the only way he can take risks and allow something to escape in the course of the take. This is the subtext of Jean Renoir’s description of his teaching methods: ‘I wanted to convince these young people that they needed to despise technique […]’. There was a risk they might then deduce that it was unnecessary to have any knowledge of the profession, which isn’t true; on the contrary one needs to know it really well, one needs to know it inside out so that one can forget it.’ From Bulle Ogier and Jean-Pierre Kalfon in L’AMOUR FOU (1969) to Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini in UN COUPLE PARFAIT (2005) – but Isabelle Huppert and Gérard Depardieu in the works of Maurice Pialat also spring to mind – improvisation stems from a consummate mastery of the actor’s art. In more documentary-style films (such as L’APPRENTI or DERNIER MAQUIS), the actor’s technique may be of a different nature but it nevertheless calls upon genuine talent: ‘There are only actors in this film’, says Ameur-Zaïmeche about DERNIER MAQUIS, ‘and yet only the mechanics and I had ever acted before.’ The requirements are different here, as the actors are improvising their own characters on camera, in everyday situations that have been reinvented for the purposes of the film. ‘Playing oneself’ may not involve as much experience but that does not mean it does not require a great deal of work. The same applies to the technical crew, the sound technicians and cam-
eramen in particular, who are forced to react in the moment to a situation that will only occur once, in the knowledge that the quality and speed of this reaction will determine the ultimate viability of the shot.

The actors’ talent and the crew’s reactivity apart, improvising filmmakers know that improvisation cannot be achieved on set without some degree of preparation, long or short. Many improvisations take root without the film crew, in the course of workshops that resemble theatre rehearsals. SHADOWS came out of an experiment with student actors in the Variety Arts Workshop, a small school that Cassavetes and Bert Lane launched in New York in 1956. The work continued on set, with Cassavetes taking shot after shot, as he was to do even more radically a few years later with FACES (1969). The system set up in rehearsals and followed up during the shoot makes it possible to re-appropriate the script and breathe life into it; but when improvisation occurs the appropriation becomes different. In acquiring the freedom to invent new proposals and delve beyond the writing, the process exceeds the performance by abolishing the gap between writing and acting: to the improviser, acting is writing. It is not a case of acting against the script; improvisation takes the writing one step further and relies on an element of exchange and collective inspiration that conjures up Renoir’s definition of the script: ‘When you write your script, when you prepare your film, you are setting up the pier of your future bridge. If the overall idea has been properly conceived, you know that your bridge will fit in with this idea, but there is no way of knowing beforehand how it will actually turn out.’

To improvise is to build the apron of the bridge together.

Fifty years on, in ENTRE LES MURS, Laurent Cantet’s approach seemed to hark back to SHADOWS. François Bégaudeau’s book, as we have said, was the starting point for the film, which was built around a year-long weekly improvisation workshop led by Cantet and Bégaudeau and located in a high school in Paris. The experiment continued into the shoot itself, its open-ended format allowing the sequences to be developed in accordance with the participants’ inspiration. Rivette was also paving the way for improvisation when he viewed the entire shoot as a workshop in which a common project could be implemented thanks to the infallible commitment of all its members, rehearsal after rehearsal, take after take, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche’s aim, particularly in BLEED NUMBER ONE, when he chose to make the takes last as long as possible, was in the same vein. Thanks to video, he was able to make a sequence continue for minutes on end with no interruptions, in an attempt, once again, to grasp the unexpected. Joint participation through communal workshops is a recurring aspect in the work of filmmakers for whom the cinematic process is an act of collective creation, guaranteeing the commitment of every member to a project, its originality depending to a large extent on this very commitment. Contrary to popular belief, this conception of the collective is ex-
tremely rare, as the undeniable hierarchy on set makes shared work far more common than collective work.

Improvisation for the filmmaker means being prepared not to know everything prior to the shoot and putting his faith in unforeseen events in order to reach an elusive truth. By counting on the commitment and contribution of each crew member in helping him invent the prerequisites for improvisation, the director is refusing to brandish some superior knowledge in the face of his team’s supposed ignorance, their role being merely to carry out orders. Although this may appear innocuous, one only needs to follow a ‘classic’ shoot in order to see just how impossible it is for the director’s authority to be questioned without arousing anxiety, the slightest doubt being interpreted as a sign of weakness. Viewing the set as a forum in which everyone, whatever his status, is a proactive force, a forum which calls for a critical mind and in which initiative is obviously encouraged, is something numerous improvisational experiments have in common, however many differences there may be in the actual mechanics of the mise-en-scène. This collective approach is implemented in a different way by the director’s physical involvement at the hub of the collective. Jacques Rozier tried his hand at almost every technical job on the set: cameraman, electrician, sound technician and set designer, depending on the urgency of the situation. There are innumerable photos of Cassavetes behind the camera, and the same applies to Johan van der Keuken and Jean Rouch, documentary directors who also claimed links with improvisation. Playing one of the characters, as did Cassavetes, but also Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche and Jean-François Stévenin, is another way of intervening physically in the film. These approaches do not only apply to improvised cinema, but they certainly appear to be prerequisites for the emergence of collective improvisation, whose watchword is: to be on hand from the first to the last day of shooting, and to work together in action and doing. It does not seem excessive to see this joint commitment in political terms, given the often precarious conditions in which these films are made, but that is the price to pay for freedom in the context of the cinema, where staggering amounts of money are often involved, generating endless constraints. Today more than ever, opting for the freedom of improvisation on a film set implies resisting a system in which filmmaking is reduced to a faithful adaptation of a script rewritten as the result of a compromise with the backers. The highly flexible set-ups that are the rule, and hardly ever the exception, can only exist in the context of small crews over which the ‘heavy industry’ of the cinema has no hold. Indeed in some cases, such experiences are almost clandestine.

To turn the shoot into a collective adventure, improvising filmmakers tend to surround themselves time after time with the same cast and crew, and sometimes even build up a whole troupe on the basis of complicity and trust. One only needs to read the credits on the films of Cassavetes, Rivette, Rouch, Rozier,
Ameur-Zaïmeche and Stévenin to see the same names cropping up again and again, interspersed with the occasional new recruit, who proves to be equally loyal. They are fully aware of the demands that will be put on them, with everyone being expected to tackle several jobs, whatever their ‘official’ skills may be, but they also know just how unique these experiences can be. The famous photo of the little troupe on the set of SHADOWS looking as if they are ready to storm the streets of New York, is a case in point. Cassavetes gradually formed a clan in which the producer (Al Ruban) was just as likely to act as chief cameraman or editor. The same spirit pervades the works of Stévenin or Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche today, the latter being the director, actor and producer of his films, while his editor, Nicolas Bancilhon, is equally floor manager and assistant director (BLEED NUMBER ONE). The production manager of that same film, Sarah Sobol, also features in the credits as assistant director. This is undoubtedly a novel approach to filmmaking, the collective cinema challenging the established hierarchy between the director and his traditional ‘creative team’, i.e. the set designers or chief cameraman. This team spirit may not only exist in improvised films but it is nevertheless their sine qua non, in view of the degree of spontaneity and reactivity such films demand.

This desire to see filmmaking as a collective adventure is mirrored almost naturally in the films’ content, each one becoming, at least in part, a reflection in situ on the prerequisites for improvised cinema. All Rozier’s works depend on a small group of characters who are, willingly or unwillingly, about to experience a collective adventure in the most unlikely venues, where they will be required to face unprecedented situations. The most radical example is that of the NAUFRAGÉS DE L’ÎLE DE LA TORTUE (1976), in which some of the staff members in a travel agency offer tourists an opportunity to find themselves on a desert island in the same situation as Robinson Crusoe, where they have to get by as best they can. Rozier’s other films are structured along the same lines: Michel, the young Parisian in ADIEU PHILIPPINE (1961), decides to give up work and spend a few weeks in Corsica before going off to fight in Algeria; the three young women in DU CÔTÉ D’OROUËT (1969) also go off on vacation, to a villa on the Atlantic coast, while the heroes of MAINE-OCEAN (1986) find themselves spending a weekend on the Île d’Yeu, against their better judgment. Rozier is not simply concerned with isolating small communities in unlikely places and putting them through unexpected situations, however. His ‘delocalized’ shoots also force the team to abandon their everyday lives and the comfort of their Parisian routines. By choosing a small island in the West Indies, the Île d’Yeu or the deserted Atlantic coast (DU CÔTÉ D’OROUËT was filmed in October, long after the end of the tourist season), the whole cast and crew find themselves having to spend several weeks together, forming a troupe in which everyone is swept up in the same adventure, which leads to some fairly predict-
able encounters. Rozier elaborates on the ideas expressed by Renoir regarding LA RÈGLE DU JEU, the clearest example of the latter’s predilection for improvisation:

I allowed myself to become completely absorbed by the subject; and also, of course, by everything that went into it, like the actors, who were quite extraordinary, completely at home in the guest house we were staying in. There we all were, a long way from Paris – it’s vital to be a long way from Paris in a case like that, in order to get away from the trivia of everyday. Other trivial things cropped up in the troupe but that was a good thing, it was tremendous. We were cut off from the rest of the world and the whole atmosphere – the actors and the landscape, and also the subject, as I said earlier – really spurred me on and drove me to do masses of things that were not initially planned.5

Equally significant are the films of Jean-François Stévenin, originally Rivette’s assistant and also one of his actors. From Passe Montagne (1978), set in a small village in the Jura, to Double Messieurs (1986), located in the Grenoble region, and finally the incredible road movie Mischka (2001), all his films are the result of a collective experience. Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche’s trilogy, the first in the Bosquets housing project, the second in an Algerian village and the third in a small firm in the Paris suburbs, also revolve around the collective experience, through communities that have invented other ways of living together. The presence of the small film crew is only accepted after a long period of adaptation by every member of the community and the Ameur-Zaïmeche ‘method’ is based on the breaking down of barriers between that community and the crew. It therefore turns into a truly shared experience, and the director’s subtle approach succeeds in convincing all the participants that the film will be a joint creative effort that will unfold during the few weeks of shooting, weeks that also imply living together as a community.

Jacques Rivette formulated this idea of the cinema as a shared experience, explaining that in L’AMOUR FOU, for instance, he wanted to make a film, not inspired by Renoir, but trying to conform to the idea of a cinema incarnated by Renoir, a cinema which does not impose anything, where one tries to suggest things, to let them happen, where it is mainly a dialogue at every level, with the actors, with the situation, with the people you meet, where the act of filming is part of the film itself.6

During the period spanning L’AMOUR FOU and Pont du Nord (1981), Rivette constantly reiterated that the film in its future form should simply stand as the trace of the adventure that went into making it:

What was exciting [in L’AMOUR FOU] was creating a reality which began to have an existence of its own, independently of whether it was being filmed or not; and then to
treat it as though it were a documentary feature, keeping only certain aspects, certain points of view, according to chance or to one’s ideas, because, by definition, the event always exceeds from every possible angle the story or the report one makes of it.  

Every improvisational experiment in the cinema can be gauged by Rivette’s hypothesis, itself a perpetuation of the practices of Renoir and Rouch. Their differences provide rich pickings too, of course, ranging from Rivette’s imaginary adventures, the African fictions of Rouch the ethnologist, Rozier’s Robinsonian capers, Ameur-Zaïmeche’s political agenda and Pialat’s bitterness. If these filmmakers have brought about multiple, and frequently highly dissimilar, exchanges between reality and fiction, however, their common conception of the shoot as a collective adventure in which each event is liable to trigger fundamental changes in the forthcoming work nevertheless sheds a different light on Rivette’s idea of the film as a ‘documentary’ of its own shoot. Improvisation in the cinema, in its quintessentially unpredictable nature, becomes the most concrete and prominent trace of the film-in-progress, of the immediacy of the event. Once again, and not for the last time, it must be stressed that this does not preclude preparation, or a requisite amount of premeditation – something that varies widely according to the filmmaker. But each one of them remains convinced that the vital essence of the cinema is played out through excess, through the unforeseen and through the use of improvisation as an opportunity for divergence.

Renoir and the actor, Rossellini and the world

If Jean Renoir’s name has cropped up so often, it is because he was the only one of his generation to keep harking back to the issue of improvisation as the most accurate way of getting under the skin of life. Although he refrains from idealising his own manifestations of improvisation, his reflections, particularly in Écrits (1926-1971) and in the compilation Jean Renoir. Entretiens et propos, help one to understand what kind of cinematic vision triggered this desire for improvisation, in a period (the interviews took place between 1954 and 1967) when a great many directors (Rouch, Rozier, Cassavetes…) were imposing new modalities of cinema from the starting point of improvisation. An exchange in 1961 between Renoir and Rivette reveals the cornerstone of the former’s thinking, soon to be taken up and radicalised by the latter. In response to a question on shooting with several cameras, Renoir explains: ‘[…] I will try, even in a film that was not designed for that purpose, to use several cameras in scenes in which I feel the action, from start to finish, needs to be led by the actor.’ Rivette
gets him to take this idea further: ‘This technique is actually only the final phase in a process you have been researching for a long time, really since the advent of the talkies, in an attempt to achieve maximum continuity through the actor.’

‘That’s right’, agrees Renoir, ‘you try to obtain in the film, or at least in some of its scenes, a continuity that stems from the development of the actor’s expression, his inner development, instead of a continuity that is generally manufactured artificially in the cutting-room.’

This desire to allow the expression of the actor to take precedence over any other consideration is one of Renoir’s hallmarks. As Rivette remarks, Renoir did not wait for the 1950s to expound his theory: several sequences from La Chienne (1931), Toni (1934), La Grande Illusion (1937) or La Règle du Jeu (1939) were structured with the same determination to give the actors time, and indeed the actors were sometimes filmed simultaneously with two or three cameras in order to allow for flexibility during the montage. Renoir’s aim was to do everything in his power to nurture an uninterrupted flow of dialogue as the mouthpiece for a certain truth. This of course explains his aversion to dubbing: ‘If one accepts dubbing,’ he said, ‘then one accepts that the dialogue is not real dialogue, one refutes that kind of mysterious connection between a trembling voice, an expression […]. In short, it means one has ceased to believe in the unity of the individual.’

Defending the continuity of the actor’s performance, believing in the voice as a sound inextricably linked to the body, to these two pillars of the Renoir style one must add a third, and one which makes him a precursor of the improvisational experiments of the 1950s and 1960s: the importance granted to the collective and to the role of the individual within that collective. Renoir’s mises-en-scène in Toni, Le Crime de M. Lange and most radically in La Règle du Jeu involved creating an atmosphere that would generate a feeling of confusion, of unpredictability, but without losing sight of the general unity or the hierarchy between the characters. ‘I was resolutely determined to highlight the main characters and keep them away from this chaotic ambience’ explained Renoir on the topic of La Règle du Jeu. This insistence on background movement, with one or two of the main characters standing out from the crowd, conjures up the orchestral compositions of Duke Ellington in which the brass stands are arranged to create a particular type of sound, designed both to guide the soloist and to accentuate his phrasing. Each musician retains an element of freedom, particularly as regards the appropriation of sound, and Ellington succeeds in taking a new slant on aural combinations thanks to the inspiration of the powerful personalities who make up the band and a composition that takes each of their specificities into account. This is what Renoir is referring to when he states, again in connection with La Règle du Jeu: ‘In a film like that, fifty per cent is improvised, but the improvisation corresponds to something deep-rooted within me. In other words, the general atmo-
sphere is not improvised but the ways of expressing it are frequently improvised.¹³ Renoir’s orchestral talent is just as striking when he brings an improviser like Michel Simon centre stage, in La Chiennë (1931) or Boudu sauvé des eaux (1932), by placing him against an ‘orchestral background’ designed not only to bring the soloist to the fore and provide him with an element of freedom but to fix the limits of this freedom and apply directorial control over the improvisation within the scene itself.

Many analysts have tried to reduce the improvisational element in Renoir’s work to the decisions made on set, thereby excluding the actors and the here and now aspect of the shot. It is true that he sometimes wrote the dialogues at the last moment, made equally last-minute directorial choices and was always ready to invent new sequences – even when shooting had begun. Despite the hurdles, however, which were largely due to the cumbersome nature of the cinematographic machine, Renoir managed to give his actors a degree of freedom of movement, and La Règle du jeu is a shining example of this. From the basic exchange of dialogue, in which he focuses on the way the bodies interact, rather than on static close-ups, to the sequences in which he plays on the multiplicity of events going on in the depth of field, and the chases in which the characters seem to be inventing the trajectories as they go along, his mise-en-scène gives a strong impression of a work-in-progress, created in the heat of the moment, with no prior planning. Renoir counters the technical inertia with a highly mobile mise-en-scène, its vibrant energy reminiscent of Commedia dell’arte. He succeeds in making up for the camera’s slow reactions by devising tricks that make it look as though the camera is not preceding the action and movements but simply following them, in long, fluid shots. This became one of the tenets of Rossellini’s cinema, although it was later adopted by everyone who claimed to be part of the improvisational canon.

Another principle which has already been mentioned, and to which we shall return at length, involves filming the sequence from the inside. The work Renoir undertook with Michel Simon in Boudu or La Chiennë shows that he was perfectly ready to hand over the reins to his lead actors in a particular scene, but he also made his own presence felt as an actor, in La RÈGLE DU JEU for instance. The character of Oscar oscillates constantly between the world of the masters, who see him as a friend and confidante, and that of the servants, theoretically closer to his social origins. His undefined status not only enables him to act as go-between among the various characters but justifies his appearance in a large number of scenes. Renoir, therefore, hones his directing skills in the midst of the actors, deflecting one actor’s inspiration and encouraging the ‘excesses’ of another. Although it cannot be termed a method, the filmmaker certainly borrowed a principle here, which can be attributed just as much to jazz as to his acknowledged musical source, the Baroque:
The evening was spent listening to records and finished off with a film. I cannot actually claim that Baroque music inspired LA RÈGLE DU JEU but it did make me want to film people moving to the spirit of this music [...]. Little by little my idea took shape and the subject was pared down. After a few days, which I continued to experience in the form of Baroque rhythms, the subject became clearer and clearer.¹⁴

Renoir no doubt knew that improvisation existed in seventeenth-century art music and that Baroque composers conducted their own music. In LA RÈGLE DU JEU, he struck a balance between the contrapuntal compositions of the Baroque masters and the orchestral world of Duke Ellington, who, despite the centuries that divided them, shared a taste for the musician as performer and improviser. Through improvisation, Rozier, Rouch and Rivette perpetuated Renoir’s work by giving precedence to the collective and to unity of speech and body as a source of human revelation.

Apart from their determination to allow the actor time, these filmmakers had another ambition, this time more akin to Rossellini than to Renoir. In response to the gradual simplification of the subject as advocated by Renoir, Alain Bergala has shown how vital it was for the Italian director to start from the most rudimentary reality, the one least fabricated by the cinema:

Rossellini discovered from the outset that if truth in the cinema was a question of ontology and not of language, he would need to start from the most literal, least re-elaborated reality. Rossellini never reneged on this conviction. His comments were always underpinned by the need to start from ‘things in their reality’, ‘things as they really are’, the ‘true sense of things’.¹⁵

This confrontation with brute reality sheds a radical new light on a cinema that is no longer concerned with the balance and beauty of the shot, but with the expression of truth in the chaos of the world: ‘It doesn’t even matter about the objective proportions of the structure,’ writes Bergala, ‘everything happens in the underlying, adjoining movements of the protagonist’s soul and that of his audience.’¹⁶ Rossellini gets his characters to face the most bitter realities, either against the backdrop of ‘History’, as in ROME, VILLE OUVERTE, PAÏSA or ALLEMAGNE ANNÉE ZÉRO or in intimate dramas such as STROMBOLI, EUROPE 51 and VOYAGE EN ITALIE.

Earlier filmmakers, however, were already well used to shooting fictional films on location, and many of them had deliberately moved away from the comfort and artificiality of the studios to fit in with their project. Their experiments were already in part a reflection of their wish to bestow another truth on the characters, through the reality of the outside world. ‘The broad, musical tempo of many of the scenes and the actors’ natural spontaneity, together with a form of documentary realism in the atmosphere and detail, often give the im-
pression of watching an improvisation,’ wrote Jacques Lourcelles\textsuperscript{17} on the subject of King Vidor’s \textit{Hallelujah} (1929), in which many sequences were shot on the banks of the Mississippi. Other filmmakers, as diverse as John Ford in \textit{Steamboat Round the Bend} (1935), Jean Vigo in \textit{L'Atalante} (1934) or Jean Renoir in \textit{Toni} (1934), were also determined to give their characters a ‘documentary depth’, triggered by the presence of nature. This mere presence takes on another dimension with Rossellini, whose aim is no longer to place fiction within the reality of the world, but to be where life is at its most vibrant, in order to ‘convey reality in a pitilessly concrete manner’\textsuperscript{18}.

In \textit{Rome, ville ouverte} (1945), \textit{Païsa} (1946) and \textit{Allemagne année zéro} (1947), all shot while the embers of the war were still burning, Rossellini reinvented the fictional character, stripping him of all heroic trappings to become a simple human being in the face of History, and the fictional story, which adopted a documentary slant on the world, unfolding in unpredictable twists and turns, with no predetermined script. The strength and consistency of Rossellini’s work, which go far beyond the later definition (or caricature) of Neo-Realism, lie in his interest in the human being and his unwavering observation of the complexity of his relationship to the other and to the world. The most revolutionary aspect of his films stems from ‘his desire to capture the present, nothing but the present, in the heat of the moment,’\textsuperscript{19} the present of History in the making and the present of the characters’ intimate journeys into the reality of a world they can no longer comprehend. The determination to reveal this present without masking its brutality and cruelty made Rossellini a precursor among filmmakers for whom improvisation provided a way of pursuing the same concerns. Cassavetes opted unhesitatingly for the intimate, taking a scalpel to depict his characters’ frustrations and the unleashing of repressed desires in \textit{Faces}, \textit{A Woman Under the Influence} or \textit{Love Streams}. Rivette followed the same course with the couple in \textit{L'Amour fou}, Pialat tracked the intimate downward spiral of a family in \textit{À nos amours} and Suwa was directly inspired by \textit{Voyage en Italie} in the inner journey portrayed in \textit{Un couple parfait}. Others, like Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, are closer to the immediately postwar Rossellini, and place their characters in a clear-cut political context, flanked by an ethnological dimension inherited from Jean Rouch. But, however diverse their creative worlds may be, they nevertheless all take human beings as their starting point, and all allow the adventures and digressions of their characters (and the shoot) to determine the narrative structure and move the goalposts between fiction and documentary.

This awareness of the complexity and heterogeneity of the world produced films in the form of imprints or sketches, films in which the raw truth of emotion, however cruel, was infinitely more important than faultless composition.
Bergala rightly points out that Rossellini’s modernity overlapped with the modernity of painting, as described by Gombrich in the following terms:

For Monet’s idea that all painting of nature must actually be finished ‘on the spot’ not only demanded a change of habits and a disregard of comfort. It was bound to result in new technical methods. [...] The painter who hopes to catch a characteristic aspect has no leisure to mix and match his colours, let alone to apply them in layers on a brown foundation as the old masters had done. He must fix them straight on to his canvas in rapid strokes caring less for detail than for the general effect of the whole. It was this lack of finish, this apparently slapdash approach which literally enraged the critics.20

Gombrich naturally assimilated Rodin to these artists who ‘scorned the finished impression’ – Rodin, whose works form the heart of Suwa’s UN COUPLE PARFAIT.

Rouch, Cassavetes, Rozier or the Godard of À BOUT DE SOUFFLE were also to exasperate the critics by their lack of respect towards a possible ‘grammar of cinema’. Improvising, as has been said, means accepting to film the work-in-progress, the moments of trial and error, the approximations, accepting the unknown, and then turning this uncertainty into a gateway leading to another form of truth. Take Thelonious Monk, whose finger seems to have slipped on an unforeseen note and who then finds his inspiration for the rest of the phrase by repeating that same note: if it has crept into the movement of the hand by chance, it will find its place in the continuum of the improvisation. To Monk, the ‘false note’ is a strictly transitory state, and not only will this same note become the right note, it will add relief to the rest of the solo. Monk was initially accused of lacking piano technique, but it soon became clear that his apparent lack of virtuosity was actually vital to his style, to his individual musical expression. The montage of SHADOWS or À BOUT DE SOUFFLE was to lead adepts of orthodox classical cinema to tax the new filmmakers with a similar ignorance of cinematographic technique, but the ‘jump cuts’ of Cassavetes and Godard are just like Monk’s ‘false notes’. In their logical rejection of the seamless match cut, Rouch, Cassavetes, Godard and Rozier were confirming that in their conception of the cinema rhythm, beat and movement were paramount: ‘I always capture things in motion.’Rossellini had said, ‘and I couldn’t care less whether I get to the end of the movement before matching it with the next shot’.21
given way to the work-in-progress concept of collective improvisation, with all that it implied in terms of concentration on the present, openness, reactivity and a degree of incompleteness. In this context, judging the work of Jacques Rozier by the yardstick of Alain Resnais thereby becomes as irrelevant as comparing Ellington’s compositions to those of Stravinsky. Improvising filmmakers have taken to extremes the idea that an element of cinematic truth can only be attained through loss of control, and can only spring from what escapes, in a hereafter of composition and in the mastery of detail. One of the ways of reaching what Bergala calls the ‘point of truth’ or ‘confession’ is to welcome the overflow, the moment when what is planned is superseded by a subconscious element, which leads the characters along other paths. This transition from *interpretation to improvisation* must not be viewed as a culmination, but rather as an alternative, a possible sequel of prepared composition. This kind of cinema must be centred on the actors, on their bodies and voices, on the exchanges that can surface within the duration of the take, rather than on the constant interruptions that prevail in the course of traditional shoots. The necessary time span is accompanied by another, equally important, prerequisite: freedom of physical movement, which is inherent in the desire to abandon the confined space of the studio and step into the real world. Improvisation may entail shooting on location, using live sound and giving the actors freedom of movement, but it also implies other filming techniques that are far less restrictive, or at least in which the restrictions are of a completely different nature.

**On the fringes of the New Wave**

Although the actual concept of improvisation goes back as far as filmmaking itself, its implementation was essentially linked to the aspirations of a new ‘modern’ era of cinema, in the wake of World War II. This research into a renewal of forms, a fertile experimental ground in the 1950s, coincided with major technical innovations. It is hard to say whether the desire for a different kind of cinema stemmed from these technical developments or whether it was the other way round. To quote a famous example, Bergala has shown that the role of such developments in the aesthetic approaches of the New Wave directors has been greatly exaggerated: the determination of Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol and others to pit themselves against the ‘professionals of the profession’, bitterly criticised in the columns of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, soon convinced them to shoot their first feature films in 35 mm, the regular format for movie theatres, and the only one to be recognised by the movie industry. In order to avoid being marginalised, they resisted 16 mm, even though by 1959 it already matched what
they were looking for in terms of weight, performance and sync sound. This realisation led Bergala to claim that,

what has sometimes been overlooked, in rewriting the history of the advent of the New Wave, is that there was no synchronization between the desire for esthetic, stylistic change, represented by the young team of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, and the reality of technical developments in the 1950s and 1960s. One can even claim, in this particular historic context, that the idea of a new form of esthetics preceded, and in part determined, the cinema’s technical innovations throughout the 1960s.²³

The increase in image-based reportage of war zones, together with the advent of television, made more portable cameras, such as the Arriflex, launched in 1937, and the even lighter Caméflex or Camerette, created by Éclair in 1947, a necessity. These two 35 mm models, termed combat cameras by the Americans, did have one substantial drawback however – their noise. Filmmakers had to wait a long time for the industry to come up with an answer. The handy, and at long last silent, Arri BL 35, the first 35 mm camera to permit shooting with live sound, was only produced in 1972, although it was soon followed by other models. Alain Cavalier, who, like Renoir, never came round to the idea of dubbing, that moment when, as he put it: ‘sound finally meets the body, but too late: it is impossible to separate what nature has united’²⁴ was thrilled to have the opportunity of shooting Plein de super, a semi-improvised film shot in 1976, with the new Panavision camera:

Compact, silent and can be hand-held. Image and sound, same quick performance. Shooting flexible and sharp. It feels as though the eye of the cameraman and the ear of the sound engineer are my own. Impression that I’ve unearthed, for a long time to come, the ultimate machine for seizing life before it either evaporates, freezes or strikes me down.²⁵

If one shares Cavalier’s view that improvisation by actors requires live recording of spontaneous speech to be effective, it has to be assumed that the New Wave directors were not attracted to this kind of improvisation. Things were not that simple, however. Whereas Chabrol, a dyed-in-the-wool Hitchcockian, was never drawn, Rivette, as we know, came round to the idea in 1969, with L’Amour fou and Out One, and Rohmer experimented with it much later, in Le Rayon Vert. Although Truffaut enjoyed last-minute, on-set scriptwriting, he hardly ever actually used improvisation. The case of Godard is more ambiguous, as we shall see later. Although he demonstrated his longstanding interest in the technical aspect of filmmaking by choosing the lightweight, quick-acting Camerette to shoot À bout de souffle, this did not mean that the actors were free to improvise; as on some of Orson Welles’ films, improvisation was reserved for his own in situ choices of mise-en-scène. The improvisations that
really affected the actors actually occurred on the fringes of the New Wave, with Jean Rouch and Jacques Rozier in particular monitoring the rapid development of film equipment.

Jacques Rozier’s first feature film, *Adieu Philippine*, came out in 1962. The opening sequence, which unfolds as the credits are rolling, was shot in a television studio during a live recording of Jean-Christophe Averty’s 26th programme of *Jazz Memories*, featuring the clarinetist Maxim Saury. Against the black background that precedes the first image, the audience hears a voice giving the tempo for the opening jazz number and for the film itself. As Saury’s vibrant ‘1… 2… 1 2 3…’ fades away, the opening shot merges precisely into the rhythm, with the band striking up in time to the first beat of the measure. A sideways tracking shot focuses on a television camera and its cameraman, his eye on the viewfinder, and goes on to take in most of the set, showing the concentration of both technicians and musicians, the trailing cables, the microphones, the dollies, the lens turrets and control screens; in short, everything that constitutes a live recording. Averty’s commanding tones ring out from time to time, before he actually appears on camera, sitting in a small studio, his eyes riveted on the monitors showing shots from all the different cameras, from which he not only has to choose the images he wants to broadcast but anticipate the next movements by communicating with each of the cameramen. There is a clear analogy between the band’s New Orleans polyphony and the apparently chaotic set, directed by Averty. Rozier is comparing a live recording to a performance of New Orleans jazz. The brilliant canvas composed by overlying harmonious and rhythmical lines is countered by the pan shots, the whirling turrets, the ballet of cameramen swiftly replacing the cameras, followed by the technicians freeing the cables. This plethora of seemingly random operations demonstrates an extraordinary impetus, directed towards a common end, its success depending on each person’s commitment, encapsulated by all the band members during the live performance.

This introduction to *Adieu Philippine*, in which Rozier pays tribute to the techniques launched by television, conjures up the opening sequence of *La Règle du jeu*. Here there is no cameraman but a sound technician with a headset, busy adjusting the potentiometers. A track out reveals a huge roll of cable being uncoiled by another technician. The camera seems to be fleetingly drawn in by the movement of the cable, before panning swiftly from left to right to frame a close-up shot of a Radio-Cité reporter with a microphone. It then makes it way, with difficulty, through the throng that has gathered to welcome the aviator André Jurieu at Le Bourget airport, following his transatlantic flight. The reporter, played by Lise Elina, comments live from the chaotic, bustling scene before being granted a brief interview with the hero of the hour. The leitmotiv of this sequence is the microphone cable, which enables Jurieu’s voice to be heard by
the interested party, as he expresses his disappointment at not seeing Christine, the young woman to whom he dedicated this exploit. Renoir makes the link in a dissolve between Jurieu and a close-up of the back of a radio, a close-up that tilts up to reveal Christine standing next to her bed with her maid Lisette, both of them listening anxiously to the live broadcast.

These two sequences, by highlighting the latest technical developments, went some way towards meeting the cinematic ambitions of Renoir and Rozier. For the former, the flexibility and accuracy of live sound and the rapid broadcasting of news through the medium of radio. For the latter, the speed and reactivity of shooting with several cameras, thanks to television. Two ways of broaching a film with a gleeful demonstration of how technology makes it possible to seize the moment, to capture the present. Twenty-three years elapsed between the two, however, and while Renoir’s depiction of radio broadcasting is a reconstitution, a simulated live recording, Rozier was actually shooting a live programme. Rozier, who had been a television assistant, admitted much later that he wanted ‘to draw on both Renoir and live television’. He went on, ‘So I shot adieu philippine like that, with two cameras. This allowed me to avoid interruptions when shooting a sequence, to opt for continuity and therefore give the actors plenty of freedom to improvise.’ The appeal of the live was just as ingrained with Jean Rouch, and it is well known that he joined forces with camera manufacturers to hone lightweight equipment that would provide optimum conditions for shooting in Africa. In 1959, in Abidjan, he directed la pyramide humaine, his first film with a modicum of live sound (which created its own problems at the post-sync stage), celebrating its user-friendly technology in the very first shots. After an announcement regarding the improvised nature of the film, Rouch closed the pre-credits with a shot of two of the main characters looking through the window of a camera shop, featuring a tripod camera no bigger than a stills camera. Rozier and Rouch, both pioneers of improvisation, were thereby acknowledging their debt to the technicians who had turned their dream of the cinema into reality, a cinema which re-appropriated television reporting techniques to invent new forms of fiction. A few years later, in L’Amour fou, Rivette was to use the backdrop of improvisation to examine the relationship between television coverage and shooting in the more traditional 35 mm format.

The links between television and improvised filmmaking in the late 1950s were not limited to reportage. ‘Intimacy is television’s style of predilection’ wrote André Bazin in 1955. He went on: ‘In practical terms, the director has to convey this by emphasizing the actor rather than the set; if one takes that to extremes, the whole thing could actually be shot in close-up.’ To Bazin, television was inextricably linked to the notion of the ‘live’, which creates a specific rapport to intimacy. ‘It is obvious,’ he writes,
that [this intimacy] is linked as much to a temporal presence as it is to a spatial one [...]. The recordings must retain the spontaneity of live broadcasts, because much of the charm of the televised image would disappear if one got the impression that this was a mere transmission of a film. Thanks to montage, a film can play tricks with time. The esthetic moral of television, on the other hand, is one of honesty and risk.²⁸

The ensuing development of television only partially met Bazin’s expectations, but the new relationship with intimacy that stemmed from the ‘spontaneity of live broadcasts’ shed invaluable light on the aspirations of some of the filmmakers who were familiar with this new medium. The aims of Rozier or Rouch, but also those of Cassavetes, who experienced television at first hand in his role as actor, were basically the same: to use the techniques of live recording that had originated with television programmes and reportage to create a cinema that would be more receptive to the complexity of emotions. By simulating live radio in order to broadcast, from the middle of a crowd, a message from André Jurieu to his mistress, Renoir was already juxtaposing technological innovations and intimacy. His followers, Rouch, Rozier and Rivette, relentlessly pursued this path when lighter cameras, having finally mastered live sound, made it possible to record emotions at human level. Showing the equipment on screen is a serene acknowledgment of other methods and not some kind of *mise en abyme*, their often precarious conditions guaranteeing genuine exchange between a small film crew and a few actors. By evoking the ‘honesty and risk’ of television in the mid-1950s, Bazin was heralding the later experiments of improvised cinema.²⁹

The desire to ‘[seize] life before it evaporates’, as Cavalier put it, did not only require live sound; it also justified the desire to shoot outdoors without the need for over-invasive lighting. The emergence of sensitive film also made a significant contribution in making the equipment less cumbersome and intimidating, particularly for non-professional actors, who brought their own truth to improvised filmmaking. Mastering these new techniques implied unprecedented ‘regimes of images’, less dependent on formal perfection in its classic sense than on the instantaneous capture of the disharmony of the world, its movements and its energies. Technical progress often stems from a need to ensure absolute control, to refute the unpredictable. With improvisation it tends to be the reverse: technical fine-tuning finally allowed filmmakers to cater for the unforeseen, to be where the action was and to produce new kinds of relationship to reality and to the artistic gesture.