4. Acting cinema

The body filmed, the body filming

In a two-part text devoted to Hans Namuth’s renowned Pollock (1951), Hubert Damisch, considering the hypothesis of a cinematic equivalent of Jackson Pollock’s art, said: ‘I will only retain one of the many suggestions, the one that bases its argument on the narrative processes that characterize the work of John Cassavetes to identify a kind of acting cinema, in the sense in which we refer to Jackson Pollock’s action painting.’ Damisch himself draws on a passage from Ray Carney’s book on the films of John Cassavetes, in which the author claims that the latter:

refuses to straighten out narrative loops and twists so that individual scenes will smoothly advance the plot. The acting releases energies that the story can’t control. The fidelity to impulse makes Cassavetes’ films the Jackson Pollocks of cinema. He would rather be true to the scribble of his characters’ inchoate expressions and to their undefined swirls of feeling than to the straight line of the story.

Damisch goes on to develop this idea briefly, taking an example from the end of Faces (1968), in which Cassavetes appears to be letting the impetus of the characters’ desire take sole command of the sequence, so that the movement of the film becomes entirely reliant on the movements of the bodies. By recognising the importance of these bodies’ remarkable presence, one is able to show that improvisational cinema is, at least in part, defined by a deployment of the hypothesis of acting cinema that extends far beyond a possible rejection of linear narrative. Acting must be understood in both senses of the word. The ‘energies that the story can’t control’, as Carney put it, rely on the actors’ performance and on the reactivity of the entire film crew, who have to act on unforeseen demands. Hans Namuth gives his undivided attention to Pollock’s body, whose gestures he cannot predict, the painter’s performance allowing no room for a re-take to hone the framing or focus. The improvised performance of Pollock the artist is countered in real time by the improvised performance of Namuth the cameraman, whose acute grasp of image composition owes much to his photo reporting background. On the face of it, this short feature is far more a precursor of television recording, which was later to give a starring role to jazz musicians,
than of the work of Cassavetes. And yet Namuth’s documentary project is not that far removed from the dual ambition of a filmmaker whose own television experience was far from cursory: to lead the actors towards the same kind of creation in the moment as Pollock and to achieve the same reactivity in a fictional film as Namuth had demonstrated by means of his camera. This is the crux of Cassavetes’ art: to lead his actors to that instant of performance in which, within the confines of a precise project, creation in the moment takes over from a predetermination whose only purpose is to facilitate what could once again be termed a form of overflow.

To achieve this, Cassavetes needed to make choices, as demonstrated early on with Faces. He allowed the sequences to run on in order to lure his actors towards a state of abandon in which meaning could only be transmitted through physical complicity: when the relinquishment of the narrative safety net means that acts must exist in their own right, actors need time. The time required for collective improvisation is a long one, during which each of the protagonists needs to remain constantly on the alert in order to respond to any unexpected solicitation. Cassavetes obtained the requisite collective concentration by shooting with two hand-held cameras, leaving his cameramen, who, like Namuth, were dependent on the actors’ impromptu movements, free to make their own choices. This freedom of movement, with the actor creating the space that was to pervade him, conditioned the improvisation and called for uniform ambient lighting rather than the lighting of classic cinema, which chiselled the features and space. The collective dimension of improvisation, therefore, depended not only on the theoretically pivotal actors in a particular shot or scene but on all the ‘passive’ actors too. By filming actors listening and not just speaking, reacting and not just acting, Cassavetes certainly captured the flow of emotions, but this also demanded unremitting vigilance from all the actors. One can see how the technical choices were determined by aesthetic goals, but also how the physical energies stemming from improvisation within the uninterrupted flow of the shot served to counter the narrative and transcend it without negating it.

Many Cassavetes scholars have highlighted the importance of this freedom of the bodies’ movements in space. ‘The greatness of Cassavetes’ work is to have undone the story, plot or action, but also space, in order to get to attitudes as to categories which put time into the body, as well as thought into life’, wrote Gilles Deleuze, perpetuating the analysis of Jean-Louis Comolli, for whom ‘[the characters in Faces] are built up gesture by gesture and word by word as the film progresses. This means that they actually create themselves, with the shoot acting as a moment of truth and each stage of the film developing a new pattern of behavior, its length coinciding precisely with that of the film.’ Vincent Amiel, in turn, wrote about how ‘in the extraordinary final sequence of Faces, Cassavetes throws his characters into a desperate hand to hand combat in
which urgency alone prevails, with no time for reflection, pose or choice.\textsuperscript{6} One can sense behind these words how crucial it is for an element to elude the mastery of the actor if it is to become the character’s expression of truth; this is the ultimate goal of many of Cassavetes’ sequences. To achieve this, he invented a highly complex method, based on the close, not to say intimate, relationship he had with his actors. Among fiction filmmakers, Cassavetes is undoubtedly the one who explored most consistently the porous border between the actor and his role. As far back as FACES, he started writing for actors who were also friends; little by little, he then built up a troupe, not to say a clan, around him. Each character was written with an actor in mind and reflected his personality and relationship to the world. During the invaluable rehearsal period, the dialogue was prepared jointly, paving the way for the second stage in the process of interpenetration between actor and character. Cassavetes’ idea was to imbue the characters with the social inhibitions of the actors, although the latter inevitably protected themselves when it came to writing it down – a defensive reflex that the director naturally anticipated. This explains the highly unusual but decisive role played by the written word in his work and the virtual lack of any improvisation of dialogue during the shots. For it was on set that the trap closed in: by insisting that they use the dialogues that had been written jointly in rehearsal, Cassavetes was preventing his actors from hiding behind their words – words that were soon to reveal their limitations in the face of the emotions at stake. The multiplicity of shots forced the actor to express his feelings in other ways, driving him towards what Cassavetes called the truth of the body. In other words, no flexibility in the dialogues could be allowed if the actors were to succeed in creating and improvising with their bodies. This collaborative writing process was not, as has so often been claimed, proof of a lack of improvisation in his work; on the contrary, it was the cornerstone of creative improvisation itself.

The point of the time spent together prior to the shoot was not, therefore, to pin things down so that they could be reproduced at a later stage. Speech only featured as a way of conveying the social straitjacket from which both the actors and characters were trying to break free. Speech was merely a means of reaching the body, of forcing the actor to react physically to these shackles. This is what Peter Falk was referring to when talking about HUSBANDS (1970):

He would leave you completely in the dark because he was afraid that if he explained things the actor would turn them into clichés. What he wanted from you was yourself. He wanted that bit of your feelings and emotions that is too complex and multi-layered to be reduced to words for the actor to chew on.\textsuperscript{7}

The actors had to tackle a variety of situations in which the narrative continuity was so self-evident that it did not provide the slightest clue to the characters.
From *Faces* on, all Cassavetes’ plots could be summed up in a few words. The narrative and dialogues served the same purpose as the melody and chord grids in a modern jazz standard, opening up a vast field of investigation for the improviser, who needed all his skills to reinvent in the most personal and spontaneous way the common elements underpinning the collective experience – much like Thelonious Monk shattering the familiar melody of *Tea for Two* or Albert Ayler’s frenzied performance of Gershwin’s *Summertime*. *Faces* played a similar role in Cassavetes’ work as *My Favorite Things* did for John Coltrane, who performed and recorded the hit from the musical dozens of times, as though he could never exhaust its potential. The theme of *Faces*, and indeed of the director’s entire opus, is given in the final scene by Chet (Seymour Cassel):

> We protect ourselves. So when you talk values and ethics and honesty and I’m a nice guy and you’re a nice guy and this and that it just doesn’t matter. Nobody cares. Nobody has the time to be vulnerable to each other. So we just go on. I mean right away our armour comes out like a shield and goes around us and we become like mechanical men.

Speech is effectively determined by defensive reflexes and in *Faces* it is Chet’s youthful body that triggers trouble and chaos among the middle-class suburban housewives. Away from their husbands, the women spend a perfectly respectable evening in a club, drinking and watching an unfamiliar young man dancing, and then invite him to one of their houses for a nightcap. This sequence perfectly encapsulates the Cassavetes method. Sitting round the drawing room as they did in the dance hall, they try to conceal the boredom and failure of their married lives with awkward phrases. They take it in turns to dance with Chet to prove that they can still give in to desire, but their bodies, which have lost the ability to move, cruelly reveal what their words attempted to hide. Cassavetes shoots the sequence as a succession of improvisations by the women as they rise to the highly provocative appeal of Chet’s body. When they get up to dance, they fall headlong into the trap set by Cassavetes and his acolyte Seymour Cassel. In order to reveal their inner distress, the filmmaker simply needed to show the total incompatibility of rhythm between the freedom of Chet’s body and the tense bodies of the housewives.

*Husbands*, Cassavetes’ subsequent film, opens with Harry, Archie and Gus, played by Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk and Cassavetes himself, attending the funeral of their friend Stuart. After the ceremony we find them huddled together despairingly on the back seat of a taxi, aggrieved that the minister’s sermon failed to do justice to Stuart’s exceptional personality. In the subway they exchange a few platitudes about the premature ageing of sportsmen, which encourages Gus to talk about his passion for basketball. Archie follows this up by saying ‘I want to play’ and this acts as a springboard for a succession of se-
sequences in which the dialogue is reduced to a few sentences, with the three friends finding themselves powerless to express their grief through speech. They compensate by channelling their energy into moments of shared physical effort that become the only way of facing up to their loss. Harry, Archie and Gus improvise a race in the street, which leads directly into a basketball game in a gymnasium and ends with a visit to the swimming pool. During this seven-minute chain of events, the occasional dialogues avoid any direct reference to the deceased but, as Archie says, as he gets his breath back, ‘It’s good for you. Sweat it all out.’ Everything is contained in the physical proximity of the characters; speech seems to have been drained out of them and it is their bodies that have taken over. There are innumerable shots of the three friends hugging or playfully punching one another, culminating in a remarkable drinking sequence which sees them collapsing into a formless, pathetic heap of drunken bodies. Having driven their bodies to the brink of physical exhaustion, they now purge them by spewing out endless pints of beer. In these opening sequences of Husbands, improvisation has allowed the movements of the body to take precedence over ordered speech.

This idea of the eloquence of the body transcending the eloquence of speech was not new. Indeed, Cassavetes used it in Shadows, most notably in the sequence depicting Lelia walking in the park with Tony, a young man she had met the day before, and David, her older lover. When David stops to greet a friend, Lelia and Tony suddenly flee, hand in hand, in a purely intuitive gesture. Cassavetes films their improvised escape at length, as though their sudden impulse, an expression of their joy at being together and their mutual desire, had come as a surprise to him too. Although this escapade undoubtedly formed part of the initial script, the attendant body language was entirely down to the actors. In his very first film, Cassavetes was already demonstrating his interest in the inventive potential of the body and in rhythm, the inner beat of the shot that emerges from the movement of the bodies alone. After Faces, however, what had started out as mere intuition was to become his sole raison d’être. All his orientations were dictated by a single obsession: how to get his actors to ‘let go’ and transcend their technical prowess to achieve an emotional truth. As Peter Falk put it,

It’s harder to act in John’s movies [...] because he imposes a mode of reality or immediacy or spontaneity that you don’t find in other movies. In other movies, you can get away with putting on a really good performance – with subtle, clever acting – but if you tried that on John he’d just throw it back at you.8

If it is difficult to perceive the improvisational element in Cassavetes’ work, this is because he never actually asked his actors to improvise. Instead, he gradually encouraged them to get rid of their performance techniques and mastery, en-
couraging them to act in the moment for its own sake. He turned the cinema into an art of performance, not an ‘actor’s performance’ in the film festival and navel-gazing sense of the term, but as an improvisational process which blends predetermined writing and ‘a physical act whose material characteristics cannot be completely recorded.’9 His cinema is, above all, a cinema of the body, mainly because he is one of the only filmmakers to have encouraged his actors to speak with their body. Each has their own distinctive body language, as recognisable as the sound of a voice or the tone of a jazz musician, often described as an extension of their own voice or even as the ‘sound of their body’. In the transition between the spoken word and the body in the work of Cassavetes, sound also has a vital role to play. The sudden bursts of unexplained laughter, cries and flashes of anger belong far more to the physical than to the spoken register and are often the first signs of the ‘letting go’ mentioned earlier, intense moments when the body takes over, no longer guided by a specific decision or intention. ‘[...] believing is no longer believing in another world, or in a transformed world. It is only, it is simply believing in the body,’ wrote Gilles Deleuze, who went on, ‘it is giving discourse to the body and, for that purpose, reaching the body before discourses, before words, before things are named.’10 Cassavetes’ approach does not involve placing the body before speech as much as using words to improvise the body, but it is much the same. He rapidly understood that the potential of gesture could not be pigeon-holed by classic ‘directing’. By releasing the body, he was reiterating the idea of gesture as a force to be reckoned with, ‘a powerful pointer of personalities, interests and passions.’11 Cassavetes’ films, just like experiments with free jazz, were a way of exploring the powers of the body, pushing back the limits by striving, to the point of exhaustion, for ‘that immemorial intensity of the body, which cannot be reduced to its narrative nature any more than to the social convention which underpins that narrative’, as Christiane Vollaire12 put it, when referring to the break between classical dance and its contemporary counterpart.

To tackle improvisation in the cinema it is necessary to concentrate on the actors but also on the diverse strategies that have been set up to allow an element of freedom to filter into the performance. There is another area of physical freedom, however, which undoubtedly depends on the actor’s improvisation but is specific to the cinema: this is the cameramen’s physical involvement during the shot. The importance of Hans Namuth’s reactivity in capturing the gestures of Pollock at work has already been stressed, and this reactivity proved equally invaluable in many sequences from FACES or HUSBANDS. There was nothing coincidental about this toing and froing between documentary and fiction; there is something of the documentary reportage in the improvised sequences of Cassavetes’ films, whose only purpose, perhaps, was to ‘document the body’. It is tempting here to hark back to a particular kind of documentary
in which the cameraman’s role as improviser is put forward as a way of showing constant receptivity to an elusive reality, with acting cinema shifting from the unpredictable movements of the actor’s body to the equally unpredictable movements of the cameraman(men)’s body.

Johan van der Keuken is probably the only filmmaker to have openly acknowledged his status as improviser. On several occasions he stressed how important it was for him to be aware of the improvisational potential in his work:

Film only became my means of expression once I had removed the camera from its tripod and found the courage to shoot at eye level and arm’s length, when I began to include in the flow of images what was actually in front of me at every moment, incorporating it into my initial ideas: when I began to improvise [...].

One must first recall that in the case of ‘reality cinema’ improvisation does not obviously emerge on the side of the filmed but conceivably on that of the filmer. This does not mean one should dismiss the element of improvisation that crops up every day in the lives of every living creature; but one should recognise that if improvisation is to be considered as a creative act, it must be deliberately generated, consciously perceived as an act of improvisation. Van der Keuken also recalls, in his own way, the importance of technical developments in the emergence of new, more manageable cinematic forms; in his case, for instance, the ‘crew’ was limited to two people, a cameraman – himself – and a sound technician, almost always his partner Noshka van der Lely. He also believed that it was vital for him to act as cameraman, in order to ensure his physical involvement in events. Improvisation was a way of reacting to the whims of chance while summoning in the moment all previously acquired information. In other words, to improvise was to ‘recognise the gestural element in the gradual construction of thought’, to make on-the-spot decisions, in the heat of the performance, while being acutely aware of a work-in-progress being formulated in real time. This was not simply another way of doing things; it called into question all the guiding principles of classic cinema, founded on an initial script, with a director imposing his own outlook on the world. Van der Keuken, a tremendous jazz fan, took his cue from music to define his approach to improvisation as

a need for instability, which is also a way of taking things further. Like in improvised music. The unstable is also a form of movement. It is a form of rage. One cannot be satisfied with something just being the way it is. So one destroys that moment of stability in order to shake things up again and release something different.

Van der Keuken never hesitated to reframe in order to capture a fleeting gesture or expression, zoom in to draw attention to an unexpected detail or respond with rapid camera movements to a sudden off-screen diversion, before swiftly
returning to his initial shot. In his quest for polyphony, he refused to impose a single view of a world, bringing its complex nature to the fore by a relentless destabilisation of the eye. His work is underpinned by his own body’s reactions to given situations and the body of the cameraman at work is woven into the images, contributing to the inner rhythmical beat of the shots. Improvisation allowed him to evoke the presence of a body filming, a body participating in the movement of the world, at once player and witness. Being an improvising filmmaker means intervening physically in the flow of events and trying to respond, like a jazz musician, to the myriad calls to strike the right note or the right chord at the right moment. It is not enough to record, one needs to solicit, orient, elicit. Van der Keuken never denied that his mere presence affected events and his awareness of this influence was a way of acknowledging an obvious ‘documentary mise-en-scène’. This was a gruelling commitment, both intellectually and physically, and van der Keuken admitted that he always stopped shooting when his energy gave out, because the body knows its limitations. Being prepared to put one’s own body on the line, surrounded by others, creates a link between the person carrying the camera and those in front of the lens, making it possible for the latter to interrupt the shoot by intervening directly on camera or moving out of field. Van der Keuken, like Rouch, was determined to film in close proximity to his subjects, in permanent physical contact, and it is no coincidence that they both clear-sightedly chose the hand-held camera as the only way to film the world.

The main drawback of this method lay in avoiding the slightest interruption in movement, so that the situation would have time to decant and thereby trigger complicity and spark exchange. In jazz, the improvisational repercussions created by the seminal advent of LPs are well-known – at long last musicians had more or less unlimited time to let go during a recording. In the late 1950s, Miles Davis made use of this new flexibility to invent a style in which silence was to play a crucial role. John Coltrane, on the other hand, in the wake of Ornette Coleman and the advocates of free jazz, delved into sound saturation. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that when the cinema was given the same temporal opportunities, through the emergence of new cameras and live sound, a number of filmmakers decided to rely on them as a way of inventing new images. While the LP met the expectations triggered by the boppers’ virtuoso improvisations, particularly Charlie Parker’s, the 16 mm camera with live sound was the perfect answer to Jean Renoir and Roberto Rossellini’s ambition to give actors complete freedom of expression in space and time. Thanks to technical developments, ‘documentary filmmakers’ such as Jean Rouch, Pierre Brault or Johan van der Keuken were able to give form to a cinema largely based on improvisation, but they realised that these innovations would also provide directors of fiction with new ways of filming. Richard Leacock, who
co-directed with Robert Drew the famous *Primary* (1960), a depiction of the election campaign between Kennedy and Humphrey during the Wisconsin primaries, concludes his UNESCO report, entitled ‘The Birth of the Living Camera’ in the following terms:

The possible applications of our research for the great romantic film are immense. It will finally be possible, as Jean Renoir had hoped, to capture the same person from every angle, in his dramatic continuity. I want to establish a distinction between what I call ‘the theatre’, which includes almost all the films shot under control, and our own films, which offer a perception of reality in progress.\(^\text{18}\)

By the time he wrote these lines, the movement was already well under way, with the living camera featuring in many fictional shoots. Several renowned directors with claims to the Renoir lineage tried their hand at improvisation, choosing the hand-held camera either for specific sequences or for entire films. Although they were not as persevering as van der Keuken or Rouch, these fiction filmmakers were always ready to shoulder the camera, as can be seen in the many photos depicting John Cassavetes or Jacques Rozier on set, their eye on the viewfinder, often precariously balanced, the bodies of the filmed and filming often entwined in a curious ballet. Although theoretically it is the actors who are improvising here, the temptation for the director to join in once again illustrates the need for physical commitment and shared risk-taking. When Pascale Ferran rose to the challenge of shooting two great jazzmen at work on *Quatre Jours à Ocoee* (2001), she decided, on the second day of shooting, to use a second, hand-held camera herself. After one day spent directing from the outside, she felt a compunction to become physically involved in the creative act so that she could improvise in turn. And this is precisely what acting cinema demonstrates: improvisation is often a question of exchange and always a question of the body.

**Disinhibition in focus (I): play**

The advent of live television in the 1950s and 1960s lent an unprecedented dimension of performance to recording, the creation time and reception time now being the same. In the very first sequence of *Adieu Philippine* (1961), Jacques Rozier paid a clear tribute to these television-inspired techniques, by filming the multi-camera recording of *Jazz Memories*, a musical programme directed by Jean-Christophe Averty. The opening sequence of this first feature film heralded his cinematic approach. The spontaneity that increasingly lightweight cameras and reliable live sound allowed him often influenced his choices of mise-en-
scène. In Du côté d’Orouët (1969), for instance, during the girls’ vacation on the Atlantic coast, a day is devoted to a boat trip organised by Patrick (Patrick Verde), a young man they have just met by chance on the beach. Rozier alternates between the actors’ dinghy, filming with a small hand-held camera, and a second dinghy, which he shares with the cameraman and another camera, with the sound being recorded live on a modest tape recorder. Despite its length (ten minutes), the sequence seems to have no scripted reality or foreseeable continuity. If it were not there, the film would lose some of its beauty but not its consistency. It therefore owes its existence to an inspiration of the moment, somewhat arduously recorded by two cameras and a tape recorder. Rozier is challenging all the stages of cinematic creation and radicalising this new plethora of improvisational possibilities. In doing so, he has an ambitious purpose in mind: to discover new forms of cinema, forms that will no longer be predetermined but will be invented in the course of the shoot and ‘fixed’ during the montage. This decision to move away from the cumbersome techniques of classic cinema in order to explore new avenues is reminiscent of the young jazz musicians of the early 1930s, who, tired of the big bands that were preventing them from improvising at will, reverted to smaller ensembles, inventing a new way of playing based on freedom for the soloists and impromptu exchanges. The aim of these young boppers, shared some years later by Jacques Rozier, was to draw on collective performance as a means of releasing new individual modes of expression.

In this sequence, as in the aforementioned one with the eels, but far more boldly, Rozier aimed to bring about a situation of disinhibition by releasing the actors’ bodies from all the strictures of the shoot. Faced with an unpredictable ocean, on a makeshift vessel and with no help from the director, the actresses found themselves with only one solution: to go with the tide – in every sense of the term – and allow improvisation to take the lead. The surrender to the moment by these scantily dressed girls made a graphic contribution to Rozier’s purpose, although, like his friend Pialat, he was careful not to reveal its underlying significance. Their squeals of delight, their fear of falling in the water and the expressions of pleasure on their faces inevitably conjure up a first time that is not merely that of a maiden voyage on a choppy sea. Without ever evoking the erotic subtext, Rozier manages to create a remarkable portrayal of the body’s surrender to love, that mixture of apprehension and pleasure that is so characteristic of the moment when physical expression brings the course of love, perhaps for the first time, to its conclusion. Rozier was not striking an attitude with his improvisation, he saw it as a necessity. For him, it was the only way of showing this surrender without conveying the ‘already there’ impression that so often prevails in this kind of scene. This made it impossible to opt for an on-set reconstitution of some prior improvisational work; Rozier the improviser be-
lied in the ‘live’ expression of feeling in the time span of the take, in a present experienced with maximum intensity, a time without narrative. As Jacques Lourcelles wrote:

Only the present, the ‘sheer’ present interests Rozier, severed as far as possible from its links with the past and future. The present, in other words the instant, the impalpable and elusive instant that the camera nevertheless manages to seize, is then dilated, dissected by the author. Through the miracle of his shooting technique, this present immediately turns into a magical, recomposed present, the present of memory and poetry.22

The narrative only emerges during the montage, stemming from the unforeseen incidents of the shoot. The crucial time is that of performance, in this case improvisation, which involves everyone equally. In improvising, cameramen and actors are exposing themselves to a common danger and this collective improvisation requires the total commitment of all the crew members, whose role therefore alters significantly. All the anticipatory phases of the shoot having been reduced to the bare minimum, it is not simply another way of filming but another cinema itself that emerges, a cinema in which the watchword might well be wanting the involuntary.23

Through this incongruous device, Rozier was challenging the whole concept of the film shot, with its sirens of mastery and balance. In a text devoted to experiments with improvisation in the field of contemporary dance, the philosopher Christiane Vollaire notes how,

[...] the hesitations of the body, its withdrawals, its procrastinations, its oscillations, somehow recreate that first forgotten risk, experienced by us all when we take our first steps; the permanent danger of falling, the uncertainty of the body’s position in the world, the dizzying relationship of consciousness to space, the difficulty of finding one’s center of gravity.24

In the sequence from Du côté d’Orouët, everything conspires to engender an imbalance stemming from a ‘game’ that does indeed hark back to childhood, but also to a more adolescent awareness of the pleasure that comes from shared danger and physical intimacy. Rozier’s aim is indeed to take these bodies to the edge, and even invent different cinematic bodies, first by countering predetermined speech, seen as an obstacle to the manifestation of the body, and then by placing this body under pressure, on the precipice. The sequence with the dingly, like the one with the eels, is not so much concerned with the result of improvisation as with the intensity of its genesis during the actual performance, that possible surrender to the moment. These moments of ‘letting go’ already featured in Rozier’s first short film, which we mentioned earlier. Rentrée des classes (1955) could serve as a manifesto for improvising filmmakers aiming,
like Rozier, to build their films around these moments of disinhibition – moments that, far from threatening their project, only serve to crown it in glory. In this film, Rozier pays tribute to the Renoir of Boudu sauvé des eaux and the Vigo of Zéro de conduite (1933) in his portrayal of the little boy from a village in the South of France who decides to play truant on the first day of term following the summer vacation. The mischievous kid leaves his classmates and makes for the river below, where he lets himself drift along with the current, still fully-dressed, while playing with a grass snake who acts as an impromptu guide. Back at school, he throws the class into disarray by slipping the animal into his neighbour’s exercise book. The film, which lasts twenty minutes, highlights three recurring themes in Rozier’s work: childhood, water and the presence of animals as possible triggers for improvisation. The snake heralds the eels in Du côté d’Orouët but also, in the same film, a wonderful riding scene in which the three girls, accompanied by Patrick and Gilbert, leave the forest track to gallop along the beach. The erratic shots of the horses succeed one another, with Rozier simply concentrating on their movement; it was during the montage that he included the final shot of Gilbert, alone with his horse and unable to catch up with the girls, who have got away from him yet again. Although this lends meaning to the sequence, Rozier is fascinated above all by the way the bodies give into the momentum of the horses, as he was when the same bodies were buffeted by the dinghy or when panic grabbed hold of the girls in Adieu Philippine, as a horde of bees disturbed their picnic on a Corsican beach. On each occasion, he kick-starts the situation so that the actors genuinely lose their inhibition during the take, their unforeseen gestures revealing something that has far more to do with an unprecedented rapport with the world than a simple performance technique. By bringing actors and animals face to face in the same shot, Rozier wants the bodies of the actors to hark back to a form of animal spontaneity; but while its erotic dimension does not escape him, he goes further, turning the improvised sequences into a documentary portrayal of young people’s behaviour at a given period in twentieth-century history.

Rentée des classes also highlights the importance of play for a number of improvising filmmakers. This starts out with the presence of children, who are required, as far as possible, to play themselves and not to act out a role, one of the ways of achieving this being to distract them from the camera and turn the situation into a game. In La Maison des bois, Pialat multiplies the sequences depicting the little pupils in the boarding school run by Jeanne (Jacqueline Dufranne), as they make the most of being out in the open by joining in team
games. Living in the moment is also a way of forgetting, if only for a moment, the horrors of war. Cassavetes, in *A Woman Under the Influence* in particular, constantly lures his child actors into play but does not direct them. In one of the film’s most impressive sequences, Mabel (Gena Rowlands) holds a party for her children and three of their friends. Cassavetes’ intention is to show the boundless energy Mabel channels into organising the games to prove that she is a ‘good mother’; but the games are also a way of getting the children to forget about the camera while integrating them into Mabel/Rowlands’ improvisation, which contains an element of madness not unconnected with the innocence of childhood. One could also cite *Le Rayon vert*, the only film in which Éric Rohmer responds to the chaotic presence of several children, left to do as they please on camera, and also the only film in which he seems to have faith in the virtues of real improvisation. In these examples, the children are totally absorbed in their games and are not improvising, but they contribute towards creating an atmosphere conducive to improvisation, which forces the actors to adapt to their frequently unexpected reactions; this is the point of Pialat and Cassavetes’ *mises-en-scène* when they bring adults and children together in the same games. So when improvising filmmakers sought to reproduce the same childlike, of-the-moment disinhibition, but with adults this time, they also naturally turned to games: ‘What we have been waiting for since childhood is to upset the order that is stifling us’ wrote Georges Bataille. This applies to Rozier, of course, but also Jacques Rivette, in *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974), in which the young women repeatedly seek, explicitly in this case, to recall the emotions of childhood through play. Amour-Zaïmeche began his first film with a football match involving young men from each community in the cité des Bosquets; a few sequences later, he got his amateur actors to improvise a game of golf on a piece of wasteland surrounded by high-rise buildings, making the childlike pleasure of play a cornerstone of fabulation.

The desire to depict disinhibition crops up again, unsurprisingly, in the sled sequence of *L’Apprenti*. In his script, Collardey had planned to stage a moment of interplay in the snow between Paul and Mathieu. Faithful to his guiding principles, he chose the situation but left it open, so that the protagonists could be free to move as they pleased. Paul’s descent, face down on the sled with Mathieu on his back, a descent that takes place body-to-body, amid laughter and shouting, and culminates in a glorious snowball fight, reveals without a single word being spoken the relationship that has burgeoned between Paul and Mathieu, in the wake of the first weeks of apprenticeship (and shooting). Collardey, with his hand-held camera, tries to capture what he can of this moment of complicity, in which the body’s potential to reveal inner feelings is ecstatically portrayed. The trick was to lead man and boy toward a situation of play that would be familiar to any child who enjoyed snow. Nothing could
have prepared Collardey, however, for the physical closeness that springs out of that first shot. The whole beauty of the sequence stems from the improvisation, which perpetuates the director’s masterful mise-en-scène. In order to turn chaos and disinhibition into methods of creation, it is necessary to plot a course but allow time for those moments when the course gets sidetracked, leading improvisation to reveal a basic truth, like the sled, with its two bodies on board, hugging the curves of the hill before Mathieu suddenly lets himself fall into the snow.

**Disinhibition in focus (2): dance**

One of the most successful strategies in achieving this ‘letting go’, apart from play, is dance. The word is used here in its most general sense, far removed from ‘programme’ dancing, the conventions of ballroom dancing, the codified discourse of classical dance or experiments in contemporary dance. The figures in limbo in the films of Claire Denis, a filmmaker who is highly attuned to music and the sensuality of the body, lend themselves perfectly to sudden displays of emotion conveyed by expressive forms linked to dance. In *S’en fout la mort* (1990), Dah (Isaach de Bankolé) and Jocelyn (Alex Descas), the first from Benin and the second from the West Indies, team up with a restaurant owner in Rungis, a vast wholesale market outside Paris, to organise clandestine cock fights in the restaurant. The somber, taciturn and wary Jocelyn is put in charge of training the cocks, with whom he has a strange relationship. The most mysterious and probably the most powerful sequence is when Agnès Godard films with a hand-held camera an improvised choreography between Jocelyn and one of the cocks to the strains of Bob Marley’s *Buffalo Soldier*. Claire Denis takes up the story:

Alex Descas spent two months on a cock fighting farm in Martinique. He got to know the fifty cocks that the farmer rented out for the shoot. He was covered in scars. None of us could get near the cocks but with Alex they were like cats. His relationship with them, therefore, was not improvised; this sequence only exists because of what he achieved during those two months. Very early on, Alex, Isaach and I chose the music they listen to in the film. Marley’s *Buffalo Soldier* became the tune of the whole crew. The scene [of the dance with the cock] could be seen as improvisation, and yet we’d all been expecting that scene. It reminds me of a great document that shows Coltrane improvising in a recording studio. He is so involved in his music that he doesn’t see the sound engineer gesticulating and calling him. And yet he isn’t actually alone: the musicians around him have trodden the same path by his side. Something has already been built up between them. This solo is the culmination. Like in the sequence
with Alex and the cock, these are unbelievable moments, the accomplishment of a process. All of a sudden, an actor begins to carry the whole film – and all we need to do is to pluck it.\(^\text{31}\)

The few minutes of sensual communion between trainer and animal, to the sound of Marley’s reggae, form a moment of crystallisation that is not there to resolve a situation. On the contrary, the scene underlines Jocelyn’s opacity and lends an obscure, albeit poetic, intensity to the invisible and insurmountable barrier that separates Jocelyn and Dah from the other characters. Claire Denis is confirming here the groundwork behind an improvisational outburst of this kind; that ‘accomplishment of a process’ whose hypothetical success may enable an actor to ‘carry the whole film’.

In *Beau travail* (1999), in which warrant officer Galoup (Denis Lavant) recalls his years in the Foreign Legion in the Gulf of Djibouti, Claire Denis tackles dance in a more concrete manner by getting Bernardo Montet\(^\text{32}\) to choreograph the collective training exercises for the actors playing the legionnaires. These perfectly mastered choreographies, filmed in static shots in the open spaces of the desert, seem to act as a pendant for the final sequence, in which Galoup, surrounded by mirrors in a nightclub setting, dances alone to the *The Rhythm of the Night*, a disco hit by Corona. The previous scene, which shows Galoup’s motionless body stretched out on a bed, a revolver poised on his abdomen, ended with a close-up of biceps in which a vein throbbed to the regular rhythm of a heartbeat. This inner vibration permeates the entire body in the nightclub sequence, encapsulating an improvisation that seems to spill over from the film itself, given its unexpectedness and lack of narrative credibility. The geometric figures of the soldiers at work give way to an improvised explosion of gestures by Lavant, in the guise of a tap dancer. Yet again, in this final shot, nothing has been resolved, there is just ‘a body overcome by grief or pain, thrashing about in search of who knows what; maybe an oasis of freedom in which the pain he has suffered can be ‘released’ or transferred, or can simply exist; for in the everyday arena, it is not welcome.’\(^\text{33}\) Daniel Sibony was not actually writing about Claire Denis’ film here, but about transcendence and excess in dance [*Trans-en-danse ou la danse comme excès*]. He goes on: ‘The dance space is a place to which the play of a being is transferred when it goes beyond what-we-are, what we are permitted to be.’\(^\text{34}\) Sibony is not talking about improvisation here, yet one of the strengths of such improvised moments of dance lies in their physical communication of excess, and the release of overflowing energies, which cannot be expressed in the corseted framework of everyday life. In dance choreography, however improvised it may be in preparation, the dancer needs to master his body and tame its incessant energy flows through his technical virtuosity. Non-programmed dance improvisation enables the actor’s body to be far more radi-
cally ‘attuned to the shapeless’,\(^{35}\) as Christiane Vollaire so aptly phrases it. Galoup’s improvisation must be taken in this sense, concluding the choreographed gestures of \textit{Beau Travail} to provide a possible means of expression for zones of desire that will remain mysterious and hazy, unstable and contradictory. This sequence, like a Coltrane solo on the same theme, perpetuates the improvisation carried out by the young Alain (Grégoire Colin) to Eric Burdon and The Animals’ \textit{Hey Gyp}, in \textit{US Go Home}, a film made by Claire Denis for the television channel Arte in 1994. This body only just emerging from adolescence seems to be overtaken by forces that are both vital and uncontrollable. While it does not make as blatant a reference to the powers of desire, the same intention comes into play in the sequence from \textit{L’Apprenti} in which Mathieu sings \textit{Je te promets} at the top of his voice as he cleans out the cowshed. If this ‘excess of joy’\(^{36}\) does not conjure up the same imaginary powers as Jocelyn’s dance with the cock or the solos of Galoup and Alain, its brief is, nevertheless, to let the body tell its own story by surrendering to sheer in-the-moment improvisation.

What interests John Cassavetes, Jean Rouch and Johan van der Keuken, however, is not so much this introspective dimension of dance improvisation as its potential to propel us toward the other. As the opening credits of \textit{Shadows} roll, a small party is under way in a narrow apartment filled with a huge gathering of young people dancing to a frenetic blues number. Ben (Ben Carruthers), the main character, who cannot identify with the flow, is doing his best to make his way through the crowd and seek refuge in a corner. Cassavetes takes up this idea again in a sequence from \textit{Faces}, when Maria, Florence, Billy Mae and Louise, middle-class housewives who have come to a crowded nightclub to see how the other half live, genteelly sip their drinks as they watch the young Chet uninhibitedly showing off his talents on the dance floor. ‘Cassavetes’ gestural art reaches its peak in its immediate, savage grasp of the bodies dancing and, simultaneously, in its way of making the space vacillate to restore it to its primal movement, revealing the primary turbulence of things and beings that the cinema tries with all its might to conceal’,\(^{37}\) writes Thierry Jousse. Ben’s problem is the same as that of Maria and her friends: how to free up one’s body, how to get caught up in the improvisation of the other(s). Rouch features a similar kind of embarrassment in \textit{La Pyramide humaine}, when he asks the young black and white students to find ways of living together more harmoniously. The dance sequence to the frenzied beat of drums and African voices is far more evocative than any of the speeches that precede it. The young Europeans have the greatest difficulty keeping up with their new-found African friends in this communal invention of free, gleeful gestures, in this celebration of the body in which desire is experienced without guilt, and even with a sardonic smile. When they finally agree, without enthusiasm, to move onto the earthen dance floor, they only manage to reproduce a few awkward rock and roll or ballroom dance steps, in
twosomes, in stark contrast to the relaxed vivacity of their comrades. The whole issue of the film is summed up in the difficulty of getting these black and white bodies to come together in movement, in finding a common beat in the midst of this polyrhythm.

The problem of collective rhythm is also addressed by Johan van der Keuken in *Brass Unbound*, when he takes himself to Jean Rouch’s old stamping ground of the Gold Coast in Ghana to film musicians in their daily work, in which each follows his own rhythm, and then accompanies them in the evening to their rehearsal venue. It takes hardly any time for the brass and drums to strike up a collective rhythm, and once the movement has found its ‘unstable balance’ all digressions and improvisations become feasible, the imperturbable rhythmic continuity guaranteeing overall balance. Just a few feet away from the musicians, a woman is cooking with her small children; little by little they are all drawn irresistibly into the rhythm and start dancing, as does van der Keuken himself, with his hand-held camera. ‘As I almost always carry the camera myself,’ he writes,

I think the image you see is conveying a physical reaction to circumstances […]. When there are lots of things going on all around, one gets caught up in the movement, and when it’s silent, there is a tendency to be more reflective. These different attitudes are immediately expressed in the physical reaction with the camera.38

Van der Keuken’s improvisational approach lends an unusual movement to the images, stemming from the sound of the brass, the gestures of the dancers and the beat of the drummers. This impression of an improvised event, of the truth of the body – van der Keuken’s own and those of the dancers and musicians – is intensified by the montage, also improvised on the basis of existing images, to the regular beat of the music. As he gradually concentrates on fragments of the body, feet skirting the ground, faces with their eyes closed, a swaying brass instrument or a strangely interwoven couple, van der Keuken makes us forget space, and it is the images in their entirety that abandon themselves to the music. However astute the montage, though, it cannot do otherwise but show what was being played out on that particular day between the bodies of the musicians, those of the dancers and that of the filmmaker; to portray the instability of the flow of improvised gestures that convey both the presence of a community and the existence of each of the individuals that comprise it. ‘The frame does not exist because it is a purely conventional limit, which can be transgressed at any moment’, writes Thierry Jousse about Cassavetes, before continuing:

On the one hand, the frame, which is rarely frozen, is seeking itself and its subject; on the other, one can move in and out of the frame, take it over completely, walk in front of the camera, without affecting the film, in fact quite the reverse. It looks as though
the camera is moving around the bodies and faces but is constantly preventing itself from enclosing them in a prison-frame. The indefinite is what remains in the shadows and yet cannot be dissociated from the bodies.  

In the dance filmed by Rouch or van der Keuken, this centrifugal frame is emphasised by music, which also spills over, always slipping out of the frame like the bodies which have become music-bodies in turn, in a space opened up by dance.

Releasing the body through improvised dance is also Philippe Faucon’s aim in Samia, when he depicts the reactions of the young women to the abusive authority of an older brother baffled by their longing for emancipation. Montage comes into play again when he follows a dinner in the small family apartment with an evening at a concert attended by Samia and her sisters. Faucon depicts liberated bodies from the very first sequence: the young women, sitting at the kitchen table while the men take over the living room to watch television, burst out laughing at one of Samia’s jokes. Their loud peals of laughter trigger an angry reaction from their brother Yacine (‘What kind of an idiot do you take me for?’), who is less bothered by the noise than by the connotations of independence and free thinking. The following sequence begins with a conversation between Samia and her mother, who is ineffectually criticising her daughter’s clothes for their insufficient ‘Arabness’. As she leaves the building, Samia leaps over a railing with a yell of freedom, and is then seen with her sisters and friends on the benches of an outdoor amphitheatre where the concert is to be held. As the first drum beats of the Moroccan group Dar Gwana ring out, the girls leave their seats to join the dancers, in front of the musicians. Jacques Loiseleur, filming with his hand-held camera from the middle of the dance floor, spontaneously records the awkwardness of their gestures, reminiscent of the Oriental dances that feature in family gatherings; gestures accompanied by shouting and laughter, which express the simple pleasure of moving as one. The body’s singularity and need to belong to the world come together in these improvised dances, which are never shot as a reaction to Yacine’s attitude. Faucon’s only intention, and in this he resembles Claire Denis and van der Keuken, is to seize the evidence of the body’s presence.

Each of these examples illustrates the longing to escape conscience and causal links through improvisation. The montage can be a way of ‘rationalising’ these sequences of disinhibition by harking back to earlier events, but the strength of the images stems from a conviction that only a lack of intention can conceivably turn these improvisations, not into scattered, disintegrating moments, and even less into moments of dramatic continuity, but into moments of crystallisation from which unforeseen, unexpected and ineffable worlds may emerge. The acts then only exist in themselves, in the present of an improvisation experienced as
an ‘attempt at dispossession, in the hopes that this will pave the way for something that can never be produced within the framework of the intention and project.’ So that the enigma of dance as the ‘turbulent transition between thought and the act of the body’ may suddenly, in the space of a few shots, take possession of the entire film.

**Improvising/sculpting: Un couple parfait (2005), by Nobuhiro Suwa**

The gestures of the painter in Namuth’s Pollock and the dancers in van der Keuken’s and Rouch’s films find an echo in the gestures of the sculptor who haunts Nobuhiro Suwa’s improvised film, *Un couple parfait*. In her essay *Cinéma et sculpture. Un aspect de la modernité des années 60*, Suzanne Liandrat-Giguères bases a number of her hypotheses on texts by André Bazin, compiled in the four volumes of the first edition of *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* She highlights the term ‘cameraman-sculpture’ to describe ‘the deployment composed by a set of expressions in which the mummy, the petrifaction or crystallisation, the statue and the mould all overlap’. The statue motif underpins a number of analyses, featuring among others *Voyage en Italie* (Roberto Rossellini, 1953), *Le Mépris* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Méditerranée* (Jean-Daniel Pollet, 1963) and *Shadows* (John Cassavetes, 1959) and the author concludes her stimulating comments in the following terms:

The cinematic modernity expressed through these films harks back to an idea of the cinema conceived as a set of properties that enable it to overcome the limits of the representation and resemblance of things, to delve beyond the ontological realism of the cinematic image to pave the way for a purely thought image.

In 2005, it was the turn of Japanese filmmaker Nobuhiro Suwa to tackle this modernity by directing, in Paris, what could be seen as a variation on *Voyage en Italie: Un couple parfait*. Alain Bergala has highlighted the brief pages that represent the only written element in Rossellini’s film. Although they hardly qualify as a script, they do show the importance given to Katherine Joyce (Ingrid Bergman)’s visits to museums and historical sites. Each place is referred to by name, and briefly described by means of authentic city guides: the sculpture department in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, the cave of the Cumaean Sybil, the Pozzuoli solfatarae, the ossuary of the Fontanelle cemetery and the excavations at Pompeii, where Katherine and her husband Alexander (George Sanders) see a petrified couple emerging from the ashes. Even
though Rossellini seems to have planned Katherine’s ‘cultural’ tour, however, he did no such thing with the rest of the film. Each scene was invented during the shoot, and the dialogues were written at the last moment or even left to the inspiration of the actors, who often found themselves bewildered by their director’s unorthodox methods.\textsuperscript{46}

Suwa and Rossellini’s films start out from the same pretexts, their banality only matched by their depiction of the tried and tested modernity of Antonioni and his contemporaries. In \textit{Un couple parfait}, a married couple, for purely practical reasons, undertake one last journey before separating.\textsuperscript{47} This film and \textit{Voyage en Italie} have two elements in common: a lack of traditional script and an emphasis placed on museum visits. Suwa, in the wake of Rossellini, studies the viability of improvisation as a creative method by juxtaposing its movement with the immobility of sculptures, replacing the antiquities of the museum in Naples with the works of the Rodin Museum. In \textit{Voyage en Italie}, however, the only improviser was Rossellini himself who, like Godard from \textit{À bout de souffle} on, left his actors totally in the dark as far as the development of their characters or the story was concerned, forcing them to live the situations with no prepared agenda. Although Suwa relies on the shoot to the same extent, as a trigger for unpredictability, he expects far more active participation from his actors in defining their roles and developing each scene. This bears out the film’s collective approach and a \textit{device} conducive to a particular type of improvisation, one that leads Suwa to concentrate the shoot into a handful of days and places.

The single week of shooting was split in two: first of all, two days for the two sequences in the Rodin Museum, and then four others to record all the scenes that unfold during the brief visit to Paris made by Marie (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi) and Nicolas (Bruno Todeschini). A significant number of shots feature the couple’s hotel room and the Rodin Museum, and these are completed by a dinner sequence in a restaurant, the night wedding sequence, a sequence in a bar, a few street shots and the final sequence on a station platform, a fairly meagre offering for a film that lasts one and a half hours. This economy of time and place was mirrored by an economy of crew: Suwa, his interpreter, two people on the images and two on sound. Although there was no script as such, the film was prepared well ahead of time through regular exchanges between Suwa and Valeria Bruni Tedeschi on the one hand, which inspired the narrative thread, and Suwa and his chief camerawoman Caroline Champetier on the other. In the latter’s view, ‘The spine of the film is formed by the six pages that Suwa wrote in lieu of a script. The way they structure the project with such incredible simplicity is really impressive and this gives the technical crew huge leeway.’\textsuperscript{49} Jean-Claude Laureux, the sound engineer, confirms this in greater detail:

Suwa gave us a score, a kind of chart in which each of the different-sized boxes represented a sequence. Each one was coloured in accordance with the intensity of the
scenes and he had drawn little characters to show the scale of the diagrams. He also pointed out where the emphasis lay in each scene in terms of the characters. This worksheet helped me right through to the editing stage.\textsuperscript{50}

These indications, which were fairly restrictive on the surface, were far more akin to a device than to traditional découpage and acted as the requisite framework for the actors’ improvisation as envisaged by Suwa. The bedroom and the museum were spaces in which the actors would be able to move freely, while the static long shots kept the technicians at bay, except in those rare moments when the camera suddenly became highly mobile, moving in very close to the faces.\textsuperscript{51} The actors needed to work within this framework to mirror the disintegrating relationship of the couple, the film’s outcome depending on how the shoot panned out. It was only during the dinner on the penultimate day of shooting that Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini decided upon the provisional conclusion to Marie and Nicolas’ short stay in Paris. In order to reflect with honesty the relational uncertainty, the sequences obviously had to be shot in continuity, particularly the long heart-to-heart discussions in the hotel room, which alternate with the other sequences set up by Suwa (the dinner, the wedding evening, Nicolas’ wanderings round Paris).\textsuperscript{52} These dark moments, when Marie’s attempts to obtain an explanation are met with Nicolas’ wall of silence and resignation, find their counter-shots in the luminous sequences situated in the Rodin Museum.

The choice of a single museum corresponds to Suwa’s desire to hone in on the couple, whereas Rossellini preferred to track Katherine’s meanderings through the spectrum of places haunted by the past, places she visits conscientiously with the help of guides or friends, mediators who contribute to her obstinate refusal to face the reality of the world. But the protective walls gradually crack in the face of the sculptures’ sensuality and the emotional subtext emanating from these traces of a time ‘that is no longer rooted in conceivable lineage or causality on the scale of human life’, as Alain Bergala puts it.\textsuperscript{53} There is a certain coincidence between this inner turmoil and awareness of eternity and the discovery of the entwined couple in Pompeii, which provokes unbearable emotion in Katherine. In \textit{Un couple parfait}, Marie is no longer the \textit{grande bourgeoise} in tailored suits. The character built up by Suwa owes far more to Antonioni than to Rossellini. Marie has no tour schedule to follow and her motivations in visiting the Rodin Museum twice in three days are never elucidated. The exclusive emphasis laid on Rodin’s works underlines the shift toward the intimate orchestrated by Suwa, who can thereby throw off the signs that characterised \textit{Voyage en Italie}, a film still tormented by the recent chaos of the war. By starting off the shoot with the two museum sequences, Suwa was choosing to make the
relationship between Marie and the statues the theme of the film, which like a jazz theme, shaped all the ensuing improvisations.

In the first sequence, Marie walks through the trees and stops for a few seconds in the garden, opposite L’Homme qui marche, before continuing her walk. The following shot is a very geometric close shot of La Cathédrale, with Marie entering from the right, revolving slowly around the work before moving out of frame, once more leaving the statue’s two hands centre shot. One can hear the voice of a female guide describing L’Éternelle idole, which is revealed a few seconds later in front of a pane of glass in which the reflection of a group of visitors can be made out, then Marie slowly approaches the sculpture just as the voice, still out of field, is quoting Rilke’s famous lines: ‘Something of the mood of a purgatory lives in this work. A heaven is near, but not yet attained; a hell is near, and not yet forgotten. And here too, all this radiance comes from the contact of two bodies, and from the contact of the woman with herself.’ The third shot begins with the long corridor leading to Ève, just visible at the far end, in front of a large window. At the beginning of the corridor, on the right, the imposing Torse de la Muse Whistler, a 1907 bronze, recalls the mutilated antique sculptures filling the Naples museum, which so fascinated Rodin. It is at this point that the camera changes over: the three highly contrived static shots are succeeded by a very mobile close-up on Marie’s eyes, who then sits down in front of the window, just below Ève, to wipe away a few tears. The final shot, which is once again stable, is a slow tilt-up spanning the impressive statue in its entirety, as a few notes on a piano accompany a match-cut with the hotel room in which Marie is getting ready for the wedding.

The couple’s journey is reflected in the succession of works, from the first encounter with L’Homme qui marche to the unfinished Ève, her arms hugging her body, a posture described by Rilke as ‘lean[ing] forward as if to listen to her own body’. But above all, Suwa leaves Marie, alone in front of the statues, to face these confrontations in the moment, with no other words but those of Rilke evoking the uncertain nature of this purgatory, while the instability and vulnerability of feelings and desire are expressed in the way the fingers of the two hands of La Cathédrale brush against one another, in the precarious equilibrium of L’Éternelle idole or in the body of Ève, a sculpture Rodin found particularly difficult to work on because of the ever-changing forms of his model, whose condition had not been revealed to him. Suwa is careful to avoid any reference to the couple’s own childlessness, as this would give far too explicit a significance to the pregnant Ève. Although his choice guides Marie’s steps through the sculptures, he does not pre-empt the emotions that will be unleashed as she comes face to face with them. It is in this sequence that the acumen of actress Valeria Bruni Tedeschi most tangibly informs her character. The aim is not to meld the actors with their roles, but to place them in the situation of living in
the moment a course meticulously mapped out by the director. It takes only four shots to convey the mood, just as a few simple chords were all Duke Ellington and Miles Davis needed to create the mood of their compositions. The ensuing improvisations, therefore, all depend on a preordained atmosphere, determined as much by Rodin’s sculptures as by the actress’ ability to find her conscious or unconscious inspiration in them. Her role is all the more important as she has to take the lead in the exchanges with Bruno Todeschini, who plays Nicolas. From the very beginning of the film he seems resigned to the separation, whereas Marie is determined to understand, tries to find explanations and wears her partner down with questions. This battle of wills, which is specified in the stage directions, forces her to take the initiative and set the rhythm of the scenes.

The nature of the improvisations is shaped by the tension between Marie’s apparent calm and her inner turmoil, and this tension is echoed in the contrast between the statues’ impassibility and what Leo Steinberg termed Rodin’s ‘hasty, over-eager output.’ This tension brings about a singular relationship with time, crystallised in the endless moments of silence that give the exchanges in the hotel bedroom so much impact. The space, using minimal lighting effects and filmed in one static shot, its time limit entirely dependent on the actors’ inspiration, also plays a part in emphasising this temporality. Rejecting improvisation’s almost systematic recourse to the hand-held camera, here the camera never comes between the protagonists. For Caroline Champetier, it would have been:

impossible to introduce this ‘supplementary body’ into the hotel scenes, for instance, in which everything is played out in the space between the two bodies as they move apart, come together, knock into one another and move apart once more. The camera has to stand back, choosing a precise spot that will span most of the space, showing the actors entering, leaving or staying in the field, and the takes have to be long enough to capture something of the characters’ mood.

The device that allows this time span to be implemented can only operate if the actors themselves take the time to appropriate it. This certainly happens when Valeria Bruni Tedeschi returns from the museum, but is most consummately portrayed by Bruno Todeschini, who astutely refuses to rise to the bait of his partner’s demands, not only by allowing the waiting and silence to build up but by avoiding any physical intervention in the shot. Such economy is almost unheard of in an improvisational context and once again recalls, in the way it underlines each detail, each breath, each gesture, the style of Miles Davis during his *Kind of Blue* period (1959), when his phrases, pared down to the extreme in their harmonic structure, were gradually condensed into a few isolated notes, played in a myriad different ways as though he was trying to sculpt them in
space. Light years away from the boppers’ over-exuberance or the exaggerations of the early free jazz musicians, Davis takes his time, relying on incantation and silence to convey the whole tragic dimension of this ‘endlessly consumed present’, as Michel-Claude Jalard so magnificently described improvisation. And how can one not recall here Davis’ trumpet solo in Ascenseur pour l’échafaud, echoing Florence (Jeanne Moreau)’s distraught face as she wanders through the streets of Paris.

In the exchanges that take place between Marie and Nicolas, therefore, one can detect a condensed approach that evokes not only Miles Davis but Rodin’s work on the fragment. A single word improvised by Bruni Tedeschi can actually determine the intrigue of an entire sequence – take the one nine-minute static shot that comprises the scene of extreme tension, when they return to their room on the first evening following a dinner with friends. Sitting on her bed, facing the camera, she suddenly exclaims: ‘You’ve turned into a socialite!’ Tedeschini, clearly taken aback by this unexpected accusation, reacts awkwardly, while his partner, although apparently just as surprised by the notion, continues to drive it home. There is no obvious violence, no harshness, no shouting. Everything is summed up in that one word, ‘socialite’, which defines all too well the routine the couple have settled into. Marie’s husky voice and the long silences, only broken by a few desperate bursts of laughter, lend every word and nuance its own particular significance. The void that fills the room finds its ultimate expression in the equally improvised gesture that Marie makes when she suddenly closes the door that divides the room into two separate areas, where each one now sleeps alone. Suwa allows the take to last several minutes, only showing the closed door, as her voice is heard expressing some unspecified regret. All the sequences that put into play the improvisations between the two main characters are therefore built on motifs that crystallise the essence of the emotions: a word, a phrase, a gesture or a material detail such as the red nail varnish that will not dry quickly enough; or, in the sequence that follows the first visit to the museum, a lost shoe.

These figures of condensation in improvisation techniques are juxtaposed with others that are more akin to phenomena of proliferation, particularly between the sculptures and the body of the young woman, and these mark a deliberate attempt to show the influence of the statues on the couple’s story. One of the differences between Voyage en Italie and Un couple parfait lies in the emphasis placed on the bodies as objects of desire. In Rossellini’s film, Katherine does everything in her power to resist physical temptation and is protected from the lure of the flesh by her idealisation of the platonic love she once had for a young poet. This determination is weakened, however, by her visit to the museum in Naples: by means of a series of match cuts, Rossellini depicts Katherine entering into a strange relationship with a young discobolus, and
plays on the agitation provoked by the statue, which becomes a presence in its own right. Although Katherine’s embarrassment betrays the cause of her agitation, Rossellini gives it an entirely different significance a few seconds later when, in a superb crane movement over the Hercules Farnese, he features in the same shot what Bergala terms ‘the tip over between the human point of view of this ‘being which finds itself free in the world, with no expectations of any kind’ and the point of view of ‘something dominating it’, lying in wait for the right opportunity to bestow misery or grace upon it.’ The same overhanging camera movement reoccurs as we know in the final sequence, known as ‘the miracle’, when Katherine and Alex rediscover one another in the hope, perhaps, that love may still prove possible.

In Un couple parfait, no superior force tears the heroine away from terrestrial contingencies. Here, everything is transmitted through the body, or more precisely through a form of contamination between the statues and Marie’s attitudes, which in turn condition those of Nicolas. In focusing on the link between Rodin’s statues and the rekindling of desire, Suwa is responding, perhaps unconsciously, to Godard’s request to his actors and crew, when he asked them to go and see these same sculptures before shooting the love scenes in Prénom Carmen. Furthermore, by opting for dialogue improvisation in a language he does not master himself, Suwa is able to concentrate all his attention on the bodies, bearers of a truth that words find great difficulty expressing. The improvisation that follows the museum visit is a first attempt to obtain a physical manifestation of the feelings experienced in front of the works. Sitting by the window in her underwear, Marie asks Nicolas to listen to her reading a brief passage from Rilke’s Rodin: ‘Here was life, a thousand-fold in every minute, in longing and sorrow, in madness and fear.’ But Nicolas does not hear the words that evoke lost passion, any more than he sees Marie’s sculptural body, imploring him just afterwards to ‘Look at me, look at me.’ A few scattered piano notes, already heard in the final shot in the museum, ring out once more, as though Marie has remained in this other space, in this other time, in the emotion she is clumsily trying to share with Nicolas. The second museum scene goes some way towards reducing the gulf between the two characters. This time Marie is no longer alone with the statues. It is not the unfinished Ève that overwhelms her, but a meeting with a long-lost friend, visiting the museum with his young son. The improvised exchange between Marie and Patrick (Alex Descas) seems to make the statues revert to their immobility and bring out the apparent triviality of life. As they fondly remember the past, with its dramas (the death of Patrick’s wife) and joys (the son playing at their feet), Marie is able to link the violence of the emotions she experienced in the midst of Rodin’s timeless works and the uncertainty of her relationship with Nicolas. This unexpected meeting in front of Le Secret, another of Rodin’s variations on two right hands, like La
Cathédrale, conditions the final sequence in the hotel when, in the middle of an ordinary conversation, Nicolas and Marie touch one another at last, and approach the bed kissing, the young woman appearing to be gently guiding her partner towards a position that recalls L’Eternelle idole. They do not make love, but remain in Rilke’s ‘purgatory’ before separating for the night, Marie having announced her decision to leave the following morning. On the station platform, she puts her case on the train before saying goodbye to Nicolas. But in a long, uncertain and fragile sequence shot, in which the secret aspirations of the bodies seem to be refusing to follow the injunctions of the will, the train departs without her, leaving Marie and Nicolas face-to-face on the platform, lost for words, like two statues.

By letting the actors decide on the outcome of the film, Suwa was taking his faith in their improvisation skills to the extreme. Improvisation implies a quest: each shot represents a communal search for unexpected events that may crop up at any moment. Following the second visit to the museum, Todeschini forgets to switch a lamp on, although it represents the only source of light apart from the window, through which one can just glimpse the fading daylight. The actor only realises his omission once he is in mid-take but carries on performing – and Suwa chose this dark take to accentuate the contrast with the solar brightness of the museum. At the editing stage, he had no hesitation in introducing two inserts from the same sequence, with no cut-away shot, in order to illustrate the research process and render the creative work more visible. Improvisation requires time, together with an acute awareness that the truth stems from the actor’s ability to integrate blunders or hesitation within the discourse: ‘Improvisation is a series of mistakes that have turned into a declaration or a poem’ said the multiple instrumentalist William Parker. How many incredible phrases by Thelonious Monk came about in just this way, by insisting on a discord that the trained ear would simply have qualified as a ‘wrong note’? The takes in Un couple parfait, which can sometimes last up to twenty minutes, include numerous examples of tentative gestures or hesitant words betraying both the actors’ exhaustion and the uncertainty of the situation. But it is precisely these uncertainties that confer such density to the characters’ relationship. Suwa and his crew, both actors and technicians, join forces almost naturally with the modernity of Rodin, who was ‘the first whose sculpture deliberately harnessed the forces of accident’, as Steinberg put it; Rodin, to whom ‘what [is] more beautiful than a beautiful thing [is] the ruin of that beautiful thing.’

The absence of any predetermined written dialogue or meticulous shot-by-shot shooting script paves the way for another cinema, defined by Suwa as ‘an empty circle that can be filled by each one of us’, another kind of work in which the upstrokes and downstrokes are perceptible, and the scenes are not ‘summaries of scenes’. This can lead Suwa to alter the filming regime in mid-
sequence, going from a static long shot to a mobile close shot, underlined by the image’s change in texture. This was the case in both museum sequences, with Caroline Champetier improvising an enormous close-up of Marie with her hand-held camera to reveal the intimate recesses of the face. This should not to be read as a conclusion or judgement, merely as a desire to accompany a movement. The real subject of improvisation is the process itself, with all its vicissitudes, but it is also its unfinished nature, which conveys according to Steinberg ‘an outpouring of effort so identified with the act of living that it hates to turn itself off’, like the two motionless figures, indifferent to the bustle of the station, refusing to sever the tenuous tie that still binds them together. Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini have gradually overcome, through improvisation, the instant of freedom that emerges from a succession of moments in which different strata of time overlap. The memory of the emotions felt in each scene, the memory of events experienced by the characters, the intimate memory of the actors, the memory of Rodin’s gestures. All these memories erupt into the present in an improvisation that always simultaneously involves old and new, far removed from the myths of immediacy and emancipation that have so often overdefined it. Improvisation to Suwa provides a contemporary means of mobilising a mechanism that in its very fixity recalls the ‘views’ of early cinema, while revisiting the modernity of an art that has cast aside any pretension at utopian synthesis, in order to draw, quite consciously, on practices that appear on the surface to be entirely alien. After all, was not Rodin, as a contemporary of the Lumière brothers, the first to reconcile improvising and sculpting?