5. The temptation of theatre

A seminal stalemate

The Connection is a play by Jack Gelber, which was launched on 15 July 1959 in New York by the Living Theatre, a famous underground company led by Julian Beck and Judith Malina. American director Shirley Clarke adapted it for the screen in 1962 in her first feature film, from a script written by Gelber himself, shooting it in nineteen days and editing it over a period of four months. The Connection was one of the many radical and exciting experiments to come out of New York in the late 1950s, in theatre through The Living Theatre, in cinema with Jonas Mekas, in jazz with the release of Ornette Coleman's seminal Free Jazz, in contemporary music with the experimentation of John Cage, in dance with Merce Cunningham and in the visual arts through performances. All these artists were determined to challenge the idea of the arts as a safe haven by breaking with established codes of performance and introducing new forms that were as much concerned with the creative act itself as with the mise-en-scène or the relationship with the audience.

The interest sparked by the play stemmed initially from the boldness of its subject matter and staging. In a rather down-at-heel apartment, a group of drug addicts are waiting for their ‘connection’; in other words, their dealer, Cowboy. In Gelber’s play, the group, including four jazz musicians, was made up of drug addicts brought together by a television producer who wanted to film their wait with two cameras, one on a tripod and the other much more mobile and often hand-held by the director. The producer, who is on stage, occasionally addresses the theatre audience, who are following the scene, while the musicians intermittently pass the time by playing. During the interval, the actors communicate directly with the audience, but stay in character, even asking for money to buy a shot of heroin. Reality and fiction are blurred to such an extent that many of the spectators become convinced that they have really been party to a day in the life of a group of junkies, and later ask after their health, in particular that of the addict who appears to have narrowly missed dying from an overdose – a scene that caused a number of fainting fits during performances. For the purposes of the film, Shirley Clarke chose a different device. She respected the unity of time and place, but on several occasions allowed the
protagonists to talk to camera, in other words to the spectators in the cinema, as opposed to the theatre audience. The theatrical dimension had, therefore, partly disappeared and it is a film shoot in action that is being followed by the cinema audience. The Connection, which Jonas Melkas described as ‘the Waiting for Godot of drugs’ is a cocktail of avant-garde artistic obsessions. These included challenging the traditional approach to fiction by giving it a ‘documentary’ slant, uncompromisingly tackling the problems of society, which most artistic disciplines had always studiously avoided, involving the public in a radical extension of Brecht’s ‘distancing effect’, reflecting on the interdisciplinary potential of the creative act, highlighting collective ambition and focusing on ‘performance’ and particularly improvisation to ensure the total implication of the actor, who was to live the experience and no longer simply enact it.

Gérard Genette describes performance works as ‘objects whose temporality is different and [...] more intimately linked to their manifestation’. He naturally considers improvisation to be performance, although he points out that, improvisation is not a purer expression of the performance arts, but on the contrary a more complex expression, in which two theoretically distinct works are combined, often inextricably as it turns out: a text (poetic, musical or other) – which may be subsequently notated and multiplied into infinity – forming the allographic, or ideal, side and a physical (autographical) act whose material characteristics cannot all be noted although they can be imitated or even counterfeited.

The Connection, in its theatrical version first of all, brilliantly highlighted the indiscernible transition between the predetermined element of performance, any kind of performance, and the element of possible improvisation, implying unpredictability. By juxtaposing two performance arts, both of them collective – theatre, which precludes improvisation outside the rehearsal or preparation period, and jazz, in which ‘improvisation is established as a prerequisite for performance’ as Christian Béthune put it – author Jack Gelber enabled Julian Beck and Judith Malina to implement an idea that had been apparently haunting them for several years: how to turn each performance of the play into a unique, one-off event. A few years earlier, in 1955, Beck and Malina had put on Pirandello’s Tonight We Improvise, a play in which all the ‘improvisations’ were introduced in order to give the audience the impression that everything was improvised. In a sense, there was a certain continuity between Tonight We Improvise and The Connection, although the former had been written back in 1930. By ridding his play of any dramatic agenda, the only ‘plot’ being the wait for the dealer and the ensuing fix, Gelber was emphasising the perception of a lived experience, both from the point of view of the characters and from the point of view of the audience. The dramatic device multiplies the effects designed to enhance the credibility of
the improvisation: a succession of monologues aimed at the audience, arguments between the crew and the addicts, the agonising symptoms of withdrawal and the ensuing ravages caused by the fix itself. Everything is simulated, however, and the audience let themselves fall into the trap, which raises questions regarding the honesty of the relationship with the audience.

The problem is exacerbated by the four musicians, all brilliant improvisers of hard bop: saxophonist Jackie McLean, pianist Freddie Redd, bass player Michael Mattos and drummer Larry Ritchie. Unlike the other cast members, they actually play their own characters and in both the play and the film keep their own names. Some were not unfamiliar with the drug scene themselves: before being hired for the play, Jackie McLean’s drug habit had led to the confiscation of his cabaret card, and in 1966 he was given a prison sentence, before kicking the habit for good. Naturally, on stage they only simulated the withdrawal symptoms and effects of the heroin, but there is no doubt that their familiarity with the drug scene added still more realism to The Connection. But this did not impress Beck and Malina as much as the ‘true improvisation’ of these musicians, who frequently improvised in the course of the play, leading the members of the Living Theatre to drastically reassess the ‘simulated improvisation’ performed by the actors. These jazz interludes came across as the only moments of freedom, the only times when the edges became blurred between actor and character. During performances, this impression was underlined by the attitude of the musicians in the interval: unlike the other actors, they were being themselves when they addressed the audience – the line between role playing and life had disappeared. Beck and Malina could see all too clearly that the company’s work on simulated improvisation counted for nothing on stage, compared to the improvised performances of the jazzmen. ‘Jazz is the hero,’ wrote Beck on the subject of The Connection, ‘jazz which made an early break into actual improvisation.’ Talking about Charlie Parker, he went on: ‘He inspired us, he showed us that by becoming really engaged and then letting go the great flight of the bird could happen.’ Judith Malina confirmed the significance of this play, and of jazz in particular, in the work of the Living Theatre:

> When a jazz musician plays his music, he enters into personal contact with the public; when he goes home after he has played, one who talks to him knows that there is no difference between the way he is now and the way he was on the stage. This type of relationship with the audience creates in him a great relaxation. The Connection represented a very important advance for us in this respect: from then on, the actors began to play themselves.

In The Connection, the jazzmen therefore highlighted two almost antagonistic ways of improvising. The first, when they played together, was the consecration of a vast amount of work and demonstrated consummate mastery of an artistic
discipline based in large part on collective improvisation. The second, when they addressed the audience during the interval, showed on the contrary that the difference between their identity and their performance as actor was minimal. It would appear, therefore, that there is a form of improvisation that is consciously perceived as a creative act, and an unconscious form of improvisation that seems almost (but not quite) to correspond to an episode in the musicians’ lives. This ‘not quite’ is crucial: it is what separates the creative act from life, a prerequisite for the emergence of the artistic gesture. This is also what Malina means when she says that the actors of the Living Theatre ‘started to play themselves’ and not to ‘be themselves’. By placing in the same space and limited time span a group of actors whose only perspective is to carry on waiting, and inside that group a jazz quartet that whiles away the time by playing music, Gelber’s play addresses the tenuous borderline between life and the creative act, the musicians striking up almost naturally within the movement of the play.

This questioning finds a new expression in its perception of temporality. Jazz provides the means for the four jazz musician characters to remove themselves from the constraints of the wait and break free. The music is not intended as an accompaniment, but represents one of the play’s polarities, the other being the wait itself. It is not Freddie Redd’s quartet that first introduces jazz into the play, however, but a man who comes on stage carrying a mysterious box. Before ‘connecting’ it, he places it on the table and we realise it is a record player. Without a single word being spoken, he then plays an extract from an improvisation by Charlie Parker (who had died a few years earlier from an overdose). But after only seconds of reverential attention, the needle gets stuck and Parker’s stuttering repetition of the same phrase leads the intruder to leave the stage for good, after having carefully put away his equipment. This first irruption of genuine improvisation in the play (and in Shirley Clarke’s film) creates a hiatus in the waiting game, the manifestation of a musical interlude that is resolutely in the moment, despite its connections to the past (encapsulated by the scratched record) and creates the impetus for the quartet to improvise in turn.

Two ‘liberating forces’ were now at loggerheads. The heroin fix first of all, which freed up the characters’ speech through a series of monologues addressed to the audience or to camera. But these monologues were the expression of the characters’ inner isolation and their apparent freedom is only an illusion: the alienating aspect of heroin, even if it is presented here as just one of the many forms of alienation in a society with no future, is never in any doubt. The second liberating power, jazz improvisation, does not isolate the characters, but raises the possibility of collective action, of an emancipating creative act. Instead of isolating the individual, making him a stranger to himself, collective improvisation makes it possible to live time, and master it, together: “The improviser
experiences duration without losing or forgetting himself in it’, writes Jean-François de Raymond. The contrast between the isolation brought about by drugs and the sharing of a creative time span comes across all the more violently because The Connection is a succession of monologues that seem improvised and collective interventions through music that are genuinely improvised. This contrast is never accentuated by the mise-en-scène, however. Judith Malina trusts the power of jazz to release the idea of freedom itself, a form of resistance to widespread disillusionment, a resistance that is not rooted in a flight toward some kind of ersatz but in another form of flight. As Gilles Deleuze put it, ‘to flee is not to renounce action: nothing is more active than a flight. It is the opposite of the imaginary. It is also to put to flight – not necessarily others, but to put something to flight, to put a system to flight as one bursts a tube.’ A process aptly summed up by the term ‘extemporisation’, this flight could be seen as a possible definition of collective improvisation, beyond time constraints.

The experience of The Connection convinced Julian Beck and Judith Malina that they needed to persevere in their work on the innermost human identity of the actor and audience, using jazz as a possible means of achieving this. And yet in June 1960, less than a year after The Connection opened, it was not jazz, but the theories of John Cage that inspired their new show, The Theatre of Chance, comprising two plays, one written by Jackson MacLow and entitled The Marrying Maiden. The actors were directed in part by a dice thrower, so that the volume and tempo of their speech and the gaiety or sorrow of certain passages were influenced to a certain extent by the randomness of the dice, although the whole text was written down and followed word for word. The music of John Cage, which was in fact the text of the play recorded on tape with some of the sounds distorted, was only played if the dice decreed it. Some analysts, such as Pierre Biner, came to the conclusion that ‘the opportunities for improvisation were far greater in this play than in The Connection’, which would seem to indicate that improvisation and chance can be confused with one another. But how much freedom do the actors in The Marrying Maiden actually have? Clearly none. Beck and Malina have given up improvisation in favour of randomness, proof yet again, if proof were needed, that the theatre is much closer to art music and, therefore, to composition and performance than to improvisation. That is one of the conclusions that can be drawn from the presence of the Freddie Redd quartet on the set or screen of The Connection.

Shirley Clarke’s screen adaptation posed other problems, particularly in the simulation of improvisation in the images themselves, rendered by abrupt misframing, jamming and off the cuff reactions by the cameramen to the events on set. She blended simulated and genuine improvisation as in the theatrical version but also added a dimension that could not really be perceived by the theatre audience, using two cameras to record the improvisation. This was 1961 and
her techniques were derived from experiments in live television, which had captured the imagination of filmmakers anxious to get closer to reality. As well as the simulations of improvisation relating to the on-set mise-en-scène, Clarke came up with other effects, such as quick, sweeping camera movements. The cinema spectator had now replaced the theatre audience as the possible ‘victim’ of The Connection’s so-called reality. And yet it is impossible for us to believe for one second in the event supposedly unfolding before our eyes – the frame is far too polished and the effects are unconvincing. The cameraman, far from giving the impression of recording an improvisation, always seems to be one step ahead of the action. In several interviews Shirley Clarke expressed her regret that the renowned cameraman Arthur J. Ornitz, who insisted on being given plenty of time to adjust the frame and lighting, had refused to produce a ‘dirty’ image to make it look like a recording caught on the fly. But this would only have added to the illusion of a ‘false’ improvisational performance, highlighting even more sharply the authenticity of the jazzmen’s improvisation. This (relative) failure sheds light on what is really at stake in cinema improvisation: a genuine acceptance of risk and the invention of images in the flow of the shoot and montage – a long way, in other words, from the posturing of The Connection.

Theatricalities

Although The Connection revealed the limitations of simulated improvisation, the fascination jazz exerted on Julian Beck and Judith Malina, and later on Shirley Clarke, illustrated their common aim: to perform or (and) record the ‘sheer present’ of creation. The experimental dimension shown here by Shirley Clarke, who was to demonstrate her familiarity with jazz again in her next films, proved to be a watershed. Many filmmakers had already explored the links between theatre and cinema, but none had so radically exposed the actor’s performance to the ordeal of both stage and screen. The Connection was soon to become a rich source of inspiration for improvising filmmakers, headed by John Cassavetes and Jacques Rivette. Like Clarke, who dismissed any notion of ‘footlights’ in her mise-en-scène, they were not so much interested in ‘the theatre’ as in a common determination to ‘integrate the theatrical into the cinema, without ever losing sight of the latter’s specificity.’ When L’Amour Fou was released in 1969, Rivette defined the distinction between the two approaches as follows:

I feel I have learned one or two things about the inherent contradiction between theatre and cinema, insofar as what one is primarily aiming to achieve, to capture in a film
is what the actor does just once, what only occurs once. The theatrical approach, on the other hand, partly entails providing the actor with an automatism, a mechanism he can resume every evening; with the stage director, the whole technique of his relationship to the actors is different; with the filmmaker, the problems all have to be addressed from the opposite angle.\textsuperscript{16}

Rivette is referring far more to the Renoir tradition, to which he adhered, than to the cinema as a whole, but in this context it does not really matter. But if this basic contradiction is true, given that he was himself at a stage in his career when he would stop at nothing to unearth ‘what only occurs once’, what could he have been seeking in the theatre?

In L’\textsc{Amour fou}, Sébastien (Jean-Pierre Kalfon), a young theatre director, is planning to stage \textsc{Andromaque} with his wife Claire (Bulle Ogier) in the role of Hermione. Claire gives up the role, however, following a row, and is replaced by Sébastien’s former wife Maria. Sébastien is so tied up in his work that he fails to notice his young wife gradually sinking into depression. During the shoot, Rivette did not get involved in the rehearsal sequences, which were held in a gymnasium, but handed over the reins to Jean-Pierre Kalfon to direct the tragedy and ‘delegated’ the filming to a television crew led by André S. Labarthe. During these lengthy rehearsal episodes, filmed in reportage mode,\textsuperscript{17} one can see the actors, text in hand, working on the phrasing and intonation and doing their utmost, by trial and error, to convey the true meaning of each line. Rivette is implementing here the premise of André Bazin, who wrote in 1951 in ‘\textsc{Théâtre et Cinéma}’:

In the past, the main concern of the filmmaker seemed to be to cover up the model’s theatrical origin, to adapt it, to dissolve it in the cinema. Not only does he now appear to be giving this up, on occasion he even systematically underscores its theatrical dimension. But if the text in essence is respected, how can things be otherwise? For the text, which is conceived in accordance with theatrical virtualities, already carries these within it. It determines the modes and style of performance, it is already theatre in the making. One cannot decide both to follow it and to divert it from the expression towards which it is hankering.\textsuperscript{18}

Rivette seems almost to take Bazin at his word, by filming actors who are principally concerned with the text, acknowledges the theatrical convention and even accentuates the distinction between theatre and cinema by opting for a 16 mm hand-held camera in the scenes that take place during rehearsals and in the wings and keeping 35 mm for the location sequences. The montage often alternated shots in both formats and at no point did he attempt to eradicate this strict dividing line. By removing Claire very early on from rehearsals, Rivette was underlining his determination to keep the drama of the couple quite sepa-
rate from Racine’s tragedy, thereby negating any simplistic attempt to find echoes between the intrigue of the play and the private life of the young couple.

The filmmaker, therefore, asked Labarthe’s crew to focus on the theatrical work-in-progress as it gradually gelled into a performance that was to be reproduced every evening, like a musician in an orchestra learning to breathe life into one of Mozart’s melodies. By placing the truly improvised element of L’AMOUR fou, in other words the relationship between Claire and Sébastien, outside the theatrical framework, Rivette had clearly learned from Bazin’s far-sighted hypotheses and the relative failures of Shirley Clarke’s film. In order to record the experience of performance itself, it was necessary to move away from the text and the constraints linked to filming requirements and allow the actors to tap into their creativity in the moment, allowing them the same kind of flexibility as the jazzmen in THE CONNECTION. The improvisational episodes in the couple’s apartment played the same role as the performances of the Freddie Redd quartet, triggering unforeseen forces that perpetuated earlier trajectories by releasing undreamed of emotions. This is the premise for understanding Rivette’s claim that the filmmaker’s task is to address all the problems ‘from the opposite angle’. In the many interviews he gave to coincide with the release of L’AMOUR fou, he reiterated that his purpose had been to invent the film, with the actors, from a pre-existing framework, convinced that his legitimate desire to grasp the unpredictable, a desire he felt should be the guiding principle of any filmmaker, could be accomplished in an improvisation that was indeed the reverse of the theatrical approach: not relying on a text that one repeats endlessly to uncover the essence of a line through a single gesture or intonation, but to set up the prerequisites for a spontaneous surge that will be captured on camera. This approach requires, as we have said, a singular, open-ended form of writing, a script-matter that will guarantee the irrevocability of the decisions made day after day and the project’s viability and yet pave the way for improvised creation. The musicians in THE CONNECTION knew what theme they were going to play before they sat down in front of their instruments, the melody, chord structure and harmonic sequences. In short, all the preliminary requirements for improvisation. In L’AMOUR fou, the improvisation depends on the meticulous preparation of scenes whose outcome is determined in conjunction with the actors themselves, as they live through the gradual disintegration of the relationship between Sébastien and Claire. At the end of each day’s shooting, Rivette, Kalfon and Bulle Ogier would get together for a debriefing session and would then prepare the following day’s scenes together. The words and gestures were almost always left to the actors’ powers of invention and response, a method used in many other improvised films and achieved with consummate success in Suwa’s UN COUPLE PARFAIT.
Rivette knew that if he wanted to obtain unmitigated commitment from the rest of the crew he needed to build up a close-knit community, along the lines of a theatre company. This theatre company atmosphere, although it tended towards idealisation, came very much to the fore in the sequences directed by Labarthe, which emphasised the impression of a totally dedicated ‘theatrical’ community – a rare quality on film sets – by means of images featuring conversations between the actors during rehearsals, life in the wings, an overall belief in collective creation, shared meals, tension, conflict and the tenuous dividing line between work and private life. Rivette used this ‘documentary’ approach to the theatre to highlight his own cinematic approach, designed to inspire improvisation from his actors. By keeping the apartment sequences for the end, he was able to take full advantage of the bonds that had been forged during rehearsals and in the sequences shot in the wings and over meals, and use them to nourish the moments of improvisation that lend such impact to the closing sequences. In this second phase he was not so much shooting a fictional story as making another reportage, not on the theatre this time but on a fictional work-in-progress stemming from collective improvisation. Making the most of the strong ties that the group work had generated, Rivette turned once again to the simple theatrical device of unity of time and place. The actors performed in a circumscribed area in which their inspiration was not limited by complex camera movements or staging constraints, conjuring up the early 1930s RKO musicals starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, a favourite reference of Rivette’s. Unlike the extravagant geometric figures of Busby Berkeley, which turned bodies into objects, Astaire and Rogers remained faithful to a face-on presentation à l’italienne, the camera’s only objective being to record the fluidity of the dancing and the unfettered movements of the body.19 In similar vein, Rivette opted for a mise-en-scène that despite being intellectually elaborate freed the actors from the cumbersome constraints of the cinematic device. This patently brings us back to the tradition of Renoir, who never stopped delving into the specificities of the theatre to reinvent his own cinema and longed for a technique that would be the actor’s sole prerogative. As Jouvet put it,

in the theatre you are performing; in the cinema you have already performed. This is Rivette in a nutshell. The cinema brings the security of a finished product, the record of what has already gone, it is a world of ghosts [...]. Theatre is the opposite, it is the peril of the moment, the here and now of gesture and speech, the physical presence of bodies. This is why Rivette has always used theatre to produce cinema. To put the ‘once upon a time’ in the present tense.20

Although this quote may be excessive, it does highlight the way Rivette deliberately built the links between his cinema and the theatre on two utopias. The first relates to a conception of the theatre as a necessary ‘peril of the moment’, which
finds itself challenged at every performance. No such thing applies to a discipline in which the work carried out with the actors demonstrates the evidence of rehearsal: accidents are as rare as in a concert of art music, in which the perfectly assimilated theatrical or musical text guarantees the continuity of the performance. The second utopia illustrates the desire to make the film actor something other than a ghost, a genuine, impossible ‘presence’. As Bazin said, ‘the cinema can accept all the realities [of the theatre] apart from presence.’ It is perhaps this unattainable reality of presence that improvising filmmakers are looking for in the idealised ritual of a theatre that is merely an experience encapsulated in the frailty of the instant, heralding truth. It is not a case of filming theatre, but of transposing theatrical effects beyond the stage, in the case of L’AMOUR FOU the couple’s apartment, a performance venue that has turned into a theatrical set, filmed by a camera that captures the actors’ every gesture and every suggestion. Improvisation to Rivette, Cassavetes or Rozier is the theatricalisation of everyday life, which pervades, for instance, the sequences featuring the intimate exchanges between Sébastien and Claire. Two types of improvisation coexist here, one of which focuses on the impulsive body, while the other, less spectacular but more perilous, highlights the dialogue. The excesses of the body are the only thing at stake in the scenes in which Sébastien lacerates his clothes with a razor blade and then takes a hammer to the door, with Claire’s help. These extravagant performances, which were all the rage in the 1960s, are juxtaposed here with the sequences in which their increasingly strained relationship finds its expression in an exchange of words and gestures, such as the scene in which they are lying on the bed playing with a roly-poly toy, or the one in which Sébastien, oblivious to Claire’s desire for change, listens obstinately to the same long-playing record. Inventing gestures and words enables, or even forces, the actors to get so involved in the situation that the spectator, who is almost physically involved in this unique and unpredictable event, has the impression that the bodies have real presence. If theatre is an ‘actualisation’ of cinema, as Alain Ménil puts it, then improvisation is a radical manifestation of this ‘actualisation of possibles that [the cinema] can only explore and demonstrate with accuracy by theatrical means.’

These theatrical means came into play once again in 1978 in Cassavetes’ Opening Night, a film which has much in common with L’AMOUR FOU. Here we witness the rehearsals of THE SECOND WOMAN, featuring Myrtle Gordon (Gena Rowlands) in the title role, a famous actress who is going through severe depression following the death of Nancy Stein, a young fan who was involved in an accident as she left the theatre. Myrtle’s relationship with those around her becomes increasingly difficult following hallucinations featuring Nancy’s ghost, which render her incapable of giving an accurate portrayal of the ageing woman in THE SECOND WOMAN. Opening Night and L’AMOUR FOU therefore
share the same basic premise: to show how the outcome of a theatrical project can be endangered by the existential torments of an actress. Whereas Rivette, however, was satisfied with using Sébastien’s role to suggest the repercussions of Claire’s malaise on rehearsals, Cassavetes focused far more radically on the lack of dividing line between life and theatre. Myrtle becomes increasingly disturbed, her brittle performance exacerbated by her dependence on alcohol. She modifies her role constantly during the rehearsals and performances preceding the New York première of The Second Woman, forcing the rest of the cast to adapt to unforeseen situations. The new rehearsals set up in order to get back to the original brief (although this is never clearly identified) only add to the problems, culminating in Myrtle’s disappearance before the Opening Night of the title.

During their working sessions, the actors never refer to a pre-existing text and the audience is unable to identify the actual plot of The Second Woman, a play which seems to rely on a number of situations specially written for the film, with no dialogue as such. Unlike Rivette in L’Amour fou, Cassavetes repudiates the distinction between classical theatre and a cinematic theatricality, which comes into its own off the set. Rivette believed that theatre stemmed from an established work that the director should follow, whereas film, as a recorded performance, could throw off this dependence. He therefore saw the original play in terms of a musical score ‘that one could only “adapt” by abandoning the original work and replacing it with another’, 24 to quote Bazin’s comments on theatrical texts, whereas writing for the cinema came far closer to a chord sequence in a jazz theme, methodically structured but designed to encourage improvised contributions. Cassavetes punctured this dichotomy, in a brilliant consecration of our intuition regarding L’Amour fou. It was not theatre itself that interested him, but the creative process it generated while breaking away from what constituted its identity: the gradual structuring of a performance designed for reiteration. The constantly shifting dialogue not only affects the text but the staging of The Second Woman, which has to comply with Myrtle’s unbridled imagination. The play no longer represents an accomplished work by an omnipotent director but a work-in-progress, at the mercy of the uncertainties of a constantly shifting present. In Opening Night there is no original work imposing its words on the actor but a creative process built on quicksand, which constantly relies on the invention of a ‘being for whom it is impossible to perform without bringing along an element of its vital energy’ as Thierry Jousse 25 put it. This porous frontier between life and performance reveals much about the way Cassavetes’ cinematic approach feeds on improvisation without ever acknowledging it as a creative method. Improvisation here is a cornerstone of a particular concept of cinema.
Cassavetes’ determination to show the stage actors evolving in a single place and venue is underlined by numerous shots of the rapt, delighted audience, blissfully ignorant of the torments and uncertainties affecting Myrtle. But the amalgamation between this fictional audience and the cinema audience is just an illusion. All that matters is the impression of ‘sheer present’, nourished by a given theatrical situation, but most of all by the chaotic inner turmoil of an actress, depicted in the highly cinematic oscillation between the stage and the private world of Myrtle and her entourage. The unusual slant on this confusion between life and art turns OPENING NIGHT into a ‘documentary’ on a working method designed to lead the actors towards a truth rooted in theatrical performance, but a theatrical performance that no longer depends on the stage. As Thierry Jousse says, ‘What Cassavetes essentially retains from the theatre is its theatricality, in other words the hyper-expressivity of the body, the gesture, the word, the work on posture and its implementation through performance, the essence of theatre in a sense, but theatre imbued with the everyday.’

This theatricality, far removed from naturalism, from the slightest connivance with ‘hysterical’ bodies or with the famous method of the Actors Studio, uncompromisingly defined by Louis Marcorelles as the ‘intoxication of the actor by his role’, must allow the actor to be overtaken by his own body. To Cassavetes, improvisation was one of the ways to achieve this, by freeing the actor from a ‘composition’ of predetermined gestures imposed by the director or springing from a tried and tested technique. This is what OPENING NIGHT posits in its portrayal of the simulated improvisations caused by Myrtle’s erratic behaviour but also in its reliance on moments of genuine improvisation. In the theatrical arena, Myrtle’s unmanageable excesses underline the spur of the moment aspect of creation that underpins the character’s own discovery of its true nature, a revelation that can only spring from the apparent overlap between actor and role, according to Cassavetes. The method is laid out without the slightest taboo before the cinema audience, who literally get a ringside view of the agitation and chaos created by Myrtle’s outbursts.

Jousse’s definition of ‘theatricality’ provides a possible clue to deciphering these moments of improvisation, the theater stage accentuating the theatricality of other spaces such as the wings, Myrtle’s vast empty apartment or the bedroom of Manny Victor (Ben Gazzara), the director of THE SECOND WOMAN. In a magnificent sequence, Manny’s wife Dorothy (Zohra Lampert) expresses her anguish following a phone conversation in which her husband and the desperate Myrtle seem to be involved in an amorous exchange. Zorah Lampert improvises a series of gestures simulating the physical impact of a succession of imaginary blows, drawing on choreography reminiscent of experiments in contemporary dance. Many years later, in a filmed conversation with Gena Rowlands, Gazzara confirmed the shot’s improvised nature: whereas he was only
expecting his partner to express her emotions facially, he suddenly found himself forced to react to the unforeseen convulsions of her contorted body. This was a way of theatricalising the character’s feelings in an initially banal sequence depicting the tension between the couple, theatrically staged in an enclosed space, with its entrances and exits. The most arresting improvisation, however, took place on the real set, when Myrtle, drunk out of her mind on the dreaded opening night in New York, reinvented an exchange between her stage partner Cassavetes (in the role of her ex-husband), and Cassavetes the film director (her husband in real life). This long sequence, shot before an audience and improvised with no preparation, springs from the complicity linking the two actors. Excess is the watchword here: the shouts, laughter, leaps, expressions and gestures, as well as the games directed ‘live’ by Cassavetes. This ‘theatricalisation of theatre’, in which feelings seem to burst from the eloquence of the bodies, sums up the essence of what is being played out by these ageing characters, increasingly riddled by self-doubt. Physical energy is a desperate but unflinching reaction to the lucidity of the words, which express exhaustion and relinquishment. Gena Rowlands revealed her surprise and emotion when Cassavetes suddenly admitted in mid-take his fear of the passing years: ‘I’m getting old’ he says and then, after a long silence, ‘What do we do about that?’ The scene ends a few minutes later with an incredible gestural composition, an awkward choreography that brings out the physical closeness of the two protagonists. There is nothing improper about it, everything is transmitted through performance and it is on stage that Myrtle manages to rebuild herself, in the dizzying blurring of reality and fiction that characterises the Cassavetes approach to improvisation. The closing shots of Opening Night show the little party given on stage to celebrate the première, in front of the cameras and in the presence of the couple’s friends, including Peter Falk, Seymour Cassel and Peter Bogdanovich: theatre, cinema and life have come together in a single shot.

By revealing a few elements of his ‘method’ in Opening Night, from the starting point of the links between theatre and cinema creation, Cassavetes not only unveils the improvisational aspect of each of his films but equally the nature of this improvisation, based on a theatricality that highlights the underlying forces at work in everyday life. One can analyse several improvised sequences from Shadows, Faces, A Woman Under the Influence, Husbands and The Killing of a Chinese Bookie in the light of the excesses, theatricality and powers of simulation shown in Opening Night. One can also observe the significance of the basic devices used to create conditions of unity of time and place, such as those that prevail in the theatre. In fact, this applies to most of the filmmakers studied here and not merely to the dance sequences mentioned earlier: Nobuhiro Suwa in the hotel bedroom in Un couple parfait or in the apartment in M/Other; Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche in the mosque sequence of
Dernier Maquis\textsuperscript{32} or in the more obvious example of Bled Number One, but also Maurice Pialat in the family apartment in À nos amours; or, Jacques Rozier in the holiday let in Du côté d’Orouët, not to mention Jean Rouch, whose cinematic ambitions may well have grown out of the discovery of the ritual of the Haouka sect in Les Maîtres fous, a ritual whose theatricality and improvisational dimension is obvious to all.

But, ultimately, the way the actors are directed in improvised cinema distances us from theatrical performance. In Opening Night, Cassavetes manages to reach a form of truth by making Myrtle a disruptive influence. We are leaving the theatre performance, with its connotations of predictability, and moving to the one-off, recorded event: we are leaving the theatre for the cinema. Through improvisation, Myrtle introduces chaos and anarchy as creative forces, forcing the rest of the cast to improvise in turn and react on the spot to unprecedented solicitations. On the surface, this attentiveness to the performance of one’s fellow actors takes us back to the theatre. We know that the stage requires the active presence of the actors, unlike the ‘classic’ cinema, in which actors can perform without ever actually communicating, particularly through the age-old angle/reverse angle technique.\textsuperscript{33} But improvisation requires a particular degree of concentration given the unpredictability of one’s partner’s performance, which, in turn, demands an appropriate response. Opening Night obviously springs to mind here but also the mosque scene in Dernier Maquis: however theatrical its device, it slips away from the performance – the religious ritual – when one of the workers gets up to protest against the boss’ possible abuse of power. The strength of the sequence springs from the initial surprise and then the reaction of the other protagonists, who have been given no prior warning. In improvisation, the purpose of the cinematic mise-en-scène is therefore to upset the quasi-theatrical device so that it acquires the status of an event. ‘The real comes when reality breaks away from the rules’ said André S. Labarthe:\textsuperscript{34} and here improvisation provides the means to attain the real by breaking away from the rules of the theatre.

Montages

Theoretically, montage is the decisive fork in the road between the cinematic act of creation and its theatrical counterpart. The various ramifications we have just seen, however, lead one to evoke the possibility of a concept of montage that is specific to improvised film, reflecting the culmination of choices made at each stage of the process, from the first draft of the script to the shoot itself. Writing in ‘Théâtre et Cinéma’ about Jean Cocteau’s own screen adaptation of his play
Les Parents terribles (1948), Bazin refers to the découpage in the following terms:

The notion of ‘shot’ finally dissolves all together. Only the ‘framing’ is left, the ephemeral crystallisation of a constant, pervasive reality. Cocteau is fond of repeating that he conceived his film in ‘16 mm’, ‘conceived’ being the apposite word, because he would certainly have had difficulty producing it in such a reduced format. The spectator is supposed to feel totally involved in the event, not by means of the depth of field as with Welles (or Renoir) but by virtue of the eye’s diabolical swiftness, which seems for the first time to be at one with the rhythm of our attention.35

Bazin attributes the shot’s possible dissolution to the unity of time and place and, therefore, to the film’s theatrical origin, and he goes on to examine its impact:

Although he respected the traditional découpage at a technical level [...], Cocteau gave it an original slant by only using third category shots;36 in other words, the spectator’s viewpoint and his alone; but an extraordinarily perspicacious spectator, who has been granted an all-seeing omnipotence. The logical and descriptive analysis, along with the character’s point of view, are practically eliminated and only that of the witness remains. The ‘subjective camera’ is finally a reality but it is back to front, not because of some puerile identification of the spectator with the character through the intermediary of the camera, as in La Dame du lac, but on the contrary through the witness’ pitiless exteriority. The camera is finally the spectator and nothing but the spectator.37

Bazin suggests rethinking the montage from the angle of what appears to be a recording of a play; but a recording that appears, on the one hand, to respect the unity of time and place (the theatre) and, on the other, to guarantee through its specific characteristics the ‘cinematic outcome’ of Cocteau’s project. He stresses the most notable of these specific characteristics as being the presence of a point of view, which is external to the action and assimilated to that of an attentive spectator constantly surprised by events.

This text is important for two reasons: the first relates to the link drawn by Bazin between the film’s theatrical origin and an external viewpoint, which he associates with the ‘subjective camera’; the second, which is an offshoot of the first, concerns the reassessment of the rules of montage. In improvised cinema, one finds both the ‘temptation of theatre’ and the cinematic freedom that emanates from this subjective camera, even if the dramatic role that Bazin confers upon it is lacking. Filming improvisation precludes the slightest revelation without the characters’ knowledge, because the cameraman’s aim is never to be ‘ahead’ of the events he is shooting. Thus, the present hypothesis takes Bazin’s one step further, giving it a slightly ‘leftist’ flavour: cinema improvisation de-
pends upon filmic choices that dictate new methods of montage through their concrete links with the theatre. But the spectator called upon by improvisation does not have ‘an all-seeing omnipotence’ as Bazin claims. On the contrary, he needs to relinquish his expectations in order to fully experience the work-in-progress, and be constantly prepared for ‘the authenticity of the lived experience to burst forth in the moment.’ This quest for a new spectator is simply the ultimate culmination of the improvised project, the purpose of the montage being to create and maintain the requisite openness on this journey toward the unforeseeable.

All the studies devoted to Pialat, Cassavetes or Rozier stress the liberties they took with the rules of continuity editing that had been imposed in classic cinema, which had already been challenged by Rossellini among others. This was not done in a spirit of rebellion or disavowal, but out of sheer necessity. The norms relating to match cuts or scales of shot in the context of the constraints of narrative continuity could no longer apply in cases where filming imperatives had rendered such a lexicon totally obsolete. Improvisation radicalised and generalised Bazin’s posit: it was not only the whole notion of the shot that was challenged but the notions of framing, time, space and dialogue. By acknowledging filming as the recording of a one-off event by an external spectator, whose ‘eye’s diabolical swiftness seems for the first time to be at one with the rhythm of our attention,’ new, rewarding possibilities are opened up. If the montage process often seems long and complex in improvised cinema, it is because it condenses to a large extent the choices that in classic cinema would already have been made at the writing stage, not to mention in the shooting-script or in the storyboard if it existed. To improvisers, the potential of filming was often considerable because the shot sequences did not depend on an inflexible continuity. But although the approach of these improvising filmmakers varied, it was always determined, at least in part, by the ‘subjective camera’ as defined by Bazin, an exteriority that many fundamentally different filmmakers were to share.

In Faces Cassavetes’ primary aim was certainly to shoot the sequences in continuity, his sole priority being to record the erratic ballet of bodies that seemed to be unfolding before his eyes. The spontaneity afforded by the lightweight equipment allowed him to tailor the movements of the camera to those of the actors; this did away with the traditional frame, each image existing purely in the flow of the shot, with no pretence at autonomy. The theatrical space was annihilated in turn by the plethora of close-ups of faces. Bazin seems to have predicted their role in another analysis of the relationship between theatre and cinema, this time encapsulated by Dreyer’s La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc (1928): ‘The systematic use of close-ups and unusual angles,’ he wrote,
is effectively aimed at abolishing the space once and for all [...]. It is through this intermediary that Dreyer ceases to have nothing in common with the theatre and one might even say with Man. The more Dreyer drew exclusively on human expression, the more he needed to convert it into nature. Let us make no mistake, however, this prodigious fresco of heads is the exact opposite of an actors’ film: it is a documentary of faces.\textsuperscript{39}

This astute analysis could just as well be applied to the aptly named Faces, in which Cassavetes, mesmerised by the changing expressions on his actors’ faces, seems to have been driven by a ‘recording frenzy’.\textsuperscript{40} The dialogues, whose implicitly regimented exchanges structure the rhythm of the montage, were powerless here to resist the paroxysm of the bodies, and lost their dramatic and narrative driving force. In Faces, Cassavetes, therefore, managed to condense into a single film all the new expressive avenues offered by improvisation on both sides of the camera.

All the films mentioned up to now show affinities with a form of documentary writing that is as demanding as that of Jean Rouch or Johan van der Keuken. The subjective outlook, which Bazin compares to that of a witness, underlines once more the common ground between improvised and documentary film. It is not surprising, therefore, that the keys to montage provided by van der Keuken are equally instructive in both cases:

Yet again it is all about defining the film, not in terms of what we were aiming to do but in terms of what is actually in our hands, the filmic material [...]. And almost all my montage work takes this autonomy of the filmed image into account. I think this is where I differ from many other filmmakers: ultimately, the form of the film, or the way it comes across, is never the implementation of a plan; it is a process, and each stage takes it back to the beginning of that process.\textsuperscript{41}

Although it may not always be applied so radically, this first-hand account helps us to understand why all improvising filmmakers take such an active part in the montage: ‘The more freedom we allow the image, the more space we have to create complex links between the images’, van der Keuken continues. Montage does not mean choosing between the paths opened up by these images and imposing just one. On the contrary, trajectories have to be found that will leave the multiple potential avenues of interpretation wide open. There is an element of ‘incompleteness’ in these films; an element of uncertainty that is the cornerstone of improvised creation: allowing actors to improvise is to acknowledge a relationship with the world in which astonishment is a driving force. The montage must, then, be done in such a way as to astonish the spectator too, letting him find his own way through this living matter, these movements of images that attest to a project that ‘despite becoming an entirely auton-
omous entity, completely different from the initial idea, nevertheless answers all
the criteria that existed latently from the beginning." An improvised film is
structured, at least in part, like one of van der Keuken’s documentaries, with
the creation of a coherent work only stemming from the moment the filmic mat-
ter actually reaches the editing bench. Unlike classic cinema, the improvising
filmmaker therefore structures his film after the event, gradually finding his way
through the maze of rushes resulting from the prerequisite plethora of shots and
lengthy decantation that characterise what is really more of a life experience
than a shoot.

This does not imply, however, that only blanket editing options exist. Film-
makers have succeeded in adapting the nature of Bazin’s external witness to
their own aesthetic universe. In Un couple parfait, whose treatment of con-
finement is very close to that of Les Parents terribles, Suwa rigorously ap-
plies the principle of the external witness, paying great attention to the capital
question of his position. Suwa’s single, fixed viewpoint, from which he very sel-
dom wavers, is countered by Cassavetes’ multitudinous outlooks in each se-
quency of Faces, external outlooks that convey a desperate awareness of a re-
 lentless passing of time that the dizzying shots are trying in vain to retain. These
two conceptions of montage, which represent two poles, coexist in most impro-
vised films. In Un couple parfait once again, a small, highly mobile camera
takes over from Suwa’s normal static camera on a number of occasions, delving
suddenly into the innermost facets of the characters through close-ups and ex-
cessively grainy images. These faces recall those in Cassavetes’ 16 mm Faces
but they are also reminiscent of the final shot of Jean Seberg in À bout de souf-
fle, which is itself a reference to Harriet Andersson’s nod to the spectator in
Monika (Ingmar Bergman, 1952). Through these brutal incursions, caused by
bringing the camera as close as possible to the bodies in sequences that focus
on distance and duration, one can clearly perceive the two conceptions of time
at play: on the one hand, dilation, conveyed by the hotel bedroom in Un couple
parfait, immobile and suspended in time; and, on the other, consumption, ex-
pressed in the relentless movements of the bodies in Faces.

Between these two ultimately classic poles, the desire to lend shape to the
succession of improvised episodes without betraying their impetuousity was to
give rise to a number of partly unprecedented forms of montage. Although it
would be futile to catalogue these into some kind of illusory inventory, a com-
mon bias, or perhaps even a necessity, associated with a kind of ‘modernity’,
appears to guide these filmmakers: to show the work-in-progress and willingly
reveal to the spectator the traces of the creative process on the completed work.
As Rivette put it, ‘you can only hope that the completed film still bears in a
corner the traces of its dangerous crossing, its uncertainties, its illuminations –
even if, at the end of the journey, you come to realise that you have been going
round in circles.’ One of the distinctive aspects of improvisation, which tends to contract composition and execution in the moment, is to entertain the notion of hesitations, accidents, loss of control or even failures as components of a creative act for whom completion is not the be-all and end-all. Much to the disgust of musical purists, jazz recordings actually featured the snap of the keys of the wind instruments, throats being cleared and the soloists’ heavy breathing, all intolerable manifestations of the body in action. Rather than exclude these traces of the work-in-progress, improving filmmakers, like jazz musicians, chose to integrate them into their language, recognising them as cornerstones of their artistic expression. Thus, every improvised film has some connection with the workshop, the ‘dream of the film’s perfect adherence to its shoot’, as Emmanuel Burdeau said with reference to Rozier’s cinema.

The nature of these traces varied according to the world, background and technical conditions of the shoot. Cassavetes, like Rouch, Rozier and Pialat, preferred to highlight the overall effect to the detriment of details they considered trivial, which could range from an involuntary look to camera to a blurred image, a microphone in the field or a second attempt at a speech by an actor struggling with his lines. All that mattered was the movement of the sequence and the truth that emerged from the images, which carried far more impact than the technical imperfections. Some had no hesitation in inserting two versions of the same sequence, one after the other, on the grounds that it was impossible to choose between two improvised variations of a single theme. Pialat’s LA MAISON DES BOIS was a case in point, as were the films of Cassavetes, who regarded montage as an adventure. He edited three versions of HUSBANDS, for instance, each featuring one of the protagonists in the leading role, before going on to compile a more polyphonic version, the only available version in circulation today. Suwa used strikingly obvious cuts with no change of angle to emphasise, in a single sequence, the montage of fragments chosen from different shots, in order to show the work-in-progress. And Ameur-Zaïmeche, in BLED NUMBER ONE, shot a performance by singer Rodolphe Burger at dawn on an Algerian hillock with the microphone and amplifier clearly in field. This sequence, which has no narrative justification, was improvised without the slightest premeditation during the shoot, but it was rapidly inserted into the montage and played a decisive role in the structure of the film.

The ability of improvising filmmakers to innovate during the montage reached its apotheosis in what appears to be a radical inversion of the priority given to images as opposed to sound in the classic cinema. For the sequence with the sailing boat in DU CÔTÉ D’OROUËT, Rozier had to condense a whole day’s improvised shooting into ten minutes. He collated the images with total disregard for the temporal sequence, the light consequently varying from one shot to the next. The only guiding thread turned out to be a realisation – that no
doubt corresponded to Rozier’s underlying purpose – which gradually manifested itself in the sight but particularly in the sound of the rushes. The aural coincidence between the laughter, the childlike alarm of the young women and the sexual act; the fear and pleasure, nervousness and joy, filmed together in a kind of self-abandon that thanks to improvisation was not simulated but genuinely experienced. For the montage, Rozier therefore took the highly evocative live sound as his starting point, and it was the sound that determined the continuity. The filmic matter took shape through sound, and the images merely served as an accompaniment, showing obvious disregard for the ‘accuracy’ of the match cuts. The second example of a montage ‘by ear’ is QUATRE JOURS À OCÔEE, a documentary by Pascale Ferran depicting a jazz recording. From the very beginning, Ferran rejected the idea of voice-overs or on-screen conversations with the musicians or technicians; she structured QUATRE JOURS À OCÔEE around the music and exchanges that were contained in the thirty hours of rushes (over seven hours shooting a day on average). It took her four and a half months and eight hours a day to reduce those thirty hours to a two-hour film. She applied Rozier’s ‘method’ to the entire film, creating the first montage without the images, simply with the soundtrack. Without betraying the chronology, she built her film by ear, interweaving a complex network of morning set-ups, discussions, rehearsals, musical performances and collective listening sessions in which, like the screening of rushes at the end of the day’s shoot, the modest crew hears the record gradually coming together from the chaos of the shots. As in Rozier’s fiction, listening was the first step in rendering the dimension of a ‘sheer present’. This highly physical perception of the rhythmic beat revealed the existence of a ‘musicality’ rooted in the upturning of the hierarchy between sight and sound.

One could find innumerable other examples to show how improvised cinema has paved the way for a new kind of interplay between continuity and discontinuity, and explored other rhythms of montage based on blocks of autonomous sequences, fragments and surges, elongation and condensation, and on new channels of transmission between the eye and the ear. During the montage, the director is less concerned with the completed composition than with the possibility of returning to his improvisation, so that he can make intuitive choices, eliminate endlessly and react spontaneously. These figures also mark the break from the formal perfection of classicism, in favour of a conception of creation in which the traces of the painter’s gesture, the marks of the sculptor’s tool and the ‘dirty’ sounds of the musicians create physical imprints that then become an integral part of the work. The composers of free jazz were the first to blaze a trail, creating their groundswell in black musical history by drawing on the blues, and consequently on song, to bring about their melodic, harmonic and rhythmical revolution. Returning to the theatrical source – the blues of the cin-
ema – may well have had the same effect on improvising filmmakers, guaranteeing the primary presence of Man in putting the art of cinema to the test.