The fruitful exchange between Pascale Ferran’s small film crew and the Tony Hymas/Sam Rivers duo brings to an end, for the time being at least, a study in which music has played an invaluable role in examining the diversity of the modes of existence of improvisation in an art of the image that seems at first glance to be fairly indifferent to such practices. The determined incursions of jazz, theatre and dance, and the equally stimulating but rarer manifestations in painting and sculpture, have highlighted the singular nature of film and the consequent need for a specific approach. Although the desire for improvisation seems to have been a constant for some filmmakers, the cumbersome nature of the ‘cinematographic machine’ did not allow them the requisite freedom for true in the moment invention. The cinema, however, which owes its existence to the discovery of a mechanical system for recording images, was quite naturally open to technical developments leading to the gradual introduction of lighter equipment. Handier cameras, reliable live sound and sensitive film proved to be tremendous assets for directors aspiring to close in on the realities of the world. Technical progress gave these filmmakers the concrete means to achieve their ambitions, although some, such as Jean Rouch, André Coutant and Jean-Pierre Beauviala, actually pre-empted the engineers’ research.

Theoretical hypotheses, deduced from analyses based not only on frequent descriptions of specific sequences but on scrupulous attention to the genesis of the films themselves, contributed towards defining the works in question. The aim was not to hail improvisation as the panacea for praxis but to show that by opting for improvisation, unprecedented forms could come to light, in which new figures, rhythms and gestures would be revealed. However different their worlds, improvising filmmakers all share a desire to be surprised and to fleetingly lose control. Although they never lose sight of the guiding principle that guarantees the consistency of their œuvre, their readiness to explore an unusual idea, follow an unexpected path or take up an unforeseen initiative demonstrates a conviction that the uncertainties of the journey are just as important as the ultimate destination. Improvisation has proved to be a means of exploring the singularity of the individual and his place as a member of a collective whole. All the films under review feature encounters within human communities and the difficulties of expressing feelings and fulfilling desires. This focus on the complexity of the human being formed a bond between such disparate filmmakers as Jean Rouch, whose ethnological ambitions once stimulated Johan
van der Keuken and went on to inspire Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, Philippe Fauccon and his films devoted to immigrant communities, Samuel Collardey and his face-to-face portrait of a teenager and farmer in L’Apprenti, John Cassavetes and his singular encounters in Faces and Husbands, Jacques Rivette and Nobuhiro Suwa and their painful delving into disintegrating couples in L’Amour fou and Un couple parfait, and Jacques Rozier and the crazy odysseys of his everyday heroes. ‘All improvisation,’ writes Christian Béthune, ‘stems from shared story/ies [. . .]. It is never a turning-in on oneself but a transcendence into otherness.’

It found its ultimate expression in the tensions between Tony Hymas and Sam Rivers, which found their outlet through virtuoso jousts of improvisation, captured for posterity by the intrigued but apprehensive cameras of Pascale Ferran and Katell Djian.

Although a common preoccupation with human beings is not enough to make improvising filmmakers part of the same imaginary family, the elements that have been developed here all point to a continuity, an unwavering obstinacy in the search for a cinema that is no longer constrained by technical considerations, a cinema that is attentive to the world around it, at one with life. There is not a single improvising filmmaker who does not cite Renoir as a source of inspiration, or even as a model – Renoir who was the first to proclaim with clear-sightedness and lucidity his belief in a cinema that had the capacity to express the truth of people and things, even if this meant sacrificing the seamless fluidity of movement, the reassuringly linear quality of the storyline and the perfectly controlled equilibrium of the shot. The refusal to submit to the ideal of formal perfection is a prerequisite for exploring ‘this phenomenon of the body [which] from an intellectual point of view is as superior to our conscience and spirit, to our ways of thinking, feeling and wanting, as algebra is superior to multiplication tables.’

By releasing the actor from the inhibiting determination to control that characterised the disciples of ‘conceptual’ cinema, these filmmakers released undreamed of physical powers, ranging from the invention of gestures or figures to an outburst of far more devastating Dionysian energies. It seems conceivable in this context to use the starting point of a shared taste for improvisation and refer to a ‘Renoir filiation’ spanning the entire history of the talkies, with Rossellini acting as first ‘relay’, followed by Rouch, Rozier and Rivette, who in turn handed the flame over to a vibrant contemporary cinema in which the most creative protagonists are Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche and Nobuhiro Suwa. By launching new creative gestures, improvisation has also contributed to the emergence of a new audience, whose involvement in the moving images has changed form. A witness to events that are apparently being invented before its eyes, it has forged a relationship with film based henceforth on an encounter, a possible exchange, a relay that harks back to the audience reactions to jazz, peppering the soloist’s phrase with a gesture or an onomato-
poeia. By refusing to be permanently one step ahead of their audience, and in stark contrast to the hypnotic surrender inherent in classic cinema, improvising filmmakers are offering an alternative to the jubilatory manipulation of Alfred Hitchcock or the occasionally perverse games of Abbas Kiarostami, an alternative whose watchword could well be *shared astonishment*.

The choice of improvisation is linked to a principle of uncertainty, outlined by Johan van der Keuken:

The traditional narrative starts out from the assumption that we are already familiar with the reality we are about to depict, that we know the people we are going to show in the film. But for me and some others it’s the reverse: we start out by feeling that we don’t know anything, and finally the moving images are what we retain as knowable of reality. They are moments of contact, of knowledge, the only ones that we have been able to retain from the reality which faces us. In general, my films do not comprise a series of images that form part of a presupposed whole but are instants from which the audience can form an image.³

All improvising filmmakers, to a greater or lesser degree, have shared the conviction that the sensible is a springboard for the idea – knowledge stems from a confrontation with the unknown and the film itself is merely the trace of a shoot that was a lived experience in its own right. Unsurprisingly this raises the question of the distinction between fiction and documentary filmmakers. It does not matter what strategies are called upon by the improvisers, they are all structured around the conviction that the possibility of improvisation depends on a number of methods derived from the documentary. Rozier’s eels, the actors directing a scene from the inside, Pialat springing up in the middle of a sequence: the aim is always to destabilise the fiction and produce unforeseen effects of reality. The improvisation option, even if it is only partial, pervades every aspect of the shoot, the written moments having to appear with the same spontaneity as the least premeditated ones. One could see this as a form of ‘contamination’, the writing inevitably taking account of each actor’s individual qualities in order to allow for the appropriation of a situation or dialogue. Out of this possible appropriation, a guarantee of freedom for all the protagonists, a collective spontaneity will emerge, transcending the filmmaker’s fantasy to become a strategy of mise-en-scène. All kinds of elements come together to implement this strategy, turning it into a method: open-ended writing, a lack of shooting script, the creation of companies, the isolation of the shoot, a mix of professional and inexperienced actors, the tricks involving actors ‘directing from the inside’ and a unity of time and space that conjures up the theatre.

For both fictional and documentary filmmakers, the next step is to invent a new fiction from the montage, using the material that has been recorded and thereby making improvisation the matter of composition. The diversity of the
resulting forms is related to a necessary adaptation to a composite matter that only occasionally meets the traditional demands of montage, in terms of inserts, rhythm or narrative logic. Formal inventiveness, a hallmark of filmmakers such as Rouch, Cassavetes, Rozier or Ameur-Zaïmeche, is, therefore, a consequence of the initial decision to choose improvisation as a method. By translating improvised proliferation into the montage, structures emerged that shook up – at times violently – the somewhat fossilised rules of classic cinema. Improvisation is undoubtedly a method, but by introducing an element of the unknown it is a method that never aspires toward completion, as each moment is potentially a new beginning: improvising means trying and ‘trying is trying again. It means experimenting through other paths, other links, other montages’, writes Georges Didi-Huberman. The position of tireless investigator that defines all improvisers can be seen in the editor’s gestures, and in the end the forms that arise from the accumulation of imperfect images can only be impure in turn.

Acknowledging that approximation or detours, even a brief loss of direction, are inherent in achieving their aim, however, in no way implies relinquishing all formal ambition. The boldest montage experiments, which notably include Moi, un Noir, Faces, L’Amour fou, À nos amours, Amsterdam Global Village and Un couple parfait, represent unprecedented sources for decoding reality. Other types of beauty then take hold and emotion is no longer simply a reaction to architectural balance or harmony of line; it can be triggered by discord, an inopportune movement, a juxtaposition of rhythms or atmospheres, an unfinished image. Improvising in the cinema means acknowledging the power of the forces of disorder experienced by Jackson Pollock in Watery Paths (1947), by Robert Frank in his series of photographs entitled The Americans (1958), and of course by the jazzmen, from the first manifestations of New Orleans music to the salutary outrageousness of free jazz a few decades later. Each of these unique endeavours provides a key to understanding one’s epoch and unveiling its richness and complexity. These artists are not attempting to innovate or be part of their time at all costs: ‘Contemporariness’, said Giorgio Agamben,

[…] is a peculiar relation with one’s own time, which adheres to it and at once distances itself from it; it is in other words a relationship to time which clings to it through a disjunction and an anachronism. Those who fully coincide with the epoch are not contemporary because they cannot see. They cannot fix their eyes on it.

There is undoubtedly an anachronistic element in a practice that disregards the demands of a world increasingly dependent on speed and machines. To live the present to the full without overlooking the degree of contestation and resistance that accompanies any desire for freedom is the ambition of these artists who played a major role in the aesthetic mutations of their century without ever giving into the sirens of postmodernism: irony, self-deprecation, pastiche or cita-
tion. Improvising means continuing, despite everything, to believe in the power of the cinema and the beauty of the world.