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## Killing the Writer: Movie Dialogue Conventions and John Cassavetes

### Hollywood Movie Dialogue

You're at a party. A man you don't recognize addresses you by name. You might say, "I've forgotten your name", "Have we met?" or "How do you know my name?" But more than likely you would not say, "You have me at a disadvantage." And no man, I presume, has ever said to his wife, "Darling, what's gotten into you? You're not yourself." And if a husband ever did say something so awkward, I doubt his wife would reply, "Yes I am, for the first time in my life." In a real conversation, these lines would sound bizarre, but we hear them a lot in movies, even well-written ones. When police show up at a bank robbery, do criminals say, "We got company"? And has a real police detective ever said to a reticent witness, "You and I are going downtown for a little chat"? No one has ever used this idiom with me: "I hope so, Todd. I hope so." In fact, I hardly hear anyone use my name at all in conversation, yet in movies it sounds perfectly natural. Hollywood movie dialogue obeys its own customs. We accept it according to the terms of Hollywood, not reality.

The virtue of stock movie lines is their efficiency. Stock lines have familiar, well-defined meanings and succinctly tell us what story information to expect. A stock line might indicate a turn in a scene ("I can't take it any more!"; "You're not going anywhere"; "It's so crazy it just might work"). Other lines indicate triumph, the final pronouncement in an argument ("I do care ... more than you know"; "When you come back, I won't be here"). We know a losing line when we hear it, too ("I am not crazy!"; "I can stop anytime I want"; "Do you think we lost 'em?"), lines given to characters in desperate trouble. Some lines indicate that a crisis will erupt ("One

more job and then I'm out of this business for good"; "He's either very stupid – or very smart"; "I have just one condition"; "It's my only copy, so guard it with your life"). Lines have genres, just as movies have genres, and generic lines offer us the same comfort that genre in general offers: they tell us where we are and where we are going.

Dialogue in Hollywood movies abides by conventions that do not pertain to regular conversation. I want to look briefly at four prominent conventions that will help explain why the dialogue in the movies of John Cassavetes is so interesting and peculiar. Not all dialogue follows the conventions, but they pervade Hollywood cinema because they keep film narration on course.

1) Separate characters' individual contributions to a dialogue in a Hollywood film unify into an overriding narrative purpose.

One can easily conceive of a camera or even a narrative as containing a single viewpoint; however, dialogue, by its nature, consists of contributions by figures with different perspectives and goals. It is therefore a peculiar characteristic of Hollywood movie dialogue that, although characters speak in ways that emphasize their conflicting objectives, together their dialogue contributes to a unified purpose. Although a character will appear to be striving to achieve goals, the scene's dominant purpose overrides the character's individual contributions to the dialogue.

Consider, as an example, the following exchange from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, USA 1941) between Kane and his stodgy financial manager, Mr. Thatcher, in which Thatcher tries to convince Kane to give up his interest in running a newspaper:

THATCHER.	Tell me, honestly, my boy, don't you think it's rather unwise to continue this philanthropic enterprise, this Inquirer that is costing you a million dollars a year?
KANE.	You're right, Mr. Thatcher. I did lose a million dollars last year. I expect to lose a million dollars this year. I expect to lose a million dollars next year. You know, Mr. Thatcher, at the rate of a million dollars a year, I'll have to close this place in – sixty years.

Even the rhythms and repetitions in Kane's lines, which indicate his rhetorical authority and self-confidence, tell us he will win this exchange. Although Thatcher's lines are about as confident as Kane's and indicate Thatcher's attempt to persuade

him, their starchy, smug tone exposes Thatcher, in accordance with the poetic justness of Hollywood movie dialogue, to Kane's witty and winning rejoinder.

2) Characters in Hollywood movies communicate effectively and efficiently through dialogue.

Movie characters usually listen to one another and convey what they mean. *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, USA 1944) contains dialogue that displays the kind of precisely-tuned linguistic accord that we expect to hear between lovers in Hollywood movies. Phyllis Dietrichson meets with insurance salesman Walter Neff to discuss life insurance for her husband. We know where such conversations lead, as does Walter. Their flirtation closes with these lines:

PHYLLIS. There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff – forty-five miles an hour.  
 WALTER. How fast was I going, officer?  
 PHYLLIS. I'd say around ninety.  
 WALTER. Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket?  
 PHYLLIS. Suppose I let you off with a warning this time?  
 WALTER. Suppose it doesn't take?  
 PHYLLIS. Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles?  
 WALTER. Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder?  
 PHYLLIS. Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder?  
 WALTER. That tears it. Eight-thirty tomorrow evening then?  
 PHYLLIS. That's what I suggested.  
 WALTER. Will you be here too?  
 PHYLLIS. I guess so. I usually am.  
 WALTER. Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?  
 PHYLLIS. I wonder if I know what you mean.  
 WALTER. I wonder if you wonder.

Phyllis and Walter communicate on many levels: They use the same tone (simultaneously seductive and antagonistic); they casually exchange sexually suggestive metaphors; they even replay each other's phrases and syntax. Although both characters claim to have questions about the other's intentions ("I wonder if I know what you mean"), neither character misunderstands anything the other says. In Hollywood movies, rapport is the norm.

Classical Hollywood efficiency is achieved by packing dialogue with story information and eliminating the digressions that clutter real speech. Consider, as a gross but illustrative example, the following dialogue from an early scene in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, USA 1939) between Lt. Blanchard and stagecoach driver Curly, whose exchange lays out in shorthand the progressive locales of the entire film, as well as other pertinent story information:

BLANCH. Captain Sickles has asked if you will deliver this dispatch in Lordsburg the moment you arrive. The telegraph line's been cut.  
 CURLY. Sure.  
 BLANCH. We're going with you as far as the noon station at Dry Fork. There'll be troop cavalry there and they'll take you on to Apache Wells. From Apache Wells you'll have another escort of soldiers into Lordsburg. But you must warn your passengers that they travel at their own risk.  
 CURLY. At their own risk? Well, what's the trouble, Lieutenant?  
 BLANCH. Geronimo.

Dense with exposition, this passage typifies movie dialogue's narrative efficiency. Through the dialogue, the audience quickly learns (or has reaffirmed) the three destinations of the stagecoach, that the telegraph is not working, that the coach must meet more than one escort, that the ride is risky, and that Geronimo is the source of the danger. About expository dialogue of this sort, Sarah Kozloff says: "Generally, there is something forced about the amount of specific detail crammed into presumably incidental conversation."<sup>1</sup> One can almost hear, in the dialogue, the pressure of efficiency coming to bear on scriptwriter Dudley Nichols, who seems determined to pack as much exposition into as tight a space as possible and get on with something more interesting.

3) Whereas real people tend to adjust what they are saying as they speak, movie characters tend to speak flawlessly.

Movie characters rarely amend their statements mid-sentence. To offer examples of this convention would be an exercise in obviousness; I can better illustrate it with an

1 Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. p. 40.

instructive exception. David Mamet often scripts lines in which the syntax mutates, and the fact that his dialogue often sounds peculiar demonstrates the pervasiveness of the artificial norm. In the following line from *House of Games* (David Mamet, USA 1987), for instance, each of the last three phrases belongs to a separate syntax: “You see, in my trade, this is called, what you did, you ‘cracked-out-of-turn’.” (A syntactically correct line would read, “My trade calls what you did ‘cracking-out-of-turn’.”) The Mamet character appears to construct the line phrase-by-phrase as he is speaking, until the sentence finally says all he wants it to say. Other lines from *House of Games* with mutating syntaxes include, “Man, you’re living in the dream, your questions, ‘cause there is a real world” and “Whether you mean it or not, and it’s irrelevant to me, because you aren’t going to do it”. Mamet’s splintered syntax makes his lines similar to real speech, but, partly because they violate a convention of movie dialogue, they can sound awkward and mannered.

One could find numerous film conversations that violate the three previous conventions; however, such exceptions themselves illuminate a fourth convention of Hollywood movie dialogue:

- 4) When a film violates movie dialogue convention, the transgression serves the causal progress of the narrative.

Story events in classical movies are linked by *causality* – the principal that one narrative event leads to another. Violations of movie dialogue convention are generally motivated by causal factors. Consider the rambling conversation between George and Mary in *It’s a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, USA 1946) in which the absence of an overriding and unified narrative purpose to their dialogue, as they chat on Mary’s couch, reveals their nervousness and mutual attraction: That conversation, in turn, leads to their marriage. A communication failure among characters will quickly become a key causal motivation for other story events. Consider the scene in *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, USA 1977) in which Alvy, trying to replicate the rapport he had with Annie, cooks lobster with his urbane date, a scene in which minor misunderstandings suggest that the speakers make a bad couple: the incident leads to Alvy’s effort to reunite with Annie. A character’s verbal flaws will likely pose an obstacle to overcome (e.g., Billy Bibbit’s stutter in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* [Milos Forman, USA 1975]). When a Hollywood movie violates movie dialogue convention, the violation means something.

## JOHN CASSAVETES'S DIALOGUE

The dialogue in John Cassavetes's movies does not sound like conventional movie dialogue. Without an evident overriding purpose governing the causal progress of his stories, his dialogue seems to focus on narrative detours. Rejecting the unity, effective communication, efficiency, and flawlessness that characterize Hollywood movie dialogue, Cassavetes's dialogue fixates on narrative dead ends, irrelevancies, and impediments to straightforwardness.

Cassavetes's dialogue comes so close to real speech that it often sounds as though the actors improvised their lines. Many film commentators think Cassavetes's films are largely improvised,<sup>2</sup> but they are not. His first film, *Shadows* (USA 1959), closes with the caption, "The film you have just seen was an improvisation." But even *Shadows* was not improvised in the usual sense of the word. The actors did not make up their lines on camera. Cassavetes means that, developing the story in workshops, he and the actors did not use a written script. However, they worked on their dialogue for months before shooting. For all his later films, Cassavetes wrote complete scripts, and, although he and the actors sometimes changed lines in rehearsals, they rarely improvised dialogue on camera. Sometimes a crew member acted as a stenographer, taking down what Cassavetes and the actors made up in rehearsals so that they could reproduce it during filming. Actress Gena Rowlands said,

We *do* use improvisation, but not as widely as people think. We start with a very complete script [...] Then [Cassavetes] will go and rewrite it – it's not just straight improvisation. I'm asked a lot about this, and it's true, when I look at the films and I *see* that they look improvised in a lot of different places where I know they weren't.<sup>3</sup>

Cassavetes sought what he called "the impression of improvisation" without relying much on improvisation during shooting.<sup>4</sup> Why would a filmmaker seek such an effect? My first answer is simple: dialogue that sounds improvised is similar to real speech. That answer is too simple, but, for the moment, let us explore it in relation to

<sup>2</sup> John Simon, *Esquire*, no. 83 (April 1975). p. 54; Stanley Kauffman, "A Woman Under the Influence". In: *The New Republic*, no. 171 (28 Dec, 1974). p. 20; *Human Behavior* (March 1975). p. 77; and Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Crist, *Take 22: Moviemakers and Moviemaking*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1984. p. 256.

<sup>4</sup> Ray Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. p. 161.

a conversation from Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence* (USA 1974), a film that, according to Cassavetes, had only two lines of improvised dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

Nick Longhetti (Peter Falk) has committed his wife to a mental institution. The next day, he inadvertently causes a coworker, Eddie, to fall down the side of a hill at their work-site. Almost frenzied, he takes his kids and another coworker, Vito (Angelo Grisanti), to the beach. The following exchange occurs as Vito and Nick walk along the beach with the kids:

- VITO.           What a day, Nick. I haven't been to the beach without my wife in – twelve years. I used to live in the water when I was a kid. Fish, they called me. I was thin, see, lips all blue, shaking. I was always lookin' for girls. My kids, they're all grown up now. My brother, Marco, he's a college graduate, communist. Couldn't keep a job. Too many big ideas. Reads too much. I say, let the girls read. They love to read. You know what I mean?
- NICK.           Okay, let's enjoy ourselves. Okay?
- VITO.           Okay.
- NICK.           I want to talk to my kids too.
- VITO.           Talk to your kids? They never listen. Why should they listen? I never listened. Did you listen? I mean, did you listen?
- NICK.           All right, right here. Come on, up here, we'll plop down right here. Come on. Come on. Come on.
- VITO.           Hey Nick, I'm usually a lot of fun, right? But to see a guy like Eddie fall and break all his bones, holy shit, I mean what a fall.
- NICK.           All right, knock it off, will you? We're here to have a good time. We're having a good time. We came to play with the kids. So let's play with the kids. Otherwise, we go home.

This conversation, which constitutes almost the entire scene, follows Cassavetes' shooting script practically word for word. However, it sounds improvised because, violating the conventions of movie dialogue, it is as inefficient and rambling as real speech. Let us examine the dialogue in light of the conventions.

5 The two improvised lines are Falk's "bah-bah-bah" and Gena Rowlands's driving instructions to her mother. Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, p. 341.

*Separate characters' individual contributions to a dialogue in a Hollywood film unify into an overriding narrative purpose*

Nick and Vito's conversation slides from topic to topic without any unified purpose. Vito's opening lines ("I used to live in the water when I was a kid") suggest that he will tell Nick something about his childhood. The speech starts to ramble when Vito says, "My kids, they're all grown up now", which has the word "kid" in it and therefore sounds as though it might relate to the story he has begun, but the line ends at a point irrelevant to anything that precedes or follows. "My brother, Marco" echoes "my kids" of the previous sentence in a way that again sounds pregnant, but only at first. "He's a college graduate" leads naturally to "reads too much" which in turn leads to "let the girls read," echoing Vito's earlier statement that he was "always lookin' for girls." Although each sentence resonates with sentences that precede (words repeat and ideas meld into one another), the lines do not add up to any coherent story. Lacking a clearly identifiable focus and progressing from one mental association to another, the speech mimics the rambling quality of thought.

Once Nick joins the conversation, the direction of the scene shifts as Nick anxiously tries to silence Vito, and Vito tries at once to accommodate Nick's anxiety and keep the conversation moving forward. A more conventional movie conversation – such as the sexual banter between Walter and Phyllis in *Double Indemnity* – would have each character's individual lines of dialogue serve a unified narrative purpose. Walter's witty intimation, "I wonder if you wonder," makes it sound as though each character's lines had been jointly working toward the same conclusion all along. By contrast, Nick and Vito's scene prevents any single narrative purpose from governing. No overall tone emerges because each character sets his own tone: Vito sounds laid back and philosophical, while Nick seems manic and uptight, as though Vito were in one kind of scene and Nick in another. Their opposing perspectives, goals and attitudes never integrate into a unified purpose.

*Characters in Hollywood movies communicate effectively and efficiently through dialogue*

Vito does not seem to understand that Nick wants him to stop talking. The misunderstanding is not surprising because Nick does not convey his point effectively or efficiently ("Okay, let's enjoy ourselves. Okay?" "I want to talk to my kids too."). Nick, moreover, does not acknowledge anything Vito says, responding only to the fact that Vito is talking too much. Vito and Nick listen to one another just enough to continue



conversation, repeating each other's words (for instance, when Nick says he wants to talk to his kids, Vito responds that kids don't listen) but not communicating.

*Movie characters tend to speak flawlessly*

Like Mamet, Cassavetes has his characters periodically readjust and re-focus their sentences as they speak. For instance, when Nick says, "We're here to have a good time. We're having a good time," the second line sounds like a revision of the first. Similarly, Vito's "But to see a guy like Eddie fall and break all his bones, holy shit, I mean what a fall" changes syntax mid-sentence, as though Vito were thinking of what he has to say as he says it, not before.

*When a film violates movie dialogue convention,  
the transgression serves the causal progress of the narrative*

The most peculiar aspect of this passage is that none of the violations of dialogue convention overtly serves narrative causality. The story does not build on Nick and Vito's inability to communicate because their miscommunications have little to do with the primary narrative and are, in any case, too subtle to give the scene focus. Indeed, the dialogue peculiarly draws attention to information (Vito's family and childhood, swimming, looking for girls, kids who don't listen to their parents, etc.) that bears no direct relation to events in the narrative's causal progress. The only point at which a narrative purpose starts to emerge is the discussion of Eddie's fall at the end of the exchange, but the discussion is buried among lines to which the scene gives equal weight. Besides, this scene is the last we hear of the injury, which becomes, finally, a narrative dead-end. Cassavetes said about the dialogue in *A Woman Under the Influence*,

I try to make things believable and natural and seem like they're happening. I do write differently. I write looser dialogue. The words are there, but they don't necessarily have to come to a conclusion [...] It's just what you hear in life.<sup>6</sup>

Cassavetes resisted efficiency, conclusiveness or anything in his dialogue that would betray a clear-cut narrative purpose.

6 Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, p. 341.

In short, the exchange between Nick and Vito lacks the chief quality that differentiates movie dialogue from real speech: a sense that someone wrote the lines with a dramatic intention. The four dialogue conventions betray a design behind Hollywood movie dialogue. Cassavetes' dialogue, by violating convention, lacks the sense of an implied scriptwriter. Nick and Vito's scene seems to have no creative hand controlling the characters, directing the dialogue toward a defined conclusion, and giving the scene an overriding and unified narrative purpose.

Cassavetes, however, avoids overt authorial control for a purpose his filmmaking does not advertise: He wants his scenes to belong not to his own screenplay and direction but to the performers. He believes they will discover nuances and dormant meanings in the script only if it does not betray an authorial intention and if the performers do not feel limited by his directing. Cassavetes said about Falk and Grisanti's performances in the beach scene:

[T]hey are walking and Peter has some lines and he says the lines and then they don't know what to do. Now I could tell them, but that would kill it [...]. He has to do it. I can't do it [...]. I see so many things that developed [in the scene] that wouldn't have if you [...] didn't allow room for [the actors'] interpretation. I wrote it and as soon as I wrote it I killed the writer.<sup>7</sup>

Because the actors themselves cannot divine Cassavetes' intention from his script, and because the director refuses to tell them what he wants from a scene, they deliver their lines with an improvisational uncertainty similar to what one hears in real speech.

Cassavetes was not the only filmmaker of his era to imbue his dialogue with an air of improvisation or to incorporate dialogue that emphasizes the everyday qualities of real speech. In fact, the 1970s, when Cassavetes made most of his independent films, saw a vogue of this type of dialogue in such movies as *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, USA 1970), *The Heartbreak Kid* (Elaine May, USA 1972), *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, USA 1973), *Badlands* (Terrence Malick, USA 1973), *The Last Detail* (Hal Ashby, USA 1973), *Dog Day Afternoon* (Sidney Lumet, USA 1975), and *Mikey and Nicky* (Elaine May, USA 1976). Robert Altman regularly allowed his actors to improvise lines, and his characters' sometimes mumbled, overlapping dialogue underscores the technique. *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, USA 1976) makes use of overlapping dialogue in almost every scene, as well as misspoken lines ("Do

<sup>7</sup> Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, p. 337.

any of you guys speak English? Er. Do any of you guys speak Spanish?") and narratively irrelevant dialogue insertions ("Coffee's cold", "I don't want a cookie.") Similar to Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese taped his actors' improvisations when shooting *Mean Streets* (USA 1973) and then wrote scripted dialogue based on the tapes.<sup>8</sup> Woody Allen's linguistic stumbling has become a trademark, and, like Cassavetes, he uses verbal tics and rambling speeches to generate dramatic tension.

None of these filmmakers, however, allows dialogue digressions to dominate narration in the way that Cassavetes does. Eventually, narrative causality regains control of their scenes and an overt authorial intention emerges. Allen, for instance, eventually brings his rambling speeches to a definitive resolution, and one ultimately feels the presence of the scriptwriter. Alvy Singer's opening monologue from *Annie Hall* (USA 1977) provides a good example of Allen's dialogue style:

You know, lately the strangest things have been going through my mind, 'cause I turned forty, tsch, and I guess I'm going through a life crisis or something, I don't know. I, uh – and I'm not worried about aging. I'm not one o' those characters, you know. Although I'm balding slightly on top, that's about the worst you can say about me. I, uh, I think I'm gonna get better as I get older, you know? I think I'm gonna be the – the balding virile type, you know, as opposed to the say, the, uh, distinguished gray, for instance, you know? 'Less I'm neither o' those two. Unless I'm one o' those guys with saliva dribbling out of his mouth who wanders into a cafeteria with a shopping bag screaming about socialism.

Like Cassavetes' lines, Allen's progress by association, sliding from topic to topic without an evident pre-determined direction, the lines peppered with stammered digressions and mutterings. In fact, the monologue would sound a lot like one of Cassavetes' if not for its perfectly phrased comic finish. Unlike Cassavetes' dialogue, Allen's eventually exposes the narrative purpose that results from a well constructed punch line.

#### THE SOUND OF IMPROVISATION: BLENDING ART AND REAL LIFE

In order to understand the effect of Cassavetes' unusual style of dialogue, let's return to the question I asked earlier: Why would a filmmaker seek an "impression of improvisation"?

8 David Thompson/Ian Christie (Ed.), *Scorsese on Scorsese*. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. p. 43.

If actors are improvising, then their rambling and stammering seem appropriate, a natural consequence of composing their speech as they are speaking. When watching improvisations, we likely overlook such verbal digressions in the same way we overlook them in real conversations. If an actor is delivering scripted lines, however, then the same verbal digressions, unless motivated by story causality, likely appear contrived, because there is no explicit justification for them other than a scriptwriter's overzealous commitment to realism. Dialogue sounds contrived anytime we can see the scriptwriter sweating.

But there is a third option, the one that Cassavetes takes: If we can't tell the difference between script and improvisation – if we can't tell the difference between the verbal digressions of the actor and the verbal digressions of the character – then our ability to distinguish between actor and character becomes blurred. Cassavetes' dialogue, more than conventional, tightly scripted dialogue, prevents spectators from easily distinguishing his actors' improvisations from the improvisations of his characters, who, like the actors playing them, appear to be composing their lines as they are speaking.

The blurring of actor and role in Cassavetes' films has frustrated many reviewers. For instance, in a pan of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (USA 1976), an annoyed John Simon says:

So, for example, when Cosmo tells about two girls in Memphis who cut off a gopher's tail, ate it, and died of botulism, we wonder – there being no botulism outside of canned food – who is being inept: the character, the improvising actor, or the filmmaker [...] And when a mobster claims that Marx was wrong, that opium is not the religion of the people, we cannot tell who is garbling Marx here, and to what purpose.<sup>9</sup>

Since Simon cannot tell whether the actors are delivering Cassavetes' lines or improvising their own, and since he cannot divine the "purpose" of the speech in any case, he can't maintain the customary distinction between character and actor, so he throws up his arms in aggravation.

Other reviewers regularly remarked on their inability to distinguish between actor and role in Cassavetes' films, sometimes admiringly, sometimes with the same annoyance evident in Simon's review. Richard Combs says that *Opening Night* (USA 1977) "never bothers to make too close a distinction between actress Myrtle Gordon's [the character played by Rowlands] working out of her problems with a distasteful

9 John Simon, "Technical Exercise, Exercise in Futility". In: *New York*, no. 9 (1 March 1976). p. 66.

role on stage and Gena Rowlands' own experimentation with the part of Myrtle."<sup>10</sup> Hollis Alpert, praising *Husbands* (USA 1970), asks about Ben Gazzara and his character, "Is Harry Gazzara, or Gazzara Harry? The fusing seems complete."<sup>11</sup> Pauline Kael, panning the same movie, says that the characters "act very much like Gazzara, Falk, and Cassavetes doing their buddy-buddy thing on the 'Dick Cavett Show.'"<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Kael's review sometimes neglects to distinguish between her criticisms of the filmmakers and those of the characters they play, a confusion of actor and role that the movie apparently encourages.

To illustrate the ways in which Cassavetes' dialogue blurs the distinction between actor and character, I want to look at two more passages from *A Woman Under the Influence* in which both the actors and characters appear to be improvising.

In the following speech, Mama Longhetti (Katherine Cassavetes) is speaking to a group of people Nick has invited to the house in honor of Mabel's return from the hospital. Angered by what she considers the stupidity of such a party, she makes the following announcement to the guests:

Everybody please. Quiet in here, please. Now you know Nicky loves you all. I love you all. Now you should know better to come here on a day like this when Mabel's coming out of the hospital. I'm not blaming you, but I'm saying the girl'll be here any minute, and you must go home, immediately! Please.

Mama says a number of inconsistent things in this quick speech. She understands that people might feel offended when she kicks them out of the house, so she prefaces her remarks with a line that already suggests "don't get me wrong", even before she has said anything about leaving: "Now you know Nicky loves you all." Right after she says the line, however, she seems to realize that it implies that only Nick (and not she) loves the guests. So she adds another line, "I love you all." But Mama also wants to register her disapproval of the party: "you should know better to come here on a day like this when Mabel's coming out of the hospital." Just as she does, however, she acknowledges that it is not the fault of the guests that they were invited to the party, adding, "I'm not blaming you." Again she has compensated for what she has already said, even though she has indeed just blamed them for coming. Similarly, she compensates for the aggressiveness implicit in "you must go home, immedi-

<sup>10</sup> Richard Combs, *Sight and Sound*, no. 47/3 (Summer 1978). p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> Hollis Alpert, "The Triumph of the Actor". In: *Saturday Review*, no. 53 (12. Dec. 1970). p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Pauline Kael, "Megalomaniacs". In: *The New Yorker*, no. 46 (2. Jan, 1971). p. 49.

ately!” with the more modest “please”. Mama continually alters the implication of what she just said, and the result is an impression that the character is making up her words as she speaks.

What I am saying about Mama Longhetti, however, could just as well be said of the actor, Katherine Cassavetes, since such seemingly extemporaneous adjustments are also indicative of actorial improvisation. John Cassavetes’ dialogue emphasizes precisely those moments when the two forms of improvisation become impossible to distinguish.

One more short passage ought to drive home my point. Mabel spends the night with a stranger, Garson Cross (O. G. Dunn). In the morning, Garson talks to her while she’s in the bathroom:

I’m gonna have to leave in a minute now. Listen, if this Nick fellow’s on your mind and you consider me some kind of a threat to him, or if you’re trying to punish him with me or me with him, forget it! I never met the man! And don’t blame yourself for me if that’s what you’re doing.

As in Mama Longhetti’s speech, the tone and substance of this speech – which follows the shooting script verbatim – transform as it progresses. When Garson says, “Listen, if this Nick fellow’s on your mind and you consider me some kind of threat to him”, he seems about to say something like, “then don’t worry about me. I’ll leave and never bother you again”. But the first part of his sentence fails to predict the sentence’s destination. Suddenly, Garson chastises Mabel for what he fears she might be contemplating: “or if you’re trying to punish him with me or me with him, forget it!”. The “forget it” and “I never met the man” follow logically from the second part of his sentence but do not make sense with the sentence’s original clause. Garson has changed his mind mid-sentence about what he wants to say to Mabel. “And don’t blame yourself for me if that’s what you’re doing” is another adjustment, making sure now that Mabel does not feel guilty. He adds to his sentences until they say everything he wants them to say, even if what he finally says violates the meaning and syntax of the beginning of his speech.

Because both character and actor appear to be improvising, Cassavetes’ actors sound as though they are stumbling through their performances in a way that mirrors the characters’ own extemporaneous struggles. Indeed, Cassavetes solicited imperfect performances from his actors for that very reason. Actor O. G. Dunn desperately questioned Cassavetes about Garson Cross, and Cassavetes archly refused to tell him about the part, or to tell any other cast members anything about

their parts. The director often preferred to use non-professional actors precisely in order to avoid a confident performance. He valued the indecision of a serious amateur. For instance, to play the role of Dr. Zepp in the movie, Cassavetes enlisted the producer's brother, Eddie Shaw, who had never acted before. According to Cassavetes, "When [Shaw] came in he kept on saying, 'What do I do?' I thought, 'That's wonderful! That's a great kind of a doctor to have! That's the doctors I've known!'"<sup>13</sup> Between the real indecision of Cassavetes' actors and the apparent improvisation of their lines, Cassavetes films manage to blend art and reality in an uncontrolled mixture of the actors' own identities and the identities of the roles they perform.

Digressive and inefficient, Cassavetes' dialogue is an emblem for his narrative aesthetic as a whole. His films, seemingly un-designed and improvised, exhibit a radical non-linearity, as though they have no authorial hand guiding them and are instead guided by the quirks and behaviors of his actors or characters. Whereas other filmmakers of his era (such as Altman, Scorsese, and Allen) admit impediments to straightforward storytelling, Cassavetes makes such impediments his primary narrative focus. In his dialogue and in his films overall, detours and digressions end up dominating his films' narration. Such extremity always plagued Cassavetes, who forwent commercial success – indeed seemed, by all accounts, determined to avoid it – when he rejected the classical Hollywood tenet that dialogue, and narration in general, be kept on course.

<sup>13</sup> Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, p. 332.