

A Woman Under the Influence: The War at Home

By [Kent Jones](#)



If there's one quality that separates John Cassavetes's movies from almost everybody else's, it's the density of detail in the storytelling. His films need to be read closely, from beginning to end. There are no lulls with Cassavetes, no lapses in rhythm; the films aren't broken down the way most are. You have to apprehend them from gesture to gesture, breath to breath. Very few filmmakers in the sound era have chosen to work this way, at least in the realm of fiction. Only Carl Theodor Dreyer, of whom Cassavetes was a great admirer, comes to mind. This is not to slight filmmakers with a different approach to their art, who either break up their scenes in clearly articulated units (Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Bresson), build tableau effects that take the action into an eerie timelessness (Stanley Kubrick), isolate a certain visual or behavioral event as the focal point of a given shot (Jean Renoir), or dig into the marrow of time to make an event out of duration itself (Andy Warhol, Andrei

Tarkovsky). Every approach is equally valid, none more elevated than the rest. Die-hard Cassavetes devotees do him no favors when they buy into his own pronouncements and claim that his methods allowed him a greater purchase on the truth (whatever that is) than other filmmakers. "My films *are* the truth," he once said during a personal appearance with a filmmaker of my acquaintance; needless to say, my acquaintance was more than a little put off. Yet such pretentiousness is easily forgiven in a man like Cassavetes, just as it's easy to make allowances for the pomposity contained within Bresson's book of maxims. When you consider how far against the grain they both went, it's understandable that they would each accord their own idiosyncratic working methods the status of scientific breakthroughs or archaeological finds.

A whole generation of critics misunderstood Cassavetes so spectacularly that the ones who are still around are probably too embarrassed to take a second look. The Gustav Mahler of cinema, Cassavetes was excoriated in his lifetime for formlessness, lack of focus and modulation, et cetera and ad infinitum. And, like Mahler, his work has come back after his death to haunt those who were so quick with their doctrinaire judgments. Actors Studio exercises, formless improvisations, and unmodulated emotionalism are all you're going to see if you look at every movie with the expectation that it will/should be broken up into visually and behaviorally pointed units. Films like *A Woman Under the Influence* defy a century's worth of film theory, screenwriting tips, and film school orthodoxy. When you look at a close-up in a film by almost anyone else, you're looking at a representation of the idea of an emotion, no matter how detailed the acting. In Cassavetes, every blink, every shrug, every hesitation counts and drives the story forward.

What is *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974)? If you look at it from one end of the telescope, it's a hyperrealistic portrait of a woman going mad, a bravura performance in a vaguely working-class setting, a sort of déclassé American version of Ingmar Bergman's *Face to Face* (1976),

without Bergman. From the other end, it's a richly detailed experience, alternately soaring and gut-wrenching, composed in two long, mighty, almost but not quite unwieldy movements. And it's about . . . what? Men and women? Family life? The difficulty of distinguishing between your real and ideal selves? Male embarrassment? All of the above, none of the above. Tagging a movie like *Woman* with something as neat as a "subject" is a fairly useless activity. "John had antennae like Proust," Peter Falk once wrote. *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Faces*, probably his two greatest films, are both ultimately as impossible to pin down as *In Search of Lost Time*. Like Proust before him, Cassavetes rode the whims, upsets, vagaries, and mysterious impulses of humanity like a champion surfer.

The first movement of *A Woman Under the Influence* takes us up through Mabel's commitment, and the second movement is devoted to her disastrous homecoming six months later. Within these movements, different forces come into play. First and foremost, of course, there is Mabel herself (Gena Rowlands). She is the magnet, the center, of whom everyone is demanding what seems like the simplest thing in the world but what is, finally, impossible: "Just be yourself." There's Nick (Peter Falk), who clings for dear life to his image of happiness. It's an image based on memories of a carefree past with his wife, probably before the arrival of children, and it blinds him to the difficulties of the present. How many times in the film does Nick violently insist that everyone have a good time, that they get along, that they relax? How many times does he scream at strangers or family outsiders, insisting that they look away from Mabel's madness, for him only a temporary aberration? Is this a portrait of a blue-collar type "resorting" to violence? For Cassavetes, that seems wholly unimportant. Nick is a man who believes so passionately in his idea of perfect happiness, no matter how wrongheadedly, that he'd rather destroy everyone around him than see it compromised. "I'll kill ya," he warns Mabel, once again on the brink of madness, "and I'll kill these sons-o'-bitchin' kids." A terrifying moment and a liberating one as well, because it gives voice to frustrations that most people bottle up just when they're

about to reach the surface. It's one of the film's five or six key moments, when an emotional tidal wave swells and breaks.

Nick's mother is another force, and she's played, formidably, by Cassavetes's own mother, Katherine Cassavetes. You might call her the meddler, or the passionately interested outsider observing the maelstrom within, picking and choosing the moments when she must intervene. One of the side benefits of Cassavetes's cinema is his wonderful ear for the music of American speech, the voices of intelligent yet relatively inarticulate, second-generation, working-class Americans. And it reaches a peak in the voice of this wonderful woman, with her beautifully nasal delivery and stubbornly insistent pronouncements. "This woman is *crazy!*" she screams in fierce, authoritative defense of her son and grandchildren, putting many of us in mind of our aunts or family friends from childhood.

There are the children, passive and loving in the first half of the film, just the way people always want children to be, and unconditionally loved in return; we can infer that the inconvenience and awesome, life-changing responsibility of children has been furiously denied (by Mabel) and batted aside (by Nick). In the second half, the kids are recalcitrant, fiercely protective of their mother, and stubbornly unwilling to stay put.

There are the outsiders, sometimes silently judgmental, sometimes vocally so—Nick's fellow workers, who look the other way, or tentatively reach out, or deride Nick when he refuses to admit that there's a problem with Mabel; and the in-laws, including Mabel's father (Fred Draper, from *Faces*), who doesn't understand what Mabel means when she asks him to "stand up" for her.

And finally there's the house itself, also a force: the foyer with the bench, the ground-floor bedroom with the sliding doors opening onto the living room, the dining room with the long table, the backyard, and, most dramatically of all, the staircase (like many great directors before him,

Cassavetes understood that the staircase was a necessary focal point of domestic drama—as it is in this film, or in the devastating final shot of *Faces*). With its geography of open and closed spaces, places from which to observe and places in which you're left exposed, places to congregate and places to be alone, the house becomes a theater of battle, as houses often do—even the ones with loving families inside.

People often speak of Cassavetes's films as prime examples of "actors' cinema." In other words, he's one of those poor schmucks who turned the keys to the asylum over to the inmates out of misplaced respect. It's astonishing that anyone still believes this hogwash, but it keeps coming up, again and again. His mother, Katherine, is a 100 percent electrifying presence in *A Woman Under the Influence*, striking the action like a lightning bolt. "Doctor, aren't ya gonna give 'er a shot?" A hair-raising moment: she's standing with her arms crossed on the stairs, craning her neck to observe the goings-on between her son and her daughter-in-law, her face breaking into a sneer. Is it great acting? On one level, of course it is. But inasmuch as we think of a performance as a unified creation within a greater unified creation, it seems to me that we're witnessing something else here. Every gesture, every look, every movement, every hesitation has become the exclusive property of the director. Human activity is to Cassavetes what color is to Vincente Minnelli and space is to Hitchcock. It's at once his aesthetic and his moral center of gravity, his canvas, and his most reliable tool. In the final analysis, he's far closer to a Hitchcock or a Bresson than many people realize.

As she did in three of her husband's major films, Rowlands portrays a woman on the edge of madness in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Which means that the level of calculation and imagination in her acting is necessarily higher than it is for her fellow actors. Rowlands's Mabel, with her abstracted turns of the head and hands, her overemphatic emotional responses, her violent attempts to eradicate potentially threatening impulses, is certainly an imaginative feat. Falk is out on an emotional limb

here. Cassavetes made the most of what he perceived as Falk's sense of embarrassment as a human being, and the moment where Nick screams at his mother to send away the sixty well-wishers crowded into the house, because he can't bear to do it himself, should give many men a shock of recognition. Yet Rowlands has the more arduous task of reconciling the greatest theatricality with the most immediate interpersonal byplay. Rowlands's appearances in *Faces*, *Woman*, *Opening Night*, and *Love Streams* are riveting experiences in and of themselves, because Cassavetes makes the most of her incongruity within any given setting. As a presence, she is innately glamorous yet earthy (the earthiness has a lot to do with that twangy midwestern voice, always on the verge of cracking with emotion), a little broad in her gestures yet exquisitely detailed in her choices, ethereally beautiful (a high school French teacher type) yet always ready for action, and finally a little too weird for superstardom. Theirs would be one of the cinema's greatest and most complex on-screen love affairs, if not for the simple fact that it plumbs so much deeper than mere infatuation.

Along with *Raging Bull* (1980), made by Cassavetes's old friend Martin Scorsese, *A Woman Under the Influence* is the toughest of all great American films. It takes conflicts and dynamics that we all know—all of us—and writes them uncomfortably large. Like the Scorsese film, it doesn't reach expressive peaks—both films begin at peak expressive levels and stay there—as much as it hits emotional pressure points. "Die for Mr. Jensen, kids," says Mabel, unforgettably; she's instructing her kids and their friends to improvise *Swan Lake* in the backyard at four in the afternoon, thus giving form to her own outlandish ecstasies and worrying the other kids' dad. (The actor Mario Gallo would enact another variety of American male embarrassment, briefly but indelibly, as the crying boxing trainer in *Raging Bull*.) "I have five points, Nick," utters Mabel just before she is carted away—her hand is outstretched, and she's trying to figure how the odds are stacking up against her. The music of the moment is fearful as Mabel lowers her voice for perhaps the first time in the film and

slips down another notch into a dangerously private, dissociated reality. Cassavetes takes us from level to level of Mabel's withdrawal from reality, and the two passages of her madness are among the most harrowing in movies.

To say that *A Woman Under the Influence* is a singular achievement is to put it mildly. And yet it does bear a more than passing resemblance to another film, which is Dreyer's *Ordet* (1955). Both are "household" movies, and in both so much is dependent on the woman at the holding center. In both films, the layout of the house itself seems to contain the entire universe, and the tone of both is pitched between the earthy and the ethereal. And just like *Ordet*, *Woman* ends with a resurrection: Mabel's sudden snap back into clarity after Nick smacks her down, as if she's awoken from a trance. Two miracles, ultimately inexplicable, that violently wrench their respective films away from despair and toward some kind of affirmation. Yet unlike *Ordet*, *A Woman Under the Influence* is a war movie. In the end, Mabel and Nick have dueling conceptions of reality, each as valid as the other. And that's how wars get started.

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