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# IMPROVISING CINEMA

GILLES MOUËLLIC



 ROUTLEDGE  


## Improvising Cinema

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# Improvising Cinema

*Gilles Mouëllic*

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*In memory of my father*



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# Introduction

Long before it fired the enthusiasm of twentieth-century creators, improvisation had held its own in popular forms of theatrical entertainment such as medieval 'games' or 'mystery plays', precursors of *Commedia dell'arte*. It went on to become associated with music, the seventeenth-century definition of the verb 'to improvise' being 'to create and perform spontaneously and without preparation'. This musical grounding helped to establish improvisation as an 'absolute poetic fact', as the philosopher Christian B ethune put it,<sup>1</sup> an assertion that tied in with Western beliefs, progressively based on notions of the artist and his work. The nineteenth century may have glorified Romantic genius but it also marked the decisive split between composer and performer, a way of proclaiming the written word's superiority over invention in the moment, with the musician losing any prerogative over the composition by becoming the mouthpiece of a pre-existing work. At that time, improvisation was assimilated to the virtuoso *tours de force* that so enthralled Salon gatherings – leading composers could sometimes turn out to be consummate improvisers but it was through their scores that they joined the ranks of creators.<sup>2</sup>

In one of the rare essays to be devoted to improvisation, Jean-Fran ois de Raymond claims that 'Everything marginalises improvisation, the seemingly unaccomplished acts, the sketches. Lacking ancestors, genealogy or archives, it does not transmit, perpetuate or explain anything.'<sup>3</sup> This did not prevent it, however, from attracting a remarkable amount of attention across a broad artistic spectrum throughout the twentieth century, with varying degrees of success. The untapped potential of the body was explored through dance and theatre, while painting and sculpture inspired a fascination with gesture, the spontaneous nature of the Surrealists' highly-prized 'automatic' writing was applauded and the unpredictable happenings in the realm of the visual arts gained in popularity. This diversity also harboured a certain confusion, along with a legitimate wariness regarding the less convincing spontaneous creative experiments. Only jazz, which preceded and inspired many of these ventures, seems to have been unaffected by such doubts. With no other motive but *to play together*, musicians imbued with the black folklore of New Orleans imposed their 'immediate inventive practices'<sup>4</sup> on every Western stage, brilliantly implementing the creative potential of improvisation. Having graduated in the space of only a few years from exotic artefact to the epitome of artistic revolution, jazz

gave credence to other forms of expression in which writing played second fiddle to inventions in the moment.

In a variety of ways, performance arts such as music, dance and theatre, which were particularly receptive to alternative improvised expression, all acted as possible models. Although performance plays a key role in the cinema – it goes without saying that improvisation goes hand in hand with filming, unexpected hiccups being part and parcel of every film shoot – no one at that stage associated the cinema with improvisation. Our brief, however, does not cover these episodes of forced improvisation; the aim here is twofold: to confirm the existence of improvisational practices that can be specifically attributed to the cinema and to determine their powers of expression. In other words, we are not concerned with gauging the reactions to the random mishaps that may have occurred in the course of the shoot, but rather with revealing the practices that deliberately cast the spotlight on improvisation as the instigator of unprecedented forms of expression. To a certain extent, the cinema gives the lie to Jean-François de Raymond's claim. The technical recording process that underpins it actually makes it possible to keep track of past events and build them into potential archives:

Filming an interview, capturing a stage in a work-in-progress, recording a gesture, a word, a moment of hesitation or on the contrary a consummate moment of virtuosity, all these things are rendered and preserved by the cinema, and made even more valuable by the fact that a completed work tends to absorb the traces of all the effort that went into creating it. The preservation of the transitory, fleeting, ephemeral aspect of an artist's work or the lengthy process of implementation or effectuation required for a specific creation [...] is made possible by cinematographic recording, in turn remote, cold and objective and close, empathetic and profoundly visceral.<sup>5</sup>

Preservation becomes even more invaluable in the case of improvisation, as the creative act exists within the time span of the performance and only in that time span. In their respective ways, film and jazz both manage to freeze frame these living moments for eternity. They are patently different, of course: although the rapid success of jazz and its consecration as an art form were undeniably due to recording, the latter was only the tangible expression of an event epitomised by performance. Filmmaking, despite being based on a succession of stages that can span several months, actually depends ontologically far more on the recording process. In both cases, however, there is a moment at which a machine records the 'sheer present', and it is from these temporal imprints that one can begin to envisage a phenomenology of improvisation in a cinematic context, a phenomenology whose founding principles are in part inspired by the theory and history of jazz. The huge variety of improvisational manifestations in jazz has triggered a great deal of rewarding research, making it possible to grasp the

diverse approaches of improvisers such as Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker, or Jean Rouch and John Cassavetes. 'The meeting of two disciplines,' wrote Gilles Deleuze, 'does not occur when one of them begins to reflect on the other but when one of them realises that it needs to solve, for its own end and by its own means, a problem that resembles a problem posed in another.'<sup>6</sup> This famous, even slightly hackneyed, quote nevertheless conveys the state of mind that informed our project, built on a rich breeding-ground of exchanges between the cinema and the other arts, and not simply jazz.

The historical dimension will also play a significant role, as a number of aspects can only be put into perspective if their background is taken into account. The feasibility of film improvisation, for instance, depends on the development of sound and shooting techniques. For instance, the emergence of increasingly lightweight equipment, originally from the world of television and reportage, contributed in no small degree to the invention of devices that were to give the actor greater freedom. Although the temptation to improvise comes across quite clearly in, for example, *TONI* (1934), Jean Renoir is not in the same reactive ballpark as, say, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche over seventy years later, when in *BLED NUMBER ONE* (2006) the cameraman, using a hand-held camera, literally steps into the frame so that each shot features his own movements. Taking this interest in the history of techniques as a starting point, considerable attention will be paid to the genesis of the works. Determining the degree of improvisation in filmmaking would indeed prove difficult if one omitted the complexity of its various stages, from the first draft of the script to the choice of montage. The prerequisite in analysing cinema improvisation, therefore, is to take into account not only the finished product, but also all the processes that led up to it. The improvising filmmaker is not seeking the perfection of a completed work, but the demonstration of a work-in-progress, and he views the creative process as a journey, or even a sketch or a draft. An improvised film retains the trace of a collective experiment that is perpetuated in the presence of a spectator, who finds himself invited into a workshop in which the participants, whatever their role, readily acknowledge their doubts and uncertainties. The study of improvisation, then, becomes a matter of theorising from the premise of these practices; relying, if necessary, on the accounts of the crew members involved.

In improvised filmmaking, each decision reached in the course of the creative process seems designed to release unpredictable forces on set and to turn each shot into an event in itself and not the *representation* of an event. This relationship to the present implies singular temporalities and original attitudes to living time, the challenge of the improviser, in front of or behind the camera, spanning 'a labile temporality in which the instant prevails.'<sup>7</sup> These complex images have given rise to new forms of montage, somewhere between the documentary and a partially predetermined composition constantly open to question. These im-

provisers want to spark new rhythms, new movements, new energies, all of which stem from their unmitigated faith in the little-known and often uncontrollable forces of the body. To discover *what the body can do* within the creative act might indeed be an accurate definition of improvisation, with its attendant phenomena of excess and proliferation. The cinema drew on this with a view to bringing about a renaissance that could well represent the other facet of a 'modernity', analysed from the angle of those deserted spaces that Michelangelo Antonioni in particular so prized.

The films under review all belong to a narrative form of cinema, which raises the ongoing question of the human body and its impulses, a cinema 'whose movement is still plummeted, fettered by the corporeity of forms, in which the grain is not obscured by high-speed action or the matter by narrative.'<sup>8</sup> Improvisation is a way of moving into the real world by allowing potentialities to develop, each one an unexpected starting point for fiction, with the improviser relentlessly hunting down the ghosts of history as they rise from the chaos of a reality that is unstable by nature. With this in mind, only documentary or fictional works whose motivation is to tackle the raw reality of the world will be included here. Other acts of improvisation obviously exist in the history of the moving image, and particularly in a number of radical examples of 'experimental' cinema, or in the more daring forms of animated film.<sup>9</sup> These raise different issues, however, and warrant a study in their own right, an approach that has been partially attempted in a few works examining the frontiers between the cinema and the visual arts. Silent films have no place here either: in the approximation and emulation that marked the first decades of the cinematograph, improvisation sprang from necessity rather than choice. This in no way detracts from the talent of those magical inventors, the early filmmakers, and Petr Král is absolutely right in referring to slapstick cinema as 'jazzist',<sup>10</sup> in the light of its significant contribution to improvised expression. Improvisation as a creative method – in the films of Jacques Rivette, Jacques Rozier, Johan van der Keuken or Nobuhiro Suwa – is of a different nature, although this does not preclude slapstick from rearing its head in many of their films. Despite these restrictions, however, the body of work covered by this survey is considerable, and it seemed both futile and unnecessary to pile on examples in a vain attempt to achieve a totally illusory exhaustiveness. A choice had to be made and the relatively limited number of works under review were all selected for their suitability in stimulating across-the-board debate, according to the diverse or complementary nature of the issues raised, each film being an appropriate candidate for a transversal model. As Jean Renoir put it:

It is obvious that the ideas that spring to mind when you need to improvise strike you with tremendous force. The feeling is so sharp that it is like needles pricking your

skin. I don't know if they are any better than the ideas one comes up with in the silence of the study. But either way they are different, and produce different works.<sup>11</sup>

And it is precisely this difference that is under discussion here.



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# I. Writing and improvisation

## A selection of models... and their limitations

The works highlighted in this study share a number of specificities that might tempt analysts to group their respective directors into a single fictional family – indeed, innumerable works and treatises have already linked the names of Renoir, Rivette, Rouch, Rozier, Pialat, Cassavetes, Ameur-Zaïmeche and Faucon. It would be difficult, however, to interpret this as a trend spanning the history of the cinema, except in its questioning of the dominance of traditional scriptwriting. The refusal to overemphasise the value of the written word may take a variety of forms, but it is always an expression of the desire to turn the shoot into a moment of experimentation. Filmmakers may consequently be divided into two camps: those who defend preliminary structure and the immutability of the written word versus those who are determined to view the shoot as a performance. This approach brings two stages in the cinematic process to the fore: on the one hand, the writing (the screenplay, shooting script and sometimes the storyboard) with its controlled, rational dimension; and, on the other, the shoot, which is seen as a forum for improvisation. The analogy with music is revelatory here: the desire of the art music composer<sup>1</sup> to work through writing and the layout of preordained signs finds its counterpoint in the approach of the jazz composer, to whom writing is merely a starting point, a framework that will enable the performers to express themselves freely and together. It would be risky, however, to claim an incontrovertible duality between determination and indetermination – in the cinema, as in music, reality is less cut and dried. The proportion and nature of the written word can vary tremendously and even in the most faithful renditions of preparatory composition, the performance retains an inevitably random dimension. Despite the aspirations of Adorno, it is impossible to ‘protect’ an art of performance from the unpredictable vicissitudes of the human body, unless it is put in the hands of a robot... which extinguishes its life. In the cinema, filmmakers who pride themselves on their power and expertise know that something has to elude them if they want to produce the gesture, look or intonation that will lend the images their most profound meaning. The preparatory work then gives way to the *mise-en-scène*, which focuses on bringing about this creative surge as the ultimate achievement. With impro-

visation, however, the creative surge is not viewed as a culmination, but as a launch pad, the implementation of another type of creation in which invention in the moment acts as the driving force.

While the supremacy of the written word in art music went from strength to strength during the twentieth century, a new lease of life in so-called 'creative improvisation' was provided by another kind of music, this time belonging to the oral tradition. Jazz, which had first appeared in the Deep South at the beginning of the century in the guise of New Orleans folklore, went on to become a key artistic discipline in the Western world, restoring the status that had gradually been lost to improvisation with the advent of written musical composition. Consummate musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, based their whole musical technique on their mastery of improvisation, defined somewhat idealistically (as we shall see later) by Jean-François de Raymond as 'the act that contracts in the moment the usual time frame from conception (or composition) to external performance, the hiatus being eliminated by the immediacy of this act.'<sup>2</sup> Jazz – and this is precisely its strength – is not set against art music or against the written form; it is elsewhere, and it is from this elsewhere that jazzmen can invent new creative expressions and discover new potential in the creative gesture.

As jazz took hold, artists from across the board joined the improvisation bandwagon to invent new and original forms according to their own particular field. Stage directors proved to be the most determined, finding in these techniques new ways of involving the actor in a creative act underpinned by collective ambition. Each line of research became an exploration of the powers of improvisation, based on the body's willingness and on lived time, as shown in Jacques Copeau and Jacques Lecoq's experiments with collective creation, the improvised exercises and productions of Peter Brook and the improvised sequences of Jerzy Grotowski.<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, choreographers also turned to individual or collective improvisation in a bid to discover the untapped potential of the body, released from the narrative depictions required by classical ballet in particular. A number of 1950s musical experiments, largely from the United States, could also be cited here, as composers devised 'open' works – mobile or containing an indeterminate element – in which a 'tendency towards improvisation' could be perceived. The musician's free hand, however, was circumscribed by the composer, and it is difficult to assimilate this indeterminate element into improvisation in the sense applied here. Finally, one cannot exclude manifestations in the visual arts such as happenings, although the issue of improvisation could surely be tackled just as viably in the work of Jackson Pollock or Auguste Rodin.

Of all the arts, the one that has delved most deeply into improvisation and seems most akin to the cinema is theatre. With few exceptions, improvisation

features as a form of preparatory exercise for the actors,<sup>4</sup> a process that has been explained in detail in a plethora of manuals. These productions seldom run the risk of improvising in front of an audience; however, at the pre-production stage, this is a collective approach, which is designed to pave the way for a closeness between the actors and their characters, characters they have themselves helped to 'invent'. The period of improvisation and the period of performance therefore remain quite separate, improvisation representing a mere stage in the creation of a fixed entity that can be iterated with every performance. These multiple performances do not exist in the cinema, in which the camera records a specific instant on film or on some digital medium and then modifies it if necessary at the editing stage, before reproducing it technically. The difference between theatre and cinema, therefore, is self-evident. And yet all, or almost all, improvised films betray a close link with theatrical performance.

In a theatrical vein, some filmmakers work, or even invent, scripts from the starting point of improvisations with the actors, either during rehearsals or, in the more radical cases, during the shoot itself. The script and dialogues of John Cassavetes' *SHADOWS* (1959) were written this way, as were a number of sequences in Jacques Rivette's *L'AMOUR FOU* (1969). Both directors were also affected by theatrical improvisation at another level. In their own way, they both highlighted the 'theatrical exercise' in a number of films, demonstrating in a fictional context the element of invention sparked by the actors at the moment of performance. In *L'AMOUR FOU*, Rivette films (or, as we shall see, 'films by proxy') the rehearsals of *Andromaque* directed by the main character, while the heroine of *OPENING NIGHT* (John Cassavetes, 1978), a renowned theatre actress, finds herself incapable of performing on stage a role specially written for her. One should add that Cassavetes had an opportunity to prepare another of his films (*LOVE STREAMS*, 1984) by putting on an apparently largely improvised play in 1981 in Los Angeles. In a less direct manner, Nobuhiro Suwa featured a number of strikingly theatrical locations in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* (2005), in which improvisation also plays a significant role. Theatrical venues of a different kind crop up again with filmmakers as diverse as Maurice Pialat (in some sequences from *À NOS AMOURS*, for example) and Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, particularly in *DERNIER MAQUIS* (2008), in which the courtyard of a small pallet manufacturing business is filmed as though it were a stage, with the actors largely improvising their roles. These few examples, which raise the question of collective creation (in its 'theatre company' sense), are adequate proof of the importance of theatre in a study of this nature. Other names will also be making their valuable contribution to this work. Indeed, the links between theatrical improvisation and film can no doubt be ascribed to the 'boss' Jean Renoir, who acknowledged the theatre as a source of inspiration and improvisation as a working method.

The relationship between cinema and dance is not that different. Improvisation plays a significant role in contemporary dance, but this also serves to create 'a fixed entity from something that only exists through a time of enactment.'<sup>5</sup> Here, again, are the two stages of theatrical composition, from conception inspired by improvisation through to public performances from which improvisation has disappeared. The difference lies perhaps in a form of radicalism that characterises dance improvisations as the initial moment of creation. As Anne Boissière puts it, 'The danced gesture, in its freedom, no longer seems to require a model, it is self-motivated, its impetus and inner energy having shaken off all props and exteriority.'<sup>6</sup> In fact, such unmitigated emancipation is as improbable as absolute improvisation released from any predetermined agenda. Nevertheless, one should put forward the hypothesis that the improvised gesture in dance is an extreme case, the one that most closely resembles improvisation as an act of freedom. 'Once the true signifier of dance can only be transmitted through the body, it becomes inconceivable to impose psychological antecedents on this body, which are liable to ruin the pertinence of a decision that would, for its part, no longer belong to the body', writes Laurence Louppe, who has entitled her article 'L'Utopie du corps indéterminé' [The Utopia of the Indeterminate Body].<sup>7</sup> The title shows the illusory nature of a 'zero level' of improvisation, although this does not detract from the experiments of Merce Cunningham or Trisha Brown, who strived for the total absence of intention. If this 'fantasy of radical autonomy', as Catherine Kintzler phrases it,<sup>8</sup> means little in the narrative cinema, it does allow one to reflect on the presence of dance among improvisatory filmmakers. The many 'danced' episodes are moments of physical exertion experienced as times of exultation, explosion or liberation, moments when the body seems to take over from ineffectual speech. The nightclub dance in *FACES* (Cassavetes, 1968) or the one that concludes *BEAU TRAVAIL* (Claire Denis, 1999), the dance of the young lead in the cowshed in *L'APPRENTI* (Samuel Collardey, 2008), the numerous recurring dance scenes in the works of Johan van der Keuken and Jean Rouch: the questions of the body's freedom and gestural invention are crucial and these reflections on improvisation in dance have proved extremely valuable in analysing improvisation in the cinema.

Finally, music, which is not far removed from dance, will be making a vital contribution. Jazz is the only artistic practice in which improvisation, even if it is not a prerequisite, certainly plays a decisive role. All the great jazzmen were great improvisers and the amazingly swift development of jazz in the twentieth century can be ascribed to the extraordinary way in which these musicians were able to constantly renew their improvisation techniques. The quintessential difference between jazz and experiments in theatre and dance is that here we no longer have two succeeding stages – improvisation and performance – but a merging of the two, the public performance of the jazzman being a performance

in improvisation. While art music was honing its command of an increasingly complex written form, jazz was inventing other models in which the performer was the creator and the score (when there was one) merely the raw material through which the musician could express his own personality. In jazz, creation only exists in that moment of play and performance and the only way to preserve that moment is through recording. The remarkable influence of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker and others on twentieth-century artistic practices can be attributed to their natural interpretation of a revolutionary idea: improvisation is neither a rough draft nor a rehearsal exercise, it is not the first stage in a composition rooted in the written. Improvisation is creation in the moment, it has its own rules and requires different models of analysis. It must not be judged by the yardstick of writing; its place is elsewhere and imposes unprecedented creative practices.

Experiments with improvisation in the cinema had at least one thing in common with jazz: filmmakers were aware that improvisation could trigger emotions, gestures and exchanges that were impossible to predict or put in writing. As they only occurred once, the only way of fixing them for posterity was to record them with a camera. This faith in the moment altered the habits of filmmakers. Broadly speaking, we will be studying two approaches to filming here: the first, which is akin to art music, is illustrated by the hierarchy on set and a reliance on the predetermined nature of composition – in this case the screenplay and shooting script – with the actor being the interpreter of a minutely written ‘score’; the second is similar to jazz, in which the script is simply a *matter* that enables the actor to contribute toward the invention of his character. A contrast has often been drawn between the ‘script’ filmmakers, who view the shoot as the implementation of a work whose core is already contained in the written word, and the ‘shoot’ filmmakers, who believe in on-set team work and are prepared to leave much to collective invention. This over-systematic and somewhat fruitless dichotomy does at least show one thing, however: by making a conscious decision to opt for improvisation, the filmmaker is accepting the unpredictable nature of the task ahead. Theoretically, he therefore belongs to the second category, but this does not mean he is against the existence of a script, which may even be meticulously detailed. The difference lies far more in the nature of the writing and the way it is used during the shoot.

If jazz can help in the first instance to dispel this sterile comparison, it is through the refusal of its musicians to see their art as *anti* writing. Jazz always contains an element of the written, in its orchestral compositions, in its themes that pave the way for improvisation, in its chord charts enabling boppers to perform together, or in the admittedly minimal rules that foreshadow performances of free jazz, although these can also be invented during the actual performance. The only thing at stake during the performance is the free expression

of the musicians, and it is the quality of this expression, rather than the fact that it conforms to a pre-existing written form, that will ultimately weigh in the balance. This attitude to the written word is therefore far removed from that of art music performers. Over and above the performer's independence in relation to the written, jazz is also instructive in terms of its wide variety of forms of improvisation. From the honed paraphrases of Louis Armstrong, the orchestral explorations of Duke Ellington or Charles Mingus, the ability of Charlie Parker or John Coltrane to rethink their music individually or the apparent chaos of free jazz experiments, every stage in the history of jazz is underpinned by the invention of new forms of improvisation, new balances within the collective experience, new ways of devising chord sequences, dissonance, tension. Improvisation filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, John van der Keuken, John Cassavetes, Claire Denis or Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche have stressed their tangible interest in jazz as a creative act. Although this striking interest in jazz will certainly be a topic for discussion, this will not be the only frame of reference. Indeed, in *Le Jazz et l'Occident* Christian Béthune rightly refutes an over-implicit analogy between the filmmakers' art and the art of jazz musicians: 'Whether or not it is implemented,' he writes, 'improvisation is somehow immanent to jazz. In film, on the other hand, the use of improvisation can only be transcendent.'<sup>9</sup> The 'creative heterogeneity of jazz and the cinema'<sup>10</sup> therefore, stems from a difference in the nature of the two disciplines, improvisation being a prerequisite in the jazzman's expression, whereas in the case of filmmakers it is the result of a deliberate choice. This is borne out by fact: in the cinema, these practices, however diverse, are in the minority and should be regarded as such. Furthermore, the act of improvisation is less direct, less immediate than in jazz, which requires minimum props: just a musician and his instrument. In the cinema, improvisation is only one of many factors, a stage in the filming process. It is therefore difficult to talk about 'improvised cinema', whereas it is possible, even if this is a slight misnomer, to refer to jazz as 'improvised' music.<sup>11</sup> Improvising filmmakers, however, even if they cannot claim the creative immediacy of jazzmen, tend to turn the shoot into an event, the take being a time of density akin to that of jazz improvisation, with the same unpredictability and invention in the moment. Jazzmen and filmmakers become united in a common desire, considering the creative act as a moment of experimentation, of collective research. In the cinema, this commitment does not only apply to the actors; it extends to the whole crew, whose aim is to capture the unexpected, the word, gesture or look that will launch that moment of truth. This conception of the cinema implies a certain number of choices that will determine every stage in the filmmaking process, with the ultimate consequence being the invention of unprecedented forms.

## Emptiness or overflow

Improvisation depends on original, or 'open', forms of writing. The philosopher Michel Guérin claims, however, that one 'senses writing as a hardening, a tensing-up of meaning. Because it *engraves*, it is seen as a *stop*.'<sup>12</sup> In order to understand improvisation, however, it is surely indispensable to come up with a form of writing that does not serve as a *stop*, but as a *start*. Numerous studies have pointed out two types of improvisation: one, enclosed in a pre-existing format, is considered merely as a form of *variation*; whereas the other, released from all the formats reckoned to hinder authentic invention, emerges as the only *creative improvisation*. In her remarkable analysis on the subject of dance, Catherine Kintzler takes up this contradiction between what she terms 'the improvisation of proliferation' and 'constituent improvisation'.<sup>13</sup> According to her,

improvisation, in its initial sense, can be understood as a renewal of models, of motifs. It is rooted in a powerful matrix from which it radiates and extrapolates. This is a sheltered form of improvisation, which assumes the constituted moment of an art, depending on it to proliferate to the point of saturation. There is nothing more traditional than this kind of improvisation, which perpetuates a model of oral culture.<sup>14</sup>

Kintzler goes on to argue in favour of the second type of improvisation, in her view the only one to engender true invention: 'When we talk about improvisation, we are referring particularly to the second meaning, the one that involves open improvisation, which, seeking a constituent moment, proceeds not through proliferation but by unlocking.'<sup>15</sup> She concludes that in the first perspective,

the same grids, the same polarizations symmetrically nourish, guide and magnetize the action of the improviser and the expectations of his audience: although virtuosity and fluidity engender pleasure linked to this *freedom of performance*, they are by definition bound to produce an effect of *recognition* and not an effect of unfamiliarity or rediscovery. They cannot give rise to the slightest *reform*.<sup>16</sup>

Improvised creation therefore requires one to 'create a blank slate in order to begin'<sup>17</sup> and, quite logically, Kintzler distances herself from any form of writing: 'As a general rule, the global nature of any mode of fixation tends to perpetuate the oral model and bring about an attitude that is closer to recognition than to reform.'<sup>18</sup>

In view of the stumbling block formed by the widespread notion that improvisation can only stem from a *tabula rasa*, this is a crucial debate. It would be easy to contest Kintzler's demonstration on the basis of a single example, jazz, that she appears, like Adorno, to brand as 'stereotypical and sterile'.<sup>19</sup> Without

going into the Adornian theory of jazz, which is itself a subject of debate,<sup>20</sup> it is probably sufficient to recall how a number of 'reformers' like Charlie Parker, Kenny Clarke, Dizzy Gillespie or Thelonious Monk managed to develop their music extensively, without challenging earlier practices based on improvisation within pre-existing chord charts. The same could be said of the precursors or inventors of free jazz, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane or Ornette Coleman, whose radicalism also stemmed from the jazz tradition.<sup>21</sup> The appalled reactions of fans who refused to consider bebop and free jazz as real jazz, proved, though this was hardly necessary, that their comfort zone had given way to a cauldron of new practices, in which invention was conditioned by an entirely familiar context that only existed in order to be challenged, overtaken and endlessly reinvented. Unlike Kintzler, for whom 'proliferation' and 'unlocking' are antonymic, proliferation seems to us to be the path always chosen by the improviser to reach – if he is lucky – that final unlocking. He is not satisfied with using his freedom to weave a comfortable web within a set framework. On the contrary, his position encourages him to step beyond it and use the clues provided by a few notes, a gesture or a phrase to attain the unforeseeable, the revelation of a form of truth. Miles Davis endlessly repeating the opening notes of *The Man I Love*,<sup>22</sup> Coltrane who seems to be abandoning his soul to the theme of *My Favorite Things*, Cassavetes on the set of *HUSBANDS* forcing an extra on the verge of tears to sing before a group of drunken men, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi accusing her husband in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* of being a 'socialite' and then building the whole sequence around this accusation. All these moments of improvisation are heartbreaking in the chasms formed by a few notes of Gershwin or Richard Rodgers, an end-of-dinner song or a seemingly innocuous remark.

Invention through improvisation is therefore only possible in both jazz and the cinema from the starting point of writing, of a pre-existing idea. Musicians and actors work from a common base and through impromptu exchanges gradually build up conditions for creative overflow. This is where we agree with Kintzler, who claims that 'A kind of real is indeed banished here, the real of evidence, immediacy and transparency, but this is only in order to call in more effectively the real of insistence and resistance.'<sup>23</sup> In the cinema, in order to reach the real that resists, one first needs to address the appearances, the evidence of the real; this is the only way to 'banish the real' and reveal the complexity and ambiguity of the world. This is the goal shared by Rossellini, Cassavetes, Rouch, van der Keuken and Ameur-Zaïmeche. All of them turned to improvisation in order to invent new forms but they never built on sand. Resisting the sirens of abstraction or 'experimental' cinema, they favoured a cinema of experience, relying on the body's energies and the inexhaustible potential of the narrative. For an actor, improvisation only means something when the situation has been set, however tenuously, and this situation cannot be confused with a mere

pretext, given the amount of preparation involved. The most intense moments in the films of Cassavetes were reached after innumerable takes, only some of which survived the cutting-room, and the exhausted bodies remain the only clue to the colossal effort that went into them; the famous scene of the improvised meal in Pialat's *À NOS AMOURS* represents the culmination of weeks of a gruelling shoot, with the conflicts between Pialat and some of his actors actually adding grist to the mill in some of the scenes; the sequence featuring the song in the asylum in Constantine, in *BLED NUMBER ONE*, was the result of the mutual trust gradually built up between staff and patients. Improvisation in the cinema cannot always be satisfied with emptiness because it so often stems from an overflow: an overflow of longing and exhaustion in Cassavetes, an overflow of tension in Pialat, and an overflow of suffering in Ameur-Zaïmeche.

## Writing the unpredictable

The appeal of the cinema, but also its complexity, resides in the multiplicity of operations that go into the creative process, from the first draft of the synopsis to the final cut. These successive stages shed light on the way the director implements his choices and determine the nature of the work to come. In other words, every technical decision, in the broad sense of the term, is also an aesthetic one.<sup>24</sup> If one stays with the notion of writing as fixing on paper, improvising filmmakers display a number of common characteristics. First and foremost, they are themselves authors or co-authors of the script and, with very few exceptions, this script is an original work or at the very least one vaguely inspired by a pre-existing text. The only two adaptations that will feature here are both different and unique and both demonstrate the quintessential freedom of the director. *THE CONNECTION* (1962) is a film by Shirley Clarke, adapted from Jack Gelber's famous play, created in New York in 1959 by Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre. The film, like the play, tackles improvisation by depicting a group of people in one venue *simulating* improvisation, while a jazz quartet pepper the performance with their own authentic improvisations. Clarke was not attempting to improvise from a text she had not written, her aim was to juxtapose the actors' simulated improvisation and the musicians' free improvisation. In *ENTRE LES MURS* (2008), François Bégaudeau's book served as the basis for a script that was then reinvented from the perspective of situations improvised by the young actors. The approach adopted by Bégaudeau and Laurent Cantet during the weekly preparatory workshops, and during the shoot itself, involved 'keeping the book at a distance' to allow the students/actors to appropriate the subject matter for themselves. Bégaudeau's involvement

as author, co-scriptwriter and lead actor acted as a kind of guarantee of freedom for the director: the film was structured in the shape of a year-long workshop from the matter of the book itself.

Being the author of an original screenplay enables the filmmaker to stand back if necessary and even introduce a radical new slant according to circumstances and the inspiration of the crew. Despite the carefully written script of *bled number one*, for instance, Ameur-Zaïmeche's violent confrontation with his mother country on the first few days of the shoot quickly convinced him that he should only retain the dramatic template (Kamel returning to his birthplace following his deportation and his rediscovery of a country he hardly knows) and use the work-in-progress to forge new sequences. Each situation was therefore reinvented in accordance with unexpected events and meetings, the director's intuitions and the crew's suggestions. The extreme example of Rivette's *OUT ONE: NOLI ME TANGERE* (1971) is another case in point, with Rivette taking the pretext of an adaptation of Balzac's *L'Histoire des Treize*, which only takes up a few pages, to produce a twelve and a half hour film. This is an exception, however, and fictional films rarely emerge from such tenuous precepts. Even the most improvisation-friendly filmmakers rely on frequently elaborate scripts, out of a sense of necessity rather than for production purposes (the putative financial backers being little inclined to throw themselves into a project of a few lines on the director's say-so). Writing does not simply (or necessarily) mean forecasting, organising, planning and controlling: it also implies *thinking*, implementing the creative process, a process that will nourish the choices that will need to be made during shooting. To leave the improvised channels open at the writing stage implies an acute awareness of the project, even if the filmmaker only gradually discovers the sinuous paths that will lead to a conceivable form. The films in which the improvisation aspect is of paramount importance are all by unclassifiable filmmakers whose work is innately consistent (Cassavetes, Pialat, Rozier, Rouch). In opting for improvisation, the role of the director is not only unchallenged but reinforced. Whatever the degree of unpredictability and collective creation, the director remains the author of the film, the one responsible for its 'composition' and 'direction'. Jacques Rivette is unequivocally the author of *OUT ONE: NOLI ME TANGERE*, in the same way as Charles Mingus is the composer of every work to which he put his name, even if his instructions to his musicians were limited to a few pointers on harmony and (or) structure. 'This is where the paradox or conjuring trick occurs', comments H el ene Frappat in her essay devoted to Rivette, 'because he plays on his authority, his responsibility, the director, in his own dialectical way, is also the author; and he reveals himself, discreetly (or deviously), as the master.'<sup>25</sup> But it is only paradoxical on the surface; if one opts for improvisation and draws on its potential, the prerequisite must be to define a creative world that is not only homogenous but firm.

Reading the script before the shoot<sup>26</sup> provides insight into the amount of freedom that will prevail on set. In the vast majority of films with a partial or total emphasis on improvisation, the choices of *mise-en-scène* are not explicit. The only pointers relate to the situations or to broad outlines for development, along with a few clues on the dialogue, location or set. Most of the technical decisions – movements, gestures, frames, scale of shot and so on – are made during the shoot. The crux of the *mise-en-scène* will therefore be invented on set, possibly after rehearsals. Such open scripts are incompatible with the shooting script, the locus of the programmed and mastered. Improvising filmmakers consequently avoid them and prefer to improvise the shot breakdown [*découpage*] on the spot, the script thereby becoming a work-in-progress. Defined by Vincent Amiel as ‘a preliminary intellectual process for breaking down reality, with the narrative in view,’<sup>27</sup> *découpage* is the element that brings the filmmakers closest to art music composers, who with the advent of the written score continually expanded their indications for performance (sounds, movements, nuances, attacks, phrasing...), in an attempt to protect themselves from any untoward deviation. *Découpage* no doubt involves other constraints, technical and economic in particular (the need to rationalize the shooting process, for example), but it also serves to underline the director’s intentions through the choice of frame, movement or gesture; in short, everything that *composes* each shot. It is tempting to interpret, as Amiel does, a lack of *découpage* as a *refusal* – but it is really more accurate to see it as a conception of the script, which excludes this process: what would be the point, after all, in using *découpage* to cancel out the inherent potential of the script? Amiel goes on to say that ‘*découpage* entails predicting the limitations of each shot and ordering them – in both senses of the term.’<sup>28</sup> The improvisers’ desire for creative disorder is incompatible with this need for order.

A number of scripts among the films under discussion here serve to illustrate this point, while also highlighting the diversity of the ‘writing strategies’. The script of *ADIEU PHILIPPINE*, for instance, comprised a series of situations that were to evolve considerably during the shoot, with Rozier unhesitatingly deleting scenes and coming up with others according to his inspiration and chance encounters, the personalities of the cast members nourishing the writing day by day. Rivette was often satisfied with just a few pages of synopsis: the script of *L’AMOUR FOU* ‘is a tale which unfolds over about thirty pages, [...] compiled in the wake of his conversations with Marilù Parolini.’<sup>29</sup> The sequences were liable to be written each evening by one or more of his accomplice scriptwriters or even by the actresses, as in *CÉLINE ET JULIE VONT EN BATEAU* (1974). Suzanne Schiffman, who co-directed *OUT ONE*, gave a detailed account of Rivette’s method:

During the pre-production stage, we wrote down the meeting points of the characters on a large sheet of squared paper, and then I drew up a kind of chart, which more or less collated the narrative continuity [...]. We followed that chart—we planned the shoot around it and used it to prepare the actors, to tell them when they were going to meet whoever.<sup>30</sup>

Ameur-Zaïmeche's scripts represent a serious sounding board for reflection before shooting begins but on set little (or no) reference is made to them, although this does not mean they have been cast aside. His method involves a writing stage, which allows him to pinpoint the possible trajectories, sketch out some of the leads and imagine what the different phases of the shoot will be; he then resumes oral communication with the participants as a whole. In each of his films, Ameur-Zaïmeche evokes very concrete worlds (the high-rise housing project outside Paris where he lives, his family's home village, a few African workers from a pallet manufacturing business a few miles from Paris) in which the relationship to the written word, often with poor command of the language, is an uphill struggle. The lack of the script-object during the shoot is a prerequisite for establishing the dialogue that is essential to collective creation. Any involvement with the written word would be seen as a way of introducing a balance of power with the actors, many of whom are playing their own characters. It is hardly surprising that Ameur-Zaïmeche will only acknowledge Jean Rouch as an influence, as the latter's method was founded on dialogue, on the leitmotiv of free speech, with no room for the immutable authority of the written word. Nobuhiro Suwa's project for *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, however, was of a totally different nature. From the starting point of a brief script, the successive sequences were mapped out with a series of drawings to indicate the frame and scale of the shots, the atmosphere being expressed in a variety of colours. These drawings, known as the 'score', illustrate the extent to which the methods of improvisation or, more accurately, the ways of *writing the unpredictable* vary from project to project. In Ameur-Zaïmeche's stories of small communities, as in the intimate exchange between Suwa's couple, the dialogues are invented by the actors and the movements are unplanned. These remarkably similar choices, however, produced works that are unlike each other in every other way: improvisation is the only common ground between the two films.

In 'open' scripts, dialogues, if they already exist at this stage, are just drafts or frameworks, subject to major change. 'We would have lunch together and everyone would invent his own dialogues'<sup>31</sup> recalls André S. Labarthe on the topic of *L'AMOUR FOU*. The broad outline was drawn but the words themselves were invented during exchanges with the cast in rehearsals or even – and this is not an exceptional case – during the actual takes of *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* or, to quote another totally different example, *L'APPRENTI* (2008), the strange fiction/

documentary directed by Samuel Collardey. The intimate exchanges between Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini are as improvised as the dialogues between all the 'amateurs' in Collardey's film. Again, the only common aspect of Suwa's urban fiction and Collardey's rural experiment is the use of improvisation. The choice of improvised dialogue is not alien, however, to the impression of reality that emanates from both films. The fact that actors are using their own words to express an idea enables them to experience the situation from the same standpoint as musicians working from an 'oral' score by Ellington or Mingus: they have become far more than interpreters of the written word; they are now 'filmmakers' in their own right, sharing the fiction that is being played out with the director. The latter needs to call on all his skills to ensure that the words do not move away from what is really at stake in the scene, while allowing – or even encouraging – discord and excess, which lend an unprecedented weight of truth to this viewpoint. Allowing the characters to 'fabulate' is one of the major challenges of improvisation in the cinema and filmmakers have invented a plethora of more or less deliberate strategies to contain the limits of this fabulation from within.

There is a striking contrast between the quiet self-confidence of Suwa, Collardey or Ameur-Zaïmeche and the wariness of the previous generation of improvisers. Jacques Rozier, for example, is cautious, not to say reticent, when he refers to the improvisatory element in his films. One should not forget, too, that even Cassavetes, who had probably been put off by the negative connotation of improvisation (despite the fact that his first film, *SHADOWS*, ends with the words: 'The film you have just seen was an improvisation'), would respond when any allusion was made to this subject that the script of *FACES*, the most improvised of his films, actually comprised over two hundred pages, an argument designed to dispel any 'suspicion' of improvisation. The most contemporary examples – far removed from Suwa, Collardey or Ameur-Zaïmeche – illustrate perhaps a change of mood: by openly acknowledging the importance of improvisation in their films, they are recognising that the choice is of paramount importance in the process of cinematic creation. Other equally serene improvisers will also be featured here, such as Philippe Faucon with *SAMIA* and Maurice Pialat with *À NOS AMOURS*, summed up by chief cameraman Jacques Loiseleux: 'We try to do things without formulating them, based on the principle that once they are formulated they are dead, whereas we want them to emerge alive from the actors and from the characters in the film.'<sup>32</sup> These few words show the importance of what we have called 'open writing', which tirelessly strives to find a balance between reflection, inevitable planning and an unwavering belief in the shoot as the cradle of creation and invention, and maybe even of improvisation. In improvised cinema, the film certainly ema-

nates from a written text but it is not an 'application' or 'execution', more a praxis.

## The script as matter

Although there is certainly a time for writing and a time for shooting in the cinema, they interweave in a completely different way when improvisation is on the menu. In order to write while knowing that a degree of invention will intervene on the set, one needs to take into account the actor's potential for invention. This form of writing, which does not aim to limit or restrain, but rather to encourage emergence and revelation, harks back once again to the position of the jazz composer. Making no concessions to the strictures of composition while being prepared to share the creation not only with the performers or actors but with the entire crew; welcoming the other into the composition with enough generosity to enable him to reveal something in turn: all this goes to show that writing and improvisation are not in contradiction, as is so often claimed, but can both come into their own through the invention of ongoing forms of exchange.

From this standpoint, one can attempt to reach a definition of these open scripts. Their underlying dual dimension of openness and control is best termed a *device*, and this device implies a global approach, a *modus operandi* capable of achieving its target, explicit or not. *TEN*, by Abbas Kiarostami, is a striking example of such a device, with each of the ten sequences taking place in a car, with two small digital cameras on the dashboard filming the passengers. The director, seated behind the actress, cues her during the take through a headset. There is no written dialogue; Kiarostami intervenes in real time and directs the actors from the inside, thereby becoming the only improviser on the set. Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's (many) devices are less sophisticated and less cunning. In *DERNIER MAQUIS* for example, a sequence is improvised in a room being used as a place of worship for a small community of Muslim workers. Ameur-Zaïmeche uses the rules of the religious ritual as a device, smattering them with embryos of fiction, which he uses as a basis for improvisation. The bedroom in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* is equally conceived as a device. The hotel room, discovered by Suwa and his chief camerawoman Caroline Champetier, is divided by a door into two distinct parts. The two actors, playing a couple on the verge of breaking up, use these two spaces to enact the strains in their relationship. The wide-angle, static shots contribute to the impression of the room as a dramatic space in which the characters are free to do their own thing. In *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE*, a remarkable documentary depicting the preparation of a jazz album,

Pascale Ferran uses the two separate rooms of the recording studio in *Ocoee* as though they were two communicating dramatic spaces, one occupied by the technical crew and the music producer and the other by the two musicians, the two cameramen and a sound engineer.

Although perfectly at home with these kinds of devices, improvisation can also be applied to more light-hearted contexts. For instance, the two young women who take up the attractive sailing instructor's invitation to spend time on his dinghy, in Rozier's *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* (1969), seem to be just out for a good time. They agree to act on camera as though they are (genuinely?) afraid, an improvised sequence that turns into one of the most powerful in the entire film. Fun and improvisation crop up again on the beach in *BLED NUMBER ONE*, with the women rediscovering sensuous pleasure in the waves of the Mediterranean, and in the extraordinary sequence of *WESH WESH, QU'EST-CE QUI SE PASSE?* (2001), Ameur-Zaïmeche's first film, in which a group of youths find an outlet for their boredom by improvising a game of golf on the lawn of a suburban housing project. The game may require rules, as in many of Rivette's films, but these are kept more or less under wraps and can change as the game progresses, according to the inspiration of the players. 'The child becomes himself by forgetting who he is – the game – and the actor finds his place by taking over someone else's – the role,' writes H  l  ne Frappat.<sup>33</sup> Rivette reinvents this form of entertainment through a multiplicity of plots and mysteries<sup>34</sup> that require solving together, a pleasure and challenge to the actor and a sometimes grueling path towards the truth of a person and character: the improvised adventure of the shoot becomes a way of playing out one's own life.

Over and above these devices or games without rules, however, scripts represent *matter*. 'One no longer writes a *phrase* but *matter*,' writes Fr  d  ric Pouillaude on the topic of improvisation in dance.

Composing a *phrase* usually means fixing the physical trajectory of a gesture and turning it into abstract ideality, which can be endlessly renewed. Writing *matter* is restricted to determining the general parameters of the identity of the gesture (which kinesthetic theme, rhythmical structure or accompaniment for the imaginary[...]) without actually fixing its form.<sup>35</sup>

In the cinema, these 'general parameters' are basically very dissimilar but share a receptivity to improvisation or to the unexpected. This is another facet of writing, which dismisses its fixed, predetermined aspect, its command over the events on set. It is no coincidence that such a script, or *matter*, is often transmitted by word of mouth, with no reference to the authority of a written document. Speech, as opposed to discourse, means exchange, the possibility of discussion and argument; in short, the onset of improvisation.

At this point, scriptwriting involves providing actors with the wherewithal to invent their own itinerary, ensuring they are open to a given situation or to unexpected solicitations. Creating the conditions for improvisation implies giving everyone the means to accept a degree of responsibility in the development of each situation and proposing a singular interpretation, a personal response. This does not mean that matter should be reduced to a mere succession of events with no one pulling the strings, even if the aims are expressed to a certain extent in the flow of the shoot. On the contrary, the project contained in this script-matter should be particularly firm, so that a form can gradually emerge during shooting (when the composition actually *takes form*) and be finally integrated at the editing stage. Although the script-matter may not impose any pre-determined form – unlike most film projects – it does require virtual forms, one of which will materialise in the cutting-room. This reversal, with each stage of the shoot playing a part in engendering form rather than applying the form created during the writing phase, enables us to understand the influence of improvisation on these films, which revealed other cinematic strengths. The forms taken by *FACES*, *L'AMOUR FOU* and *MAINE-OCÉAN* were not established by an all-powerful script, they were triggered by improvisation. Cinematic improvisation entails putting one's faith in the power of the events that are about to unfold in the heat of the action in order to bring about other representational forms of the real. Form, therefore, stems both from the potential of the script-matter and from the creative process set up during the duration of the shoot, which is a lived experience. The forms of improvised cinema are invented *between* open composition and improvisation, between script-matter and invention in the moment, before being fixed at the editing stage.

It is clear that what is being questioned here are the *functions* of writing, as we saw earlier with jazz, whose composers were not setting themselves *against* the authority of art music writing but *elsewhere*. The written word does not establish the norm, an 'indelible witness that precludes any wandering'<sup>36</sup>; but, on the contrary, enables speech to come alive thanks to a form of writing whose 'throat has been widened', as Frédéric Pouillaude so aptly puts it.<sup>37</sup> Cinema improvisation always goes through a writing phase – this is a way of keeping alive and refreshing writing's potential for invention – but the writing preserves the treasures that have been revealed through improvisation. The borderlines of composition and improvisation may be challenged but they do not disappear. Filmmakers have succeeded in bringing the two together in a common aim, already formulated by Alain Bergala in relation to Roberto Rossellini: to make the cinema 'the instrument of *revelation* and *capture* of a truth that he merely needs to bring to light.'<sup>38</sup> Improvisation is one of the ways of quenching that Rossellinian quest.

This 'capture of truth' does not simply depend on the scriptwriting. Improvisation is just as reliant on other choices, which can be summed up in a single founding principle: to allow actors greater freedom, which to a large extent – although not exclusively – implies limiting the constraints of the cumbersome technical apparatus. If improvisation has become such a vital and truly significant benchmark in modern-day cinema, it is because filmmakers now aspire to another kind of cinema, freer and more in touch with the real world. This quest for another truth stems from a reversal of priorities, highlighted on numerous occasions by Renoir and Rossellini. Although in the context of classical cinema actors were forced to bow before technical constraints, something that was further exacerbated by the arrival of the talkies, it became vital to release the actor from such hindrances; in other words, to make the technical constraints bow before the actor. In the wake of Renoir and Rossellini, this reversal of roles naturally put the spotlight on the New Waves, but also, and perhaps most of all, on those quintessentially inventive mavericks Jean Rouch, Agnès Varda, Jacques Rozier, Jacques Rivette, John Cassavetes, Maurice Pialat, Johan van der Keuken, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche and Philippe Faucon. For these filmmakers, the first step was to free themselves from the over-obvious clichés of classical drama, thanks to what we have termed the 'script-matter'. The second was to implement, on set, the conditions that would enable improvisation to exist as a possible pathway to truth.



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## 2. Creation in action

### A collective adventure

The reluctance of many filmmakers to be branded as improvisers results from the confusion that surrounds any attempt to define improvisation, wavering between the mystical consecration of a quasi-divine source of inspiration and a damning indictment linked to its supposedly unprepared nature, denoting a lack of creative thought. By claiming it not only as a choice but as a practice, we hope to dispel a romantic and supposedly facile reputation that has been systematically belied. Every act of improvisation, in whatever discipline, is based on working knowledge, on mastering techniques that first have to be learned. The improviser is not satisfied with turning his technical know-how into a virtuoso performance, he needs to go beyond it. Every improvising actor is, first and foremost, a skilled professional, prepared to set aside his honed technique – as John Cassavetes required Peter Falk or Ben Gazzara to do – because he knows this is the only way he can take risks and allow something to escape in the course of the take. This is the subtext of Jean Renoir's description of his teaching methods: 'I wanted to convince these young people that they needed to despise technique [...]. There was a risk they might then deduce that it was unnecessary to have any knowledge of the profession, which isn't true; on the contrary one needs to know it really well, one needs to know it inside out so that one can forget it.'<sup>1</sup> From Bulle Ogier and Jean-Pierre Kalfon in *L'AMOUR FOU* (1969) to Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* (2005) – but Isabelle Huppert and Gérard Depardieu in the works of Maurice Pialat also spring to mind – improvisation stems from a consummate mastery of the actor's art. In more documentary-style films (such as *L'APPRENTI* or *DERNIER MAQUIS*), the actor's technique may be of a different nature but it nevertheless calls upon genuine talent: 'There are only actors in this film', says Ameer-Zaïmeche about *DERNIER MAQUIS*, 'and yet only the mechanics and I had ever acted before.'<sup>2</sup> The requirements are different here, as the actors are improvising their own characters on camera, in everyday situations that have been reinvented for the purposes of the film. 'Playing oneself' may not involve as much *experience* but that does not mean it does not require a great deal of work. The same applies to the technical crew, the sound technicians and cam-

eramen in particular, who are forced to react in the moment to a situation that will only occur once, in the knowledge that the quality and speed of this reaction will determine the ultimate viability of the shot.

The actors' talent and the crew's reactivity apart, improvising filmmakers know that improvisation cannot be achieved on set without some degree of preparation, long or short. Many improvisations take root without the film crew, in the course of workshops that resemble theatre rehearsals. *SHADOWS* came out of an experiment with student actors in the Variety Arts Workshop, a small school that Cassavetes and Bert Lane launched in New York in 1956. The work continued on set, with Cassavetes taking shot after shot, as he was to do even more radically a few years later with *FACES* (1969). The system set up in rehearsals and followed up during the shoot makes it possible to re-appropriate the script and breathe life into it; but when improvisation occurs the appropriation becomes different. In acquiring the freedom to invent new proposals and delve beyond the writing, the process exceeds the performance by abolishing the gap between writing and acting: to the improviser, acting is writing. It is not a case of acting *against* the script; improvisation takes the writing one step further and relies on an element of exchange and collective inspiration that conjures up Renoir's definition of the script: 'When you write your script, when you prepare your film, you are setting up the pier of your future bridge. If the overall idea has been properly conceived, you know that your bridge will fit in with this idea, but there is no way of knowing beforehand how it will actually turn out.'<sup>3</sup> To improvise is to build the apron of the bridge together.

Fifty years on, in *ENTRE LES MURS*, Laurent Cantet's approach seemed to hark back to *SHADOWS*. François Bégaudeau's book, as we have said, was the starting point for the film, which was built around a year-long weekly improvisation workshop led by Cantet and Bégaudeau and located in a high school in Paris. The experiment continued into the shoot itself, its open-ended format allowing the sequences to be developed in accordance with the participants' inspiration. Rivette was also paving the way for improvisation when he viewed the entire shoot as a workshop in which a common project could be implemented thanks to the infallible commitment of all its members, rehearsal after rehearsal, take after take, sometimes to the point of exhaustion. Rabah Ameur-Zaimeche's aim, particularly in *BLED NUMBER ONE*, when he chose to make the takes last as long as possible, was in the same vein. Thanks to video, he was able to make a sequence continue for minutes on end with no interruptions, in an attempt, once again, to grasp the unexpected. Joint participation through communal workshops is a recurring aspect in the work of filmmakers for whom the cinematic process is an act of collective creation, guaranteeing the commitment of every member to a project, its originality depending to a large extent on this very commitment. Contrary to popular belief, this conception of the collective is ex-

tremely rare, as the undeniable hierarchy on set makes *shared work* far more common than *collective work*.

Improvisation for the filmmaker means being prepared not to know everything prior to the shoot and putting his faith in unforeseen events in order to reach an elusive truth. By counting on the commitment and contribution of each crew member in helping him invent the prerequisites for improvisation, the director is refusing to brandish some superior knowledge in the face of his team's supposed ignorance, their role being merely to carry out orders. Although this may appear innocuous, one only needs to follow a 'classic' shoot in order to see just how impossible it is for the director's authority to be questioned without arousing anxiety, the slightest doubt being interpreted as a sign of weakness. Viewing the set as a forum in which everyone, whatever his status, is a proactive force, a forum which calls for a critical mind and in which initiative is obviously encouraged, is something numerous improvisational experiments have in common, however many differences there may be in the actual mechanics of the *mise-en-scène*. This collective approach is implemented in a different way by the director's physical involvement at the hub of the collective. Jacques Rozier tried his hand at almost every technical job on the set: cameraman, electrician, sound technician and set designer, depending on the urgency of the situation. There are innumerable photos of Cassavetes behind the camera, and the same applies to Johan van der Keuken and Jean Rouch, documentary directors who also claimed links with improvisation. Playing one of the characters, as did Cassavetes, but also Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche and Jean-François Stévenin, is another way of intervening physically in the film. These approaches do not only apply to improvised cinema, but they certainly appear to be prerequisites for the emergence of collective improvisation, whose watchword is: to be on hand from the first to the last day of shooting, and to work together in action and *doing*. It does not seem excessive to see this joint commitment in political terms, given the often precarious conditions in which these films are made, but that is the price to pay for freedom in the context of the cinema, where staggering amounts of money are often involved, generating endless constraints. Today more than ever, opting for the freedom of improvisation on a film set implies resisting a system in which filmmaking is reduced to a faithful adaptation of a script rewritten as the result of a compromise with the backers. The highly flexible set-ups that are the rule, and hardly ever the exception, can only exist in the context of small crews over which the 'heavy industry' of the cinema has no hold. Indeed in some cases, such experiences are almost clandestine.

To turn the shoot into a collective adventure, improvising filmmakers tend to surround themselves time after time with the same cast and crew, and sometimes even build up a whole troupe on the basis of complicity and trust. One only needs to read the credits on the films of Cassavetes, Rivette, Rouch, Rozier,

Ameur-Zaïmeche and Stévenin to see the same names cropping up again and again, interspersed with the occasional new recruit, who proves to be equally loyal. They are fully aware of the demands that will be put on them, with everyone being expected to tackle several jobs, whatever their 'official' skills may be, but they also know just how unique these experiences can be. The famous photo of the little troupe on the set of *SHADOWS* looking as if they are ready to storm the streets of New York, is a case in point. Cassavetes gradually formed a clan in which the producer (Al Ruban) was just as likely to act as chief cameraman or editor. The same spirit pervades the works of Stévenin or Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche today, the latter being the director, actor and producer of his films, while his editor, Nicolas Bancilhon, is equally floor manager and assistant director (*BLED NUMBER ONE*). The production manager of that same film, Sarah Sobol, also features in the credits as assistant director. This is undoubtedly a novel approach to filmmaking, the collective cinema challenging the established hierarchy between the director and his traditional 'creative team', i.e. the set designers or chief cameraman. This team spirit may not only exist in improvised films but it is nevertheless their *sine qua non*, in view of the degree of spontaneity and reactivity such films demand.

This desire to see filmmaking as a collective adventure is mirrored almost naturally in the films' content, each one becoming, at least in part, a reflection in situ on the prerequisites for improvised cinema. All Rozier's works depend on a small group of characters who are, willingly or unwillingly, about to experience a collective adventure in the most unlikely venues, where they will be required to face unprecedented situations. The most radical example is that of the *NAUFRAGÉS DE L'ÎLE DE LA TORTUE* (1976), in which some of the staff members in a travel agency offer tourists an opportunity to find themselves on a desert island in the same situation as Robinson Crusoe, where they have to get by as best they can.<sup>4</sup> Rozier's other films are structured along the same lines: Michel, the young Parisian in *ADIEU PHILIPPINE* (1961), decides to give up work and spend a few weeks in Corsica before going off to fight in Algeria; the three young women in *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* (1969) also go off on vacation, to a villa on the Atlantic coast, while the heroes of *MAINE-OCÉAN* (1986) find themselves spending a weekend on the Île d'Yeu, against their better judgment. Rozier is not simply concerned with isolating small communities in unlikely places and putting them through unexpected situations, however. His 'delocalized' shoots also force the team to abandon their everyday lives and the comfort of their Parisian routines. By choosing a small island in the West Indies, the Île d'Yeu or the deserted Atlantic coast (*DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* was filmed in October, long after the end of the tourist season), the whole cast and crew find themselves having to spend several weeks together, forming a troupe in which everyone is swept up in the same adventure, which leads to some fairly predict-

able encounters. Rozier elaborates on the ideas expressed by Renoir regarding *LA RÈGLE DU JEU*, the clearest example of the latter's predilection for improvisation:

I allowed myself to become completely absorbed by the subject; and also, of course, by everything that went into it, like the actors, who were quite extraordinary, completely at home in the guest house we were staying in. There we all were, a long way from Paris – it's vital to be a long way from Paris in a case like that, in order to get away from the trivia of everyday. Other trivial things cropped up in the troupe but that was a good thing, it was tremendous. We were cut off from the rest of the world and the whole atmosphere – the actors and the landscape, and also the subject, as I said earlier – really spurred me on and drove me to do masses of things that were not initially planned.<sup>5</sup>

Equally significant are the films of Jean-François Stevénin, originally Rivette's assistant and also one of his actors. From *PASSE MONTAGNE* (1978), set in a small village in the Jura, to *DOUBLE MESSIEURS* (1986), located in the Grenoble region, and finally the incredible road movie *MISCHKA* (2001), all his films are the result of a collective experience. Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's trilogy, the first in the Bosquets housing project, the second in an Algerian village and the third in a small firm in the Paris suburbs, also revolve around the collective experience, through communities that have invented other ways of living together. The presence of the small film crew is only accepted after a long period of adaptation by every member of the community and the Ameur-Zaïmeche 'method' is based on the breaking down of barriers between that community and the crew. It therefore turns into a truly shared experience, and the director's subtle approach succeeds in convincing all the participants that the film will be a joint creative effort that will unfold during the few weeks of shooting, weeks that also imply living together as a community.

Jacques Rivette formulated this idea of the cinema as a shared experience, explaining that in *L'AMOUR FOU*, for instance, he

wanted to make a film, not inspired by Renoir, but trying to conform to the idea of a cinema incarnated by Renoir, a cinema which does not impose anything, where one tries to suggest things, to let them happen, where it is mainly a dialogue at every level, with the actors, with the situation, with the people you meet, *where the act of filming is part of the film itself*.<sup>6</sup>

During the period spanning *L'AMOUR FOU* and *PONT DU NORD* (1981), Rivette constantly reiterated that the film in its future form should simply stand as the trace of the adventure that went into making it:

What was exciting [in *L'AMOUR FOU*] was creating a reality which began to have an existence of its own, independently of whether it was being filmed or not; and then to

treat it as though it were a documentary feature, keeping only certain aspects, certain points of view, according to chance or to one's ideas, because, by definition, the event always exceeds from every possible angle the story or the report one makes of it.<sup>7</sup>

Every improvisational experiment in the cinema can be gauged by Rivette's hypothesis, itself a perpetuation of the practices of Renoir and Rouch. Their differences provide rich pickings too, of course, ranging from Rivette's imaginary adventures, the African fictions of Rouch the ethnologist, Rozier's Robinsonian capers, Ameur-Zaïmeche's political agenda and Pialat's bitterness. If these filmmakers have brought about multiple, and frequently highly dissimilar, exchanges between reality and fiction, however, their common conception of the shoot as a collective adventure in which each event is liable to trigger fundamental changes in the forthcoming work nevertheless sheds a different light on Rivette's idea of the film as a 'documentary' of its own shoot. Improvisation in the cinema, in its quintessentially unpredictable nature, becomes the most concrete and prominent trace of the film-in-progress, of the immediacy of the event. Once again, and not for the last time, it must be stressed that this does not preclude preparation, or a requisite amount of premeditation – something that varies widely according to the filmmaker. But each one of them remains convinced that the vital essence of the cinema is played out through excess, through the unforeseen and through the use of improvisation as an opportunity for divergence.

## **Renoir and the actor, Rossellini and the world**

If Jean Renoir's name has cropped up so often, it is because he was the only one of his generation to keep harking back to the issue of improvisation as the most accurate way of getting under the skin of life. Although he refrains from idealising his own manifestations of improvisation, his reflections, particularly in *Écrits (1926-1971)*<sup>8</sup> and in the compilation *Jean Renoir. Entretiens et propos*,<sup>9</sup> help one to understand what kind of cinematic vision triggered this desire for improvisation, in a period (the interviews took place between 1954 and 1967) when a great many directors (Rouch, Rozier, Cassavetes...) were imposing new modalities of cinema from the *starting point* of improvisation. An exchange in 1961 between Renoir and Rivette reveals the cornerstone of the former's thinking, soon to be taken up and radicalised by the latter. In response to a question on shooting with several cameras, Renoir explains: '[...] I will try, even in a film that was not designed for that purpose, to use several cameras in scenes in which I feel the action, from start to finish, needs to be led by the actor.' Rivette

gets him to take this idea further: 'This technique is actually only the final phase in a process you have been researching for a long time, really since the advent of the talkies, in an attempt to achieve maximum continuity through the actor.' 'That's right', agrees Renoir, 'you try to obtain in the film, or at least in some of its scenes, a continuity that stems from the development of the actor's expression, his inner development, instead of a continuity that is generally manufactured artificially in the cutting-room.'<sup>10</sup>

This desire to allow the expression of the actor to take precedence over any other consideration is one of Renoir's hallmarks. As Rivette remarks, Renoir did not wait for the 1950s to expound his theory: several sequences from *LA CHIENNE* (1931), *TONI* (1934), *LA GRANDE ILLUSION* (1937) or *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* (1939) were structured with the same determination to give the actors time, and indeed the actors were sometimes filmed simultaneously with two or three cameras in order to allow for flexibility during the montage. Renoir's aim was to do everything in his power to nurture an uninterrupted flow of dialogue as the mouthpiece for a certain truth. This of course explains his aversion to dubbing: 'If one accepts dubbing,' he said, 'then one accepts that the dialogue is not real dialogue, one refutes that kind of mysterious connection between a trembling voice, an expression [...]. In short, it means one has ceased to believe in the unity of the individual.'<sup>11</sup> Defending the continuity of the actor's performance, believing in the voice as a *sound* inextricably linked to the body, to these two pillars of the Renoir style one must add a third, and one which makes him a precursor of the improvisational experiments of the 1950s and 1960s: the importance granted to the collective and to the role of the individual within that collective. Renoir's *mises-en-scène* in *TONI*, *LE CRIME DE M. LANGE* and most radically in *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* involved creating an atmosphere that would generate a feeling of confusion, of unpredictability, but without losing sight of the general unity or the hierarchy between the characters. 'I was resolutely determined to highlight the main characters and keep them away from this chaotic ambience'<sup>12</sup> explained Renoir on the topic of *LA RÈGLE DU JEU*. This insistence on background movement, with one or two of the main characters standing out from the crowd, conjures up the orchestral compositions of Duke Ellington in which the brass stands are arranged to create a particular type of sound, designed both to guide the soloist and to accentuate his phrasing. Each musician retains an element of freedom, particularly as regards the appropriation of sound, and Ellington succeeds in taking a new slant on aural combinations thanks to the inspiration of the powerful personalities who make up the band and a composition that takes each of their specificities into account. This is what Renoir is referring to when he states, again in connection with *LA RÈGLE DU JEU*: 'In a film like that, fifty per cent is improvised, but the improvisation corresponds to something deep-rooted within me. In other words, the general atmo-

sphere is not improvised but the ways of expressing it are frequently improvised.<sup>13</sup> Renoir's orchestral talent is just as striking when he brings an improviser like Michel Simon centre stage, in *LA CHIENNE* (1931) or *BOUDU SAUVÉ DES EAUX* (1932), by placing him against an 'orchestral background' designed not only to bring the soloist to the fore and provide him with an element of freedom but to fix the limits of this freedom and apply directorial control over the improvisation *within the scene itself*.

Many analysts have tried to reduce the improvisational element in Renoir's work to the decisions made on set, thereby excluding the actors and the here and now aspect of the shot. It is true that he sometimes wrote the dialogues at the last moment, made equally last-minute directorial choices and was always ready to invent new sequences – even when shooting had begun. Despite the hurdles, however, which were largely due to the cumbersome nature of the cinematographic machine, Renoir managed to give his actors a degree of freedom of movement, and *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* is a shining example of this. From the basic exchange of dialogue, in which he focuses on the way the bodies interact, rather than on static close-ups, to the sequences in which he plays on the multiplicity of events going on in the depth of field, and the chases in which the characters seem to be inventing the trajectories as they go along, his *mise-en-scène* gives a strong impression of a work-in-progress, created in the heat of the moment, with no prior planning. Renoir counters the technical inertia with a highly mobile *mise-en-scène*, its vibrant energy reminiscent of *Commedia dell'arte*. He succeeds in making up for the camera's slow reactions by devising tricks that make it look as though the camera is not preceding the action and movements but simply following them, in long, fluid shots. This became one of the tenets of Rossellini's cinema, although it was later adopted by everyone who claimed to be part of the improvisational canon.

Another principle which has already been mentioned, and to which we shall return at length, involves filming the sequence from the inside. The work Renoir undertook with Michel Simon in *BOUDU* or *LA CHIENNE* shows that he was perfectly ready to hand over the reins to his lead actors in a particular scene, but he also made his own presence felt as an actor, in *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* for instance. The character of Oscar oscillates constantly between the world of the masters, who see him as a friend and confidante, and that of the servants, theoretically closer to his social origins. His undefined status not only enables him to act as go-between among the various characters but justifies his appearance in a large number of scenes. Renoir, therefore, hones his directing skills in the midst of the actors, deflecting one actor's inspiration and encouraging the 'excesses' of another. Although it cannot be termed a method, the filmmaker certainly borrowed a principle here, which can be attributed just as much to jazz as to his acknowledged musical source, the Baroque:

The evening was spent listening to records and finished off with a film. I cannot actually claim that Baroque music inspired *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* but it did make me want to film people moving to the spirit of this music [...]. Little by little my idea took shape and the subject was pared down. After a few days, which I continued to experience in the form of Baroque rhythms, the subject became clearer and clearer.<sup>14</sup>

Renoir no doubt knew that improvisation existed in seventeenth-century art music and that Baroque composers conducted their own music. In *LA RÈGLE DU JEU*, he struck a balance between the contrapuntal compositions of the Baroque masters and the orchestral world of Duke Ellington, who, despite the centuries that divided them, shared a taste for the musician as performer *and* improviser. Through improvisation, Rozier, Rouch and Rivette perpetuated Renoir's work by giving precedence to the collective and to unity of speech and body as a source of human revelation.

Apart from their determination to allow the actor time, these filmmakers had another ambition, this time more akin to Rossellini than to Renoir. In response to the gradual simplification of the subject as advocated by Renoir, Alain Bergala has shown how vital it was for the Italian director to start from the most rudimentary reality, the one least fabricated by the cinema:

Rossellini discovered from the outset that if truth in the cinema was a question of ontology and not of language, he would need to start from the most literal, least re-elaborated reality. Rossellini never reneged on this conviction. His comments were always underpinned by the need to start from 'things in their reality', 'things as they really are', the 'true sense of things'.<sup>15</sup>

This confrontation with brute reality sheds a radical new light on a cinema that is no longer concerned with the balance and beauty of the shot, but with the expression of truth in the chaos of the world: 'It doesn't even matter about the objective proportions of the structure,' writes Bergala, 'everything happens in the underlying, adjoining movements of the protagonist's soul and that of his audience.'<sup>16</sup> Rossellini gets his characters to face the most bitter realities, either against the backdrop of 'History', as in *ROME, VILLE OUVERTE*, *PAÏSA* or *ALLEMAGNE ANNÉE ZÉRO* or in intimate dramas such as *STROMBOLI*, *EUROPE 51* and *VOYAGE EN ITALIE*.

Earlier filmmakers, however, were already well used to shooting fictional films on location, and many of them had deliberately moved away from the comfort and artificiality of the studios to fit in with their project. Their experiments were already in part a reflection of their wish to bestow another truth on the characters, through the reality of the outside world. 'The broad, musical tempo of many of the scenes and the actors' natural spontaneity, together with a form of documentary realism in the atmosphere and detail, often give the im-

pression of watching an improvisation,' wrote Jacques Lourcelles<sup>17</sup> on the subject of King Vidor's *HALLELUJAH* (1929), in which many sequences were shot on the banks of the Mississippi. Other filmmakers, as diverse as John Ford in *STEAMBOAT ROUND THE BEND* (1935), Jean Vigo in *L'ATALANTE* (1934) or Jean Renoir in *TONI* (1934), were also determined to give their characters a 'documentary depth', triggered by the presence of nature.

This mere presence takes on another dimension with Rossellini, whose aim is no longer to place fiction within the reality of the world, but to be where life is at its most vibrant, in order to 'convey reality in a pitilessly concrete manner'.<sup>18</sup> In *ROME, VILLE OUVERTE* (1945), *PAÏSA* (1946) and *ALLEMAGNE ANNÉE ZÉRO* (1947), all shot while the embers of the war were still burning, Rossellini reinvented the fictional character, stripping him of all heroic trappings to become a simple human being in the face of History, and the fictional story, which adopted a documentary slant on the world, unfolding in unpredictable twists and turns, with no predetermined script. The strength and consistency of Rossellini's work, which go far beyond the later definition (or caricature) of Neo-Realism, lie in his interest in the human being and his unwavering observation of the complexity of his relationship to the other and to the world. The most revolutionary aspect of his films stems from 'his desire to capture the present, nothing but the present, in the heat of the moment,'<sup>19</sup> the present of History in the making and the present of the characters' intimate journeys into the reality of a world they can no longer comprehend. The determination to reveal this present without masking its brutality and cruelty made Rossellini a precursor among filmmakers for whom improvisation provided a way of pursuing the same concerns. Cassavetes opted unhesitatingly for the intimate, taking a scalpel to depict his characters' frustrations and the unleashing of repressed desires in *FACES, A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF LOVE STREAMS*. Rivette followed the same course with the couple in *L'AMOUR FOU*, Pialat tracked the intimate downward spiral of a family in *À NOS AMOURS* and Suwa was directly inspired by *VOYAGE EN ITALIE* in the inner journey portrayed in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*. Others, like Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, are closer to the immediately postwar Rossellini, and place their characters in a clear-cut political context, flanked by an ethnological dimension inherited from Jean Rouch. But, however diverse their creative worlds may be, they nevertheless all take human beings as their starting point, and all allow the adventures and digressions of their characters (and the shoot) to determine the narrative structure and move the goalposts between fiction and documentary.

This awareness of the complexity and heterogeneity of the world produced films in the form of imprints or sketches, films in which the raw truth of emotion, however cruel, was infinitely more important than faultless composition.

Bergala rightly points out that Rossellini's modernity overlapped with the modernity of painting, as described by Gombrich in the following terms:

For Monet's idea that all painting of nature must actually be finished 'on the spot' not only demanded a change of habits and a disregard of comfort. It was bound to result in new technical methods. [...] The painter who hopes to catch a characteristic aspect has no leisure to mix and match his colours, let alone to apply them in layers on a brown foundation as the old masters had done. He must fix them straight on to his canvas in rapid strokes caring less for detail than for the general effect of the whole. It was this lack of finish, this apparently slapdash approach which literally enraged the critics.<sup>20</sup>

Gombrich naturally assimilated Rodin to these artists who 'scorned the finished impression' – Rodin, whose works form the heart of Suwa's *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*.

Rouch, Cassavetes, Rozier or the Godard of *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE* were also to exasperate the critics by their lack of respect towards a possible 'grammar of cinema'. Improvising, as has been said, means accepting to film the work-in-progress, the moments of trial and error, the approximations, accepting the unknown, and then turning this uncertainty into a gateway leading to another form of truth. Take Thelonious Monk, whose finger seems to have slipped on an unforeseen note and who then finds his inspiration for the rest of the phrase by repeating that same note: if it has crept into the movement of the hand by chance, it will find its place in the continuum of the improvisation. To Monk, the 'false note' is a strictly transitory state, and not only will this same note become the right note, it will add relief to the rest of the solo. Monk was initially accused of lacking piano technique, but it soon became clear that his apparent lack of virtuosity was actually vital to his style, to his individual musical expression. The montage of *SHADOWS* or *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE* was to lead adepts of orthodox classical cinema to tax the new filmmakers with a similar ignorance of cinematographic technique, but the 'jump cuts' of Cassavetes and Godard are just like Monk's 'false notes'. In their logical rejection of the seamless match cut, Rouch, Cassavetes, Godard and Rozier were confirming that in their conception of the cinema rhythm, beat and movement were paramount: 'I always capture things in motion.' Rossellini had said, 'and I couldn't care less whether I get to the end of the movement before matching it with the next shot'.<sup>21</sup> The biases shown in improvised cinema, such as the continuity in relation to the actor, the links with the chaos of the world and a belief in the unpredictable as a possible source for revealing truth, engendered other types of work, other forms of montage. Once again, it was not a case of being *against* the classical preparatory approach, it was a way of bringing new creative processes to the fore, in which the priorities had been altered: the emphasis on mastery and completion had

given way to the work-in-progress concept of collective improvisation, with all that it implied in terms of concentration on the present, openness, reactivity and a degree of incompleteness. In this context, judging the work of Jacques Rozier by the yardstick of Alain Resnais thereby becomes as irrelevant as comparing Ellington's compositions to those of Stravinsky. Improvising filmmakers have taken to extremes the idea that an element of cinematic truth can only be attained through loss of control, and can only spring from what escapes, in a hereafter of composition and in the mastery of detail. One of the ways of reaching what Bergala calls the 'point of truth' or 'confession' is to welcome the overflow, the moment when what is planned is superseded by a subconscious element, which leads the characters along other paths. This transition from *interpretation* to *improvisation* must not be viewed as a culmination, but rather as an alternative, a possible sequel of prepared composition. This kind of cinema must be centred on the actors, on their bodies and voices, on the exchanges that can surface within the duration of the take, rather than on the constant interruptions that prevail in the course of traditional shoots. The necessary time span is accompanied by another, equally important, prerequisite: freedom of physical movement, which is inherent in the desire to abandon the confined space of the studio and step into the real world. Improvisation may entail shooting on location, using live sound and giving the actors freedom of movement, but it also implies other filming techniques that are far less restrictive, or at least in which the restrictions are of a completely different nature.

## **On the fringes of the New Wave**

Although the actual concept of improvisation goes back as far as filmmaking itself, its implementation was essentially linked to the aspirations of a new 'modern' era of cinema, in the wake of World War II. This research into a renewal of forms, a fertile experimental ground in the 1950s, coincided with major technical innovations. It is hard to say whether the desire for a different kind of cinema stemmed from these technical developments or whether it was the other way round. To quote a famous example, Bergala has shown<sup>22</sup> that the role of such developments in the aesthetic approaches of the New Wave directors has been greatly exaggerated: the determination of Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol and others to pit themselves against the 'professionals of the profession', bitterly criticised in the columns of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, soon convinced them to shoot their first feature films in 35 mm, the regular format for movie theatres, and the only one to be recognised by the movie industry. In order to avoid being marginalised, they resisted 16 mm, even though by 1959 it already matched what

they were looking for in terms of weight, performance and sync sound. This realisation led Bergala to claim that,

what has sometimes been overlooked, in rewriting the history of the advent of the New Wave, is that there was no synchronization between the desire for esthetic, stylistic change, represented by the young team of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, and the reality of technical developments in the 1950s and 1960s. One can even claim, in this particular historic context, that the idea of a new form of esthetics preceded, and in part determined, the cinema's technical innovations throughout the 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

The increase in image-based reportage of war zones, together with the advent of television, made more portable cameras, such as the Arriflex, launched in 1937, and the even lighter Caméflex or Camerette, created by Éclair in 1947, a necessity. These two 35 mm models, termed combat cameras by the Americans, did have one substantial drawback however – their noise. Filmmakers had to wait a long time for the industry to come up with an answer. The handy, and at long last silent, Arri BL 35, the first 35 mm camera to permit shooting with live sound, was only produced in 1972, although it was soon followed by other models. Alain Cavalier, who, like Renoir, never came round to the idea of dubbing, that moment when, as he put it: 'sound finally meets the body, but too late: it is impossible to separate what nature has united'<sup>24</sup> was thrilled to have the opportunity of shooting *PLEIN DE SUPER*, a semi-improvised film shot in 1976, with the new Panavision camera:

Compact, silent and can be hand-held. Image and sound, same quick performance. Shooting flexible and sharp. It feels as though the eye of the cameraman and the ear of the sound engineer are my own. Impression that I've unearthed, for a long time to come, the ultimate machine for seizing life before it either evaporates, freezes or strikes me down.<sup>25</sup>

If one shares Cavalier's view that improvisation by actors requires live recording of spontaneous speech to be effective, it has to be assumed that the New Wave directors were not attracted to this kind of improvisation. Things were not that simple, however. Whereas Chabrol, a dyed-in-the-wool Hitchcockian, was never drawn, Rivette, as we know, came round to the idea in 1969, with *L'AMOUR FOU* and *OUT ONE*, and Rohmer experimented with it much later, in *LE RAYON VERT*. Although Truffaut enjoyed last-minute, on-set scriptwriting, he hardly ever actually used improvisation. The case of Godard is more ambiguous, as we shall see later. Although he demonstrated his longstanding interest in the technical aspect of filmmaking by choosing the lightweight, quick-acting Camerette to shoot *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE*, this did not mean that the actors were free to improvise; as on some of Orson Welles' films, improvisation was reserved for his own in situ choices of mise-en-scène. The improvisations that

really affected the actors actually occurred on the fringes of the New Wave, with Jean Rouch and Jacques Rozier in particular monitoring the rapid development of film equipment.

Jacques Rozier's first feature film, *ADIEU PHILIPPINE*, came out in 1962. The opening sequence, which unfolds as the credits are rolling, was shot in a television studio during a live recording of Jean-Christophe Averty's 26<sup>th</sup> programme of *Jazz Memories*, featuring the clarinetist Maxim Saury. Against the black background that precedes the first image, the audience hears a voice giving the tempo for the opening jazz number and for the film itself. As Saury's vibrant '1... 2... 1 2 3...' fades away, the opening shot merges precisely into the rhythm, with the band striking up in time to the first beat of the measure. A sideways tracking shot focuses on a television camera and its cameraman, his eye on the viewfinder, and goes on to take in most of the set, showing the concentration of both technicians and musicians, the trailing cables, the microphones, the dollies, the lens turrets and control screens; in short, everything that constitutes a live recording. Averty's commanding tones ring out from time to time, before he actually appears on camera, sitting in a small studio, his eyes riveted on the monitors showing shots from all the different cameras, from which he not only has to choose the images he wants to broadcast but anticipate the next movements by communicating with each of the cameramen. There is a clear analogy between the band's New Orleans polyphony and the apparently chaotic set, directed by Averty. Rozier is comparing a live recording to a performance of New Orleans jazz. The brilliant canvas composed by overlying harmonious and rhythmical lines is countered by the pan shots, the whirling turrets, the ballet of cameramen swiftly replacing the cameras, followed by the technicians freeing the cables. This plethora of seemingly random operations demonstrates an extraordinary impetus, directed towards a common end, its success depending on each person's commitment, encapsulated by all the band members during the live performance.

This introduction to *ADIEU PHILIPPINE*, in which Rozier pays tribute to the techniques launched by television, conjures up the opening sequence of *LA RÈGLE DU JEU*. Here there is no cameraman but a sound technician with a headset, busy adjusting the potentiometers. A track out reveals a huge roll of cable being uncoiled by another technician. The camera seems to be fleetingly drawn in by the movement of the cable, before panning swiftly from left to right to frame a close-up shot of a Radio-Cité reporter with a microphone. It then makes its way, with difficulty, through the throng that has gathered to welcome the aviator André Jurieu at Le Bourget airport, following his transatlantic flight. The reporter, played by Lise Elina, comments live from the chaotic, bustling scene before being granted a brief interview with the hero of the hour. The leitmotiv of this sequence is the microphone cable, which enables Jurieu's voice to be heard by

the interested party, as he expresses his disappointment at not seeing Christine, the young woman to whom he dedicated this exploit. Renoir makes the link in a dissolve between Jurieu and a close-up of the back of a radio, a close-up that tilts up to reveal Christine standing next to her bed with her maid Lisette, both of them listening anxiously to the live broadcast.

These two sequences, by highlighting the latest technical developments, went some way towards meeting the cinematic ambitions of Renoir and Rozier. For the former, the flexibility and accuracy of live sound and the rapid broadcasting of news through the medium of radio. For the latter, the speed and reactivity of shooting with several cameras, thanks to television. Two ways of broaching a film with a gleeful demonstration of how technology makes it possible to seize the moment, to capture the present. Twenty-three years elapsed between the two, however, and while Renoir's depiction of radio broadcasting is a reconstitution, a simulated live recording, Rozier was actually shooting a live programme. Rozier, who had been a television assistant, admitted much later that he wanted 'to draw on both Renoir and live television'. He went on, 'So I shot *ADIEU PHILIPPINE* like that, with two cameras. This allowed me to avoid interruptions when shooting a sequence, to opt for continuity and therefore give the actors plenty of freedom to improvise.'<sup>26</sup> The appeal of the live was just as ingrained with Jean Rouch, and it is well known that he joined forces with camera manufacturers to hone lightweight equipment that would provide optimum conditions for shooting in Africa. In 1959, in Abidjan, he directed *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*, his first film with a modicum of live sound<sup>27</sup> (which created its own problems at the post-sync stage), celebrating its user-friendly technology in the very first shots. After an announcement regarding the improvised nature of the film, Rouch closed the pre-credits with a shot of two of the main characters looking through the window of a camera shop, featuring a tripod camera no bigger than a stills camera. Rozier and Rouch, both pioneers of improvisation, were thereby acknowledging their debt to the technicians who had turned their dream of the cinema into reality, a cinema which re-appropriated television reporting techniques to invent new forms of fiction. A few years later, in *L'AMOUR ROU*, Rivette was to use the backdrop of improvisation to examine the relationship between television coverage and shooting in the more traditional 35 mm format.

The links between television and improvised filmmaking in the late 1950s were not limited to reportage. 'Intimacy is television's style of predilection' wrote André Bazin in 1955. He went on: 'In practical terms, the director has to convey this by emphasizing the actor rather than the set; if one takes that to extremes, the whole thing could actually be shot in close-up.' To Bazin, television was inextricably linked to the notion of the 'live', which creates a specific rapport to intimacy. 'It is obvious,' he writes,

that [this intimacy] is linked as much to a temporal presence as it is to a spatial one [...]. The recordings must retain the spontaneity of live broadcasts, because much of the charm of the televised image would disappear if one got the impression that this was a mere transmission of a film. Thanks to montage, a film can play tricks with time. The esthetic moral of television, on the other hand, is one of honesty and risk.<sup>28</sup>

The ensuing development of television only partially met Bazin's expectations, but the new relationship with intimacy that stemmed from the 'spontaneity of live broadcasts' shed invaluable light on the aspirations of some of the filmmakers who were familiar with this new medium. The aims of Rozier or Rouch, but also those of Cassavetes, who experienced television at first hand in his role as actor, were basically the same: to use the techniques of live recording that had originated with television programmes and reportage to create a cinema that would be more receptive to the complexity of emotions. By simulating live radio in order to broadcast, from the middle of a crowd, a message from André Jurieu to his mistress, Renoir was already juxtaposing technological innovations and intimacy. His followers, Rouch, Rozier and Rivette, relentlessly pursued this path when lighter cameras, having finally mastered live sound, made it possible to record emotions at human level. Showing the equipment on screen is a serene acknowledgment of other methods and not some kind of *mise en abyme*, their often precarious conditions guaranteeing genuine exchange between a small film crew and a few actors. By evoking the 'honesty and risk' of television in the mid-1950s, Bazin was heralding the later experiments of improvised cinema.<sup>29</sup>

The desire to '[seize] life before it evaporates', as Cavalier put it, did not only require live sound; it also justified the desire to shoot outdoors without the need for over-invasive lighting. The emergence of sensitive film also made a significant contribution in making the equipment less cumbersome and intimidating, particularly for non-professional actors, who brought their own truth to improvised filmmaking. Mastering these new techniques implied unprecedented 'regimes of images', less dependent on formal perfection in its classic sense than on the instantaneous capture of the disharmony of the world, its movements and its energies. Technical progress often stems from a need to ensure absolute control, to refute the unpredictable. With improvisation it tends to be the reverse: technical fine-tuning finally allowed filmmakers to cater for the unforeseen, to be where the action was and to produce new kinds of relationship to reality and to the artistic gesture.

### 3. The influence of Jean Rouch

#### Godard as improviser?

Motivated by his determination to depict life in the villages of sub-Saharan Africa with optimum independence and spontaneity, Jean Rouch played a key role in the implementation of new cinematographic techniques. His extraordinary empathy with human complexity and his initial lack of interest in the so-called 'grammar' of film stemmed from his ethnological background. His aim was to record the truth of a ritual, a gesture, a situation, an attitude, an exchange, and he was not particularly bothered by stability of frame, consistency of focus or seamless match cuts. Rouch was first and foremost an ethnologist and it was only in the late 1950s that he fulfilled his writing ambition and became an 'ethnocineast', as René Prédal so aptly put it. Around a dozen films preceded *LES MAÎTRES FOUS*, which was shot in 1954 but only screened in Venice in 1957, and this was followed a year later by *MOI, UN NOIR* (1958), and then by *CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ* (1960) and *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE* (1961). Throughout this period, he used lightweight cameras to experiment with a form of improvisation, which was to reach its apotheosis, but no doubt also its limits, a decade later, with *PETIT À PETIT* (1970) and above all *COCORICO, MONSIEUR POULET* (1974).

In a well-known text entitled 'La Caméra et les hommes',<sup>1</sup> first published in 1973, Rouch defended his position as ethnographer, cameraman and director: '[...] in today's manner of shooting sync-sound direct cinema, the director can only be the cameraman. It is the ethnographer alone, to my mind, who really knows when, where, and how to film, in other words to 'direct'.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to his lightweight 16 mm hand-held cameras, he was able to get up close to his subjects: 'For me,' he continued, 'the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective, and improvising another type of ballet, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming.'<sup>3</sup> In March 1959, Godard acknowledged the importance of Rouch in two articles<sup>4</sup> devoted to *MOI, UN NOIR*, to which *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE*, shot in August that same year, owes much of its audacity. Godard noted first of all that it was feasible to improvise in the course of shooting, much like a reporter, without relinquishing one's creative ambitions: '[Rouch] has grasped that reportage today has earned its badge of honor by becoming a kind of quest for the holy grail we term *mise-en-scène*', he wrote

in *Arts*. Although Godard did not actually carry the camera himself in *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE*, numerous photos of the shoot show Raoul Coutard with his hand-held Camerette following the cast like a television reporter, with Godard by his side, physically living the take.<sup>5</sup> Director, cameraman and actor: the crew on Godard's first film was as small, and consequently as reactive, as Rouch's African crew, and neither film was shot in sync sound. The second aspect that directly inspired Godard was the montage of *MOI, UN NOIR*, in which Rouch dismissed all the rules of continuity editing in favour of new rhythms linked to physical movement, to an inner beat, elements that would also be found in *SHADOWS*, Cassavetes' first film, at that time in its finishing stages on the other side of the Atlantic.

In *MOI, UN NOIR* the jump cuts, as they came to be called, were caused by a mechanical camera which Rouch had to wind up manually every twenty-five seconds – in mid-take! This drawback was the reason behind the fantastic sideways tracking shot in which 'Edward G. Robinson'<sup>6</sup> tells Petit Jules about his experiences in the Indochinese War. It was therefore really by chance that Rouch discovered this new technique. Over and above these technical constraints, however, Rouch also invented new figures and jumps, and unprecedented forms of splicing, designed to lend an air of vitality without the shackles of narrative continuity. This impression of confusion and even lack of control is particularly noticeable in the dance contest sequence, in which the bodies seem to be freewheeling, multiplying, repeatedly escaping from the frame, to the driving rhythm of the drums. In the end, however, it is all a question of editing prowess: the regular beat of the drums to the unsynchronised movements of the musicians, the incredible parade of dancers' bodies to the regular flow of the music, the bodies that seem to be taunting those relentless jump cuts in movement, expression or light. Rouch, probably working on intuition, was composing a polyrhythmic montage designed to draw the audience into this improvised surge of energy. One needs to qualify, however, his innumerable assertions concerning the simultaneity of the shooting and montage processes, particularly in his feature films: 'All [of his] bodily improvisations (camera movement, framing, shot lengths) finally results in editing through shooting', he wrote in 'The Camera and Man'<sup>7</sup>. In fact, although the orientations of the montage undoubtedly sprang from the plethora of on-set improvisations, the amount of footage printed for each of his films necessitated a huge amount of editing work, as has been confirmed by Danièle Tessier, Rouch's editor for a number of years.<sup>8</sup>

The mechanical camera may have limited the length of the shots in *MOI, UN NOIR*, but it was another kind of constraint that dictated the montage of *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE*. It was too long, and so Godard and his editor Cécile Decugis decided to edit each shot, but only by making cuts that did not interfere with

the internal rhythm of the sequences. It was probably the widespread use of jump cuts in Rouch's film, which Godard could not fail to have noticed, that persuaded him to challenge so dramatically, in his very first feature film, one of the most sacred rules in the cinematic 'lexicon'. Taking this liberty had another, more decisive consequence, however: by freeing the montage from the constraints of the match cut, it was suddenly possible to *improvise during the montage*. The director and editor were no longer committed to a predetermined continuity. They could invent unplanned chords and discords between shots: 'It is a whole new system of rhythm, and a serial or atonal cinema, a new conception of montage', wrote Gilles Deleuze in *The Time-Image*.<sup>9</sup>

This reference to serial music takes us away from improvisation, however, by stripping the montage of spontaneity. His ensuing films were to illustrate their lack of improvisation, first in the montage and then in the mixing, most notably in their exploration of the relationship between the cinema's sound components and its images. In composer mode, Godard was harking back to the research into serial music carried out by the Viennese musicians and their heirs. Following his rhythmical explorations in *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE*, the acknowledged ideal of Godard the artist shifted from jazz improvisation to the balance and determination of art music. *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE*, which conveys a distinct feel of improvisation, highlighted by the presence of Martial Solal's jazz music, stands alone in its highly intuitive recourse to a montage inspired by a rhythmical beat reminiscent of swing. Godard did not give up the idea of improvisation during shooting, however, a hypothesis borne out by Bergala's studies in *Godard au travail*.<sup>10</sup> In relation to the 'freestanding sequences, allowing for improvisation of details and adaptability within the overall economy of the script', he writes: 'It is when he is shooting these sequences, these 'free figures', that Godard demonstrates his talent for on-the-spot invention with the greatest pleasure and ease, when there is no narrative agenda to obliterate the freedom of filming the here and now of the shoot.'<sup>11</sup> Unlike Rozier or Rivette, however, this 'brio in the moment', as Coutard put it,<sup>12</sup> was not intended to give the actors or technicians a turn at improvisation.<sup>13</sup> The last-minute dialogues, sometimes even prompted in mid-take, show Godard's talent for improvisation but also his determination not to allow the actor time for any improvisation of his own. By preventing any 'interpretation' in the classic sense of the term, something he abhorred, he did obtain a degree of spontaneity, but an ephemeral spontaneity, without any fixed plan, far removed from the form of improvisation that implies awareness of a possible future. Godard's admiration for the Rouch of *MOI, UN NOIR* can therefore be explained by the fact that it contains minimal improvisation by the characters, who are often simply living out their lives on camera. Rouch with his hand-held camera is the only one improvising here; the continuity would be devised at the editing stage. The pervasive impression of a happening stems

from the improvised commentary of Oumarou Ganda, who reinvented his story long after the shoot had ended, reliving his character's wanderings as the film was being screened. In the two articles he devoted to *MOI, UN NOIR*, Godard did not even mention this commentary, giving the impression that it was a dialogue that had been recorded live.<sup>14</sup> While he admired the daring of Rouch the filmmaker and Rouch the editor and was inspired by Rouch the inventor of forms, Godard was impervious to his characters' *fabulations*; fabulations that were to become one of Jean Rouch's driving forces. And it is here that the serial compositions of the former and the free experimentations of the latter part company.

## Fabulation and improvisation

A classic documentary cannot be envisaged as an improvisation, except by the filmmaker himself, who constantly needs to address the unforeseen. In the cinema, as in the other arts, improvisation cannot occur without the *desire* to improvise, without consciously committing a creative act through improvisation. When a director films characters going about their daily lives, he is filming them living, not improvising. If Rouch is so significant in the cinema's conception of improvisation it is because he invented improvisational strategies in order to rekindle the documentary brief of ethnographical cinema – with *LES MAÎTRES FOUS* and particularly *MOI, UN NOIR* – but this did not turn him into a fiction filmmaker. It was Gilles Deleuze who really grasped the importance of the 'in-between' nature of Rouch's *cinéma vérité*.<sup>15</sup> Referring to his films he wrote,

The break is not between fiction and reality, but in the new mode of story which affects both of them. [...] What is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonizers; it is the story-telling function of the poor, in so far as it gives the false the power which makes it into a memory, a legend, a monster. [...] What cinema must grasp is not the identity of a character, whether real *or* fictional, through his objective and subjective aspects. It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to 'make fiction' [...] and so contributes to the invention of his people. The character is inseparable from a before and an after, but he reunites these in the passage from one state to the other. He himself becomes another, when he begins to tell stories without ever being fictional.<sup>16</sup>

This lengthy quotation helps define the role of improvisation in a 'modern' aspect of the cinema: while fabulation may be considered as a specific form of improvisation, any form of improvisation must contain a degree of fabulation.

In many of his films, Rouch highlights this fabulation from the starting point of an array of existing modes of improvisation. The transition from real charac-

ters to 'fictionising' characters emerges clearly from the collective possession rites of the Hauka sect, played out by Nigerian emigrants in the suburbs of Accra in *LES MAÎTRES FOUS*. In *MOI, UN NOIR*, a far less ritualised transition takes place in the way identification is constantly played out between the 'real' characters and their cinema heroes, Edward G. Robinson, Lemmy Caution and Dorothy Lamour. It was in his next film, *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE* (1961), however, that improvisation – duly acknowledged as such – really came into its own. In the prologue, Rouch outlined the challenges and methods at stake. He can be seen in Abidjan, explaining his project – to explore 'what friendship would be like if you got rid of any racial complex' – first to a group of white high school students and then to a group of black students, who never mix outside school, even though they are all in the same class. The two groups are to experience this adventure together, inventing the characters and situations themselves, under the watchful eye of the small crew. Rouch's voice completes the prologue as the images show a friendly exchange between two students, one white and one black. 'The film we have produced, instead of reflecting reality, creates another reality. The story never happened, it grew out of the shoot, with the actors inventing their reactions and dialogues as they went along; improvisation was the only name of the game.'

The original brief (to overcome the divisions caused by skin colour) acted as the trigger and the students therefore made their contributions to the script with this in mind. The opportunity for fabulation stemmed from the live recording of their words. This improvised dialogue became their benchmark, determining the development of the characters' relationships, which, in turn, influenced the sequences to be filmed, thereby negating any need for a shooting schedule. *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE* demonstrated that the success, but also the difficulties, of any form of genuine improvisation were linked to the *adventure of speech*. As he says in his prologue, the aim of improvisation is indeed to create another reality, without the intermediary of a script or written dialogues, which always provide the director with a means of controlling speech. In an extreme case such as this, improvisation contaminates every stage of the directorial process and all the facets of the shooting itself. The storyline is conceived within the work-in-progress, the options chosen for the *mise-en-scène* depend on the exchanges between the characters and the same applies to the venues and times of the shoot. Rouch shoots long improvised debates between the students, on racism or, according to the context, on the art of seduction. The powerful presence of the dialogues clearly demonstrates one of the limitations of improvisation. Tongues are not truly untied in the symbolic subtext of the conversations on racism; the young actors, probably out of a sense of caution, hide behind clichés. In the flirtation scenes, the uneasiness stems from the ambiguous interplay between the chat-up lines that really took place during the shoot and those that were

scripted specifically for the film. The conversations are inhibited by this uncertainty and the dialogue often appears very artificial. These relative failures illustrate the difficulty for non-professional actors to improvise on a given theme without slipping into banality or confusion. In the context of the dialogue alone, the very first sequences of the film, in which Rouch experiences the feedback to his proposal from the students (who are not improvising in this case, but are genuinely living the scene on camera) are far more true to life than the 'fictional' sequences, as are the equally improvised dances, games and beach scenes, in which two different attitudes to the body are also revealed. The laid-back humorous attitude of the young Africans, who have turned desire into a favourite game, is dramatically juxtaposed with the self-conscious awkwardness of their European classmates – no scripted scene would ever have achieved such veracity.

In *JAGUAR*, shot in 1954 with commentary added in 1957 and again in 1967 on its release, Lam, Illo and Damouré leave their village in Niger to make their fortune in Accra, Ghana. As the adventures of these three friends unfold, each episode of their journey provides an opportunity to depict everyday life in Africa, with its markets, harbours and celebrations, but also the contrast between the swarming cities and the vast expanses of virgin land. The actors play themselves, improvising the commentary and dialogues on the final cut, like Oumara Ganda in *MOI, UN NOIR*. It was in *COCORICO, MONSIEUR POULET* that Rouch really explored fabulation as a principle of cinematic composition. The credits feature a 'collective' director under the name of Dalarou, which stands for Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia and Jean Rouch. In *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*, each student was consciously playing a role that was more or less akin to his true identity. Those who played the 'nasty racists', for example, if only as a defensive reflex, needed to be more acutely aware that they were acting than the lovesick admirers of the gorgeous Nadine. In *JAGUAR*, the characters seem to be go-betweens linking Rouch the anthropologist to the reality of Africa. In *COCORICO, MONSIEUR POULET*, Rouch dismisses the overemphatic symbolic dimension of *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*, and by overstepping the documentary aspects of *JAGUAR* accepts the constant blurring of the frontiers between documentary and fiction. His initial intention had been to make a documentary on the young Africans of Niger, who comb the length and breadth of the bush to buy chickens to sell in Niamey's large market. The film turned into an adventure featuring three friends, played by Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia and Tallou Mouzourane, as they travel from village to village in an incongruous 2CV car. Things soon start to get complicated, and a host of unforeseen twists and turns develop following their roadside encounter with a she-devil who casts a spell on them. The classic documentary gives way to comedy but it never loses sight of its ethnographical brief, thanks to the overlap between the actors and their role. Rouch is no longer

the key player of *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE* or the narrator of *JAGUAR*; here everyone joins in the narrative, inventing the story during the course of the shoot. But to Damouré, Lam and Tallou this invention has become a way of playing their own image, allowing their imagination a free rein from the starting point of their own existence, as though Oumara Ganda's improvisation to the images of *MOI, UN NOIR* had 'contaminated' the entire film. Although Rouch and his accomplices are naturally directing operations, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the true experiences of the crew facing the ups and downs of life in the bush and the events springing from the team efforts of the various 'script-writers'. The strength of the film, which provides an insight into another side of the real Africa, its fears and shadows, and not just its vitality and freedom, lies precisely in this uncertainty. *COCORICO, MONSIEUR POULET* represents the acme of cinema improvisation, thanks not only to Rouch's directorial decisions and the reactivity of the filming techniques but also to a culture in which the uncertainty of everyday life turns each day into a series of possible adventures and each character into a potential improviser.

Theoretically a long way from Rouch's Africa, this fabulation takes different forms under improvising filmmakers such as van der Keuken,<sup>18</sup> Rozier, Cassavates, Rivette, Ameer-Zaïmeche and Faucon. For them, the exploits of the body are as powerful as those of speech and their choices are less theoretical than those of *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*.<sup>19</sup> The life force of their films, however, often depends on their characters' ability to inject their improvisational skills into the dialogues. The collective dialogue-writing that takes place during rehearsals is a way of encouraging overflow during the actual performance. In *SAMIA* (2000) for instance, which shows the conflict between tradition and modernity in a family of Algerian immigrants living in Marseilles, Philippe Faucon chose non-professional actors from the North African community, who created their characters from the reality of their own lives. Samia's personality is very similar to that of the young Lynda Benahouda and, although the film is entirely fictional, this resemblance engenders authenticity. On several occasions, the dialogue, much of it written with the actors, springs from words invented in the heat of the moment, words that can trigger a series of spontaneous exchanges. In a particularly striking sequence, the mother points to her own life of sacrifice and relinquishment, castigating her daughters for their desire for emancipation, symbolised by their wish to go out with their girlfriends. During their exchange, in Arabic, Samia wants to tell her mother that this resignation has driven her to forego her own happiness but a particular word escapes her. She therefore asks her sister Farida, *in French*, how to say 'happiness' *in Arabic*. By improvising her question during the take, Samia (and consequently the actress herself) displays her ignorance of the word 'happiness' in Arabic, although she knows it perfectly in French. This is an unpredictable offshoot of the truth stemming from

the element of fabulation that went into building each of these characters, and no preordained dialogue could have produced this degree of symbolic force. Faucon's whole film reflects this apparently banal conversation between a mother and her daughters in its succession of concrete situations, which enable each character to act within a hair's breadth of real life. There is no looming agenda here, none of those conveniently simplistic archetypes on 'the suburbs', just a desire, already formulated by Renoir (to whom Faucon often refers) to favour the performer rather than the role, the concrete rather than the abstract, to film life rather than an idea of life.

It is certainly no coincidence that the films that have contributed to changing the image of second or third generation immigrant communities all share a direct link with a method that plays on the dividing line between fiction and documentary. This is the case not only with Faucon's *SAMIA* but with *WESH WESH*, *QU'EST-CE QUI SE PASSE?* and *DERNIER MAQUIS*, both directed by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, not to mention *L'ESQUIVE* (2004) and *LA GRAINE ET LE MULET* (2007) by Abdelatif Kechiche.<sup>20</sup> All these films, which take a new slant on ordinary events from everyday life, are mainly played by non-professionals with affinities to their roles, making it possible for them to appropriate the situations and create an often indefinable reciprocity between actor and character. In the sequence with the mother, the personality of the actress Lynda Benahouda spills over into the character of Samia for a split second, before the role takes precedence once again. But this overflow as a means of attaining another form of reality is also a clue to understanding the work of Cassavetes, who declared that 'the main difference between *SHADOWS* and [my] other films is that *SHADOWS* stems from the characters, whereas in the other films it is the characters who stem from the script';<sup>21</sup> or, that of Jacques Rozier, who responded to a question relating to the three girls in *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* by saying: 'Something had been written but it wasn't difficult to improvise because the three girls were so close to their characters. You just had to open the floodgates and let the scenes flow in as you went along. It was that movement that determined the movement of the film.'<sup>22</sup> Before tackling the specificities of improvisation as seen by Cassavetes or Rozier, however, it is worth showing the repercussions of Rouch's bold approach on contemporary cinema by studying the work of one of his most fascinating 'heirs', Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, a director who manages to tread clear-sightedly in Rouch's footsteps while assimilating the complexity of a political agenda.

## Ritual and overflow in the cinema of Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche

The primary aim of Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche's trilogy is to bring the cinema face to face with immigration-linked communities in the France of today.<sup>23</sup> *WESH WESH, QU'EST-CE QUI SE PASSE?* (2001) features a few weeks in the life of Kamel, played by Ameur-Zaïmeche himself, a young Algerian who following his *double peine* or double sentence<sup>24</sup> returns secretly to the housing project in which he grew up, the cité des Bosquets in the Seine-Saint-Denis. The same Kamel crops up again in *BLED NUMBER ONE* (2006), this time in his home country, Algeria, probably because of a second deportation or maybe as a prequel to *WESH WESH*. Once back in his family's small village, he is struck, on the one hand, by his warm welcome after so many years away, but also by the archaisms of Algeria, where the embers of civil war are still glowing. Finally, in *DERNIER MAQUIS* (2008), Mao, played once again by Ameur-Zaïmeche, the boss of a small pallet manufacturing business on the outskirts of Paris, where illegal immigrant workers from sub-Saharan Africa rub shoulders with the North African employees, provides his staff with a small mosque for Friday prayers. Everything revolves around the idea of borders, whether real or symbolic: the border between the outside world and the cité des Bosquets, made to look like a tiny sanctuary for the unemployed and aimless North African diaspora; the border between France and Algeria experienced by Kamel, who now sees the gulf that separates him from his Algerian background; the border between a small businessman, also of Algerian origin, his North African workers and the Malians who have entered France illegally to look for work. Ameur-Zaïmeche is determined to portray the way these myriad borders can be overcome and his approach is reminiscent of Jean Rouch in many ways, particularly in his highly skilful use of improvisational strategies.

Ameur-Zaïmeche has had no formal training and his love of the cinema seems to have been triggered by the anthropological studies that first introduced him to Rouch's work. He shot *WESH WESH* without any financial backing apart from a modest inheritance, with a small Sony camera normally used for television reporting. Nicolas Bancilhon, a young audiovisual graduate, joined forces with him on the editing, which was carried out on hired equipment. Following the critical success of *WESH WESH*, *BLED NUMBER ONE* was made under relatively comfortable financial conditions and shot with two DSR 570 cameras, undoubtedly more up-market than the small Sony but still basically designed for television reporting. Whereas these first two films called for a reactive crew and a great deal of hand-held camera work, the virtual unity of place of *DERNIER MAQUIS* enabled Ameur-Zaïmeche to try his hand at another approach,

this time with a chief camerawoman (Irina Lubtchansky) who was more concerned with the architecture of the frame and had a preference for tripod shooting, both of which fitted perfectly into the highly geometric set formed by the huge columns of pallets. All these technical choices were linked to his determination to work with a small crew, who were all hugely committed to the projects, despite their complexity and economic vulnerability. All three films were self-produced, this being the only way to guarantee the independence and freedom so prized by Ameur-Zaïmeche. All this goes to show that the adventures of Jean Rouch are still viable today, at a cost, on the vibrant fringes of contemporary cinema.

The concrete options shared by Rouch and Ameur-Zaïmeche would have little impact without the avowedly anthropological dimension of the latter, implemented by a *mise-en-scène* that seems to pursue the former's explorations. Ameur-Zaïmeche is also aware that in order to bring about a connivance that will be propitious for exchange and consequently for collective improvisation, he needs to focus on shared stories. His three films tell the story of the on-screen characters and, although a script does exist, its purpose is to define the project and provide the orientations that will give the films meaning. During the shoot, Ameur-Zaïmeche refers to this script as little as possible, as adapting to circumstances is a prerequisite for the successful appropriation of the situations by the crew. The small collective, released from the authority of a written script, therefore, immerses itself wholeheartedly in the shoot, which is conducive to a great deal of improvisation. This proves to be no easy task however, thanks to the innumerable ups and downs and the way some shots can actually challenge the existence of the following sequence and sometimes even of the whole project.

The reality of each situation, therefore, has to be gauged by means of the characters, who are almost always non-professional actors *playing themselves*. This is the case with *WESH WESH*, which stemmed from the urban anthropology research carried out by Ameur-Zaïmeche and his fellow scriptwriter Madjid Benaroudj. The actors were members of the director's own family and friends living in the *cité des Bosquets*, and the month prior to shooting was devoted to fine-tuning each role to fit its performer. *BLED NUMBER ONE* was shot in the village where another part of Ameur-Zaïmeche's family still lives, and the family members naturally took over most of the roles. Finally, the unskilled African workers who appear in *DERNIER MAQUIS* are genuine workers from a firm not far from the film location, which suffered a slight 'delocalisation' for the benefit of the film.

These films, however, are not documentaries about a suburban housing project, an isolated village in the Algerian countryside or a small firm on the outskirts of Paris. We are back in Deleuze's 'in-between', with fictional scripts that seem to give new impetus to fabulation as a form of improvisation and as a way

of crossing the boundaries of documentary and fiction in either direction. A sequence from *WESH WESH* provides a perfect example of this: three 'dudes', having bought a patently stolen golf bag from a fourth guy, improvise a game of golf on the expanse of greenery that surrounds their housing project. The scene in which, helpless with laughter, they imitate the gestures of the golfers they have seen on television is worthy of Rouch in its quirky self-evidence, with all it implies in terms of playfulness, dreams and fabulation. The game may have been written into the script as a fictional situation but no one could have foreseen its development, with the protagonists, having been given a free rein, transforming it into a highly ironic 'scene from suburban life'.

Ameur-Zaïmeche not only succeeds in introducing a symbolic dimension into the banality of the everyday, he manages to bring improvisation into play from the standpoint of his anthropological interest in social and religious rites. In *BLÉD NUMBER ONE*, the most 'Rouchian' sequence is the one depicting the Zerda, a ritual in which the community slaughters an ox and the families all share out the meat. There was no preparatory *mise-en-scène* here: Ameur-Zaïmeche replaced the wedding scene written into the initial script with this ritual, held in honour of the crew, and the scene turned into one of the lynchpins of the film. Although he paid great attention to each stage of the ceremony, from the killing of the beast to the sharing of the meat, he had no hesitation in incorporating his fictional characters into the ritual. When the men tell Kamel that it is forbidden to mix with women during the Zerda, Kamel replies that there is no harm in saying hello; in the following sequence he can therefore be seen, in his signature orange cap, in the midst of the procession of women making their way to the ceremony, in the beautiful Algerian light. By overstepping the territorial limits between men and women, he is blurring once again the border between fiction and documentary and questioning the immutable nature of the ritual itself.

Improvisation, therefore, makes it possible to challenge the archaism of some traditions without dismissing them, by allowing them to overflow into moments of freedom in the form of an unexpected interjection or an unforeseen act, which ideally emerge as the camera starts rolling. In the same film, Kamel's cousin Louisa is beaten by her brother Bouzid because she stood up to her husband, who is determined to quell her passion for singing. A Taleb,<sup>25</sup> who has been called in by the family to 'cure' Louisa of her longing for emancipation, prescribes seven turns around the mosque and a swim in the sea, during which seven waves will lash her face. Ameur-Zaïmeche films the two rituals but strips them of their initial *raison d'être* – their sacred dimension – giving them a whole new meaning. The swim, shot near a freighter that has run aground on the beach, in a very similar décor to that of the end of *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*, is an ode to freedom and the beauty of the female body. The obvious pleasure these three women are getting from their improvised swim, in front of a cameraman

who is doing his best to capture the bodies being buffeted by the waves, introduces an erotic dimension that is clearly at odds with the initial religious intent. Similarly, following the seven turns around the mosque, which she treats like a child's game under the amused eye of Kamel, Louisa starts singing to him *That's the way it will be*; this magnificent song<sup>26</sup> takes the act of 'penitence' further, turning it into a peaceful protest against a ritual aimed at 'curing' her of her passion, and once again sidetracks the initial meaning. Improvisation introduces the unexpected and the profane into a sacred ritual, but does not repudiate it. By prolonging the ritual by this moment of life and longing, Ameur-Zäimeche is raising the possibility, if not the necessity, of moving traditions forward; but he refrains from challenging them, only too aware of the importance of collective rites in maintaining social links in modest communities.

In a sequence from *DERNIER MAQUIS*, his third film, the blend of sacred and profane, and consequently of documentary and fiction, reaches a kind of culmination. Mao, the boss of the small pallet manufacturing business, is inaugurating the place of worship he has just created for his Muslim workers. Inside the mosque, the sequence begins with the removal of shoes, greetings and a brief welcoming speech by Mao, who introduces the Imam to the mechanics and workers. At the Imam's invitation, a man gets up and makes the call to prayer.<sup>27</sup> Ameur-Zäimeche shows obvious respect when shooting the ensuing prayer scenes and the ballet formed by the hands of the faithful as they greet each other, a symbol of the fraternity uniting them as they complete their prayers. It is at this point that one of the mechanics takes the floor to complain about the fact that the Imam was chosen by the boss. He feels this should have been a collective decision and he calls for a *mashoura*, a consultation. A number of his workmates join him in criticising what they see as Mao's abuse of power and accuse the Imam of being the boss's representative. They even explicitly suspect Mao of placing the mosque at their disposal in order to quell social unrest, as he owes them money. The sequence ends with the group separating: the mechanics walk off complaining about the legitimacy of the Imam, who finds his support among the unskilled workers, most of them illegal immigrants, who remain behind in the mosque.

This extraordinary sequence once again blends documentary (the prayer ritual) and fiction (the protest, with its obviously political undercurrent). Ameur-Zäimeche takes the ritual as his source but carries the *mise-en-scène* further, spilling over into the social and religious domain. In fact, although it had been prepared, the second part of this sequence was not actually scripted. Only a few of the protagonists were given advance warning of the protest, so that they could trigger the improvisation.<sup>28</sup> The general framework was, therefore, predetermined, but the sequence of events was improvised, without the safety net of a second take – the truth that might or might not spring forth had to depend on

the immediate reactions of the rest of the cast. The attitude of the African workers, who defend the Imam (and therefore the boss), versus that of the North African employees, who lucidly express their doubts about Mao's true motivations, creates a rift that takes on its true dimension later, when the mechanics find themselves threatened with dismissal. Ameur-Zaïmeche manages to combine, in a single sequence, the beauty of the ceremony and the solidarity that seems to unite the faithful, the possible connivance between socio-political power and religious power, and finally the potential for resistance and freedom at the heart of a highly regimented and therefore predictable ritual. Improvisation once again serves to make the profane intrude on the sacred and thereby reveal another truth about the Muslim faith and its believers, far from Western clichés.

Ameur-Zaïmeche also maximises the potential of improvisation when he depicts social rituals. At the end of *BLED NUMBER ONE*, Louisa, who has fled her village, is interned in the women's unit of the psychiatric hospital in Constantine following her attempted suicide. She defends once again her right to sing by organising a concert for the male and female patients. This creates great excitement in the hospital, where hosting a film crew is an unprecedented event. When Louisa/Meriem Serbah, a jazz singer, performs a song by Billie Holiday, the emotion in the room is tangible. Suddenly one of the women patients, followed by another, and then another, make their way to the stage and start singing too, before a spellbound and delighted audience. The cameraman captures as best he can the joy and sense of relief experienced by these patients as they perform before their fellow inmates and nursing staff, the complicity of the pianist and double bass player as they launch into an improvised reggae accompaniment, and the pleasure shared by the audience. The unpolished effects, caused by the cameraman having to improvise in the face of an event that was itself improvised – and that yet again could not be repeated – only add to the emotion triggered by this moment of truth. Although the character of Louisa is fictional, the concert is genuine and the immediacy of the audience reaction makes it feel as though the fictional is spilling into the documentary.

These few examples underline the way in which Ameur-Zaïmeche has perpetuated the work of Jean Rouch, whom he readily acknowledges as the only director to have influenced both his love of the cinema and his own work as filmmaker. They share the same desire for a collective cinema, an approachable cinema that respects human sensitivity and builds a dialogue between visions of the world that can often appear remote, not to mention contradictory, but which come together on screen in their thirst for reciprocal exchange and understanding. The other aspect they have in common is, of course, their method, based on that prerequisite time of encounter and on the opportunity for each character to 'fabulate', to play himself, appropriating the fictions created by the

filmmaker to invent new ones, that then turn into realities. Fabulation becomes a form of improvisation in its own right, involving just as much the 'actors' as the director or film crew. Ameer-Zaïmeche, however, is not satisfied with simply applying the principles that underpinned the modernity of Rouch's work. He renews their impact, acknowledging his films as works of fiction but adding more and more crossovers between the realms of fiction and documentary, which counter one another in a kind of irresolute shot-reverse shot. His *mise-en-scène* bases this new slant on largely unprecedented improvisational techniques that find an ideal outlet, as we have seen, in the unpredictable overflow of social or religious rituals. However, in losing their natural, almost everyday dimension to become mere traces of a page that has been turned, these have lost the therapeutic function that is such an integral part of Rouch's films. To Ameer-Zaïmeche these collective rituals, which can be viewed as ready-made *mise-en-scène*, remain the guarantors of social intercourse. Yet, these are also static repositories, perpetuating immutable orders. By intervening directly in these rituals, Ameer-Zaïmeche shows himself to be a far more political filmmaker than Rouch, displaying greater affinity to tangible situations such as the North-South divide. The communities he films are those of cosmopolitan suburbs or small businesses exploiting a new sub-proletariat of immigrant workers. When he chooses a small North African village as his fictional location, he does so in order to uncover the tension between a legitimate desire for modernity and archaisms stemming from cultural as well as religious traditions. The time for Rouch's wonderful fables has passed, even if they also allowed glimpses of the uncertainty of the world. Rouch, as he put it himself, created films 'the way Armstrong played the trumpet'.<sup>28</sup> Ameer-Zaïmeche takes up the tune but introduces the strident notes of John Coltrane, redolent with free jazz and blues. Coltrane, whose gut-wrenching *Naima* suddenly wells up from the concrete jungle of the *cit  des Bosquets* in *WESH WESH* and meets the lush vegetation in which Kamel, still *persona non grata*, seems to find some semblance of tranquility.

## Improvised tangents: from documentary to fiction

Improvising filmmakers, whether they are closer to fiction or to documentary, have two ambitions to contend with: the first, which could be termed 'formal', provides a way of highlighting their creative mastery and the originality of their outlook on the world, while the other, which is perhaps more concrete, involves a direct confrontation with the elements, with the freedom of the body, with the stuff of the world. Improvisation may come across as a way of eluding formal

mastery, allowing a moment of truth that cannot exist in scripted form or through rehearsals to enter a particular shot or sequence. This manifestation of the unforeseeable would, therefore, appear to represent the documentary dimension of any fiction. The first problem with this, however, is that this is *not* the way the creative act of improvisation emerges. Improvisation is not chance in itself but what chance activates, in the form of an unexpected phrase or unplanned gesture. To improvise is to adapt in real time to the unexpected. Such improvisation will only bear fruit if it is welcomed by the actors and crew – a prerequisite if ‘documentary truth’, as Jean-Louis Comolli put it, is to find its way into fiction.

By throwing himself into the water at the end of *BOUDU SAUVÉ DES EAUX*, Boudu (Michel Simon) regains his freedom and reneges on a destiny mapped out through the hastily-arranged marriage with the Lestingois’ maid. Renoir extends the fictional story not through improvisation but by juxtaposing Boudu’s body with nature, in this case the wilful current of the river, which Michel Simon has to master in order to bring it into play. Although the situation itself is not improvised, the actor needs to call on improvisation in his movements in the river. Some time later, on the bank, he has to improvise yet again when a goat, apparently frightened by the whistle of a train, tries to escape, thereby negating the presumably ‘scripted’ idea of a game between man and animal. The cameraman moves the frame slightly to the right to get rid of the goat and then tracks Michel Simon as he improvises a gesture in order to shift the emphasis of the scene. This is a basic example of ‘documentary’ elements interfering, on purpose or by accident, with the outcome of a sequence. Renoir did not simply place his film in a natural setting: by abandoning Michel Simon’s body to the vagaries of the current and the whims of the animal, he is showing his determination to bring the outside world into his shots as tangibly as possible, despite the cumbersome technical constraints. Renoir’s affection for noises off always brought him up against these confrontations with the forces of nature. This could be viewed as the first stepping-stone from fiction to documentary, which would later be taken up and radicalised by Rossellini, with the ruins of postwar Berlin crushing, with their ghastly presence, the body of little Edmund in *Allemagne, année zéro*. In Renoir’s welcoming natural setting or through Rossellini’s documentary brutality, what matters, however, is to bring the shoot up sharp with the randomness and reality of the world, in the hopes that a truth will seep into the bodies of the actors so that the décor can transcend the boundaries of its physical space and become a second skin.

This determination to make fiction segue into documentary resurfaced much later in the work of Renoir and Rossellini’s more or less direct descendants. In many of his films, Jacques Rozier also drove his actors to improvise by thrusting ‘documentary’ nature into his shots. In his very first short feature, *RENTRÉE DES*

CLASSES, which was shot in 1955, he filmed a mischievous schoolboy in a river, drifting along with the current like Boudu. The boy then turns up in class and creates pandemonium by releasing a grass snake he caught by the river. Rozier took up this idea again in *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* (1969), in which three girls holidaying on the Atlantic coast throw a young man into confusion, as he tries unsuccessfully to seduce each of them in turn. The 'method' comes across clearly in the sequence in which Gilbert (Bernard Menez) attempts to gather a few eels in a bucket, triggering panic among the girls as the eels slither across the floor. Rozier uses the eels to introduce an unpredictable element: the fiction develops a documentary slant, thanks to the girls' genuine reactions and to the cameraman with his hand-held camera, who captures the chaos of the sequence as he follows their movements in the confined space. The fictional aspect does not disappear altogether, however: the eels represent the girls, escaping from the clutches of an awkward suitor, and their apprehension tinged with amusement at the sight of the reptilian fish is a metaphor for their wary attraction to the male body. Rozier relies on the documentary to achieve a level of truth that would be difficult to obtain by fictional means. These three inexperienced actresses are able to *live* what they cannot *perform*, but without overlooking the presence of the camera, which reacts to every insinuation of their liberated bodies. And, maybe an improvising actor is simply that: an actor who lives a situation to the full but never entirely forgets the element of performance. To Rozier, amateur actors had the advantage of being unable to rely on a proven technique that was liable to convey an illusion of reality. The secret of a good director lies in nurturing an atmosphere of trust that can pave the way for that ultimate 'letting go'. The pre-existing element of fiction guarantees the possibility of collective creation. Rozier's ambition was not to bring a faithful rendition of the script to the screen as though it were cast in stone, but to plan situations that would encourage the actors to improvise and the fiction to drift towards a documentary truth, with the calculated risk that this tangent might never occur. In the eel sequence, the absence of written or prepared dialogue contributes to this tangent and overflow. Through a series of improvisations representing so many collective experiments, Rozier 'documents' the bodies of these young women from 1969, although despite the period 'sexual liberation' seems to be the last thing on their minds. To Rozier's girls, young men and films – and young men *in* films – are merely pretexts for the enduringly childlike pleasures of play.

Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche also uses improvisation to produce a new take on the crossover between fiction and documentary. He does not rely on a few sequences to trigger a truth that finds its origins not only in predetermined fictional elements but in a kind of documentary surge – his aim is to apply a new kind of connection between the two to the *œuvre* as a whole. While he is basically a director of fiction who has invented new pathways to the documentary,<sup>30</sup>

his method once again recalls that of Jean Rouch, described by Jean-André Fieschi in the following terms: 'The filmmaker's desire is the desire to fall in with (to organise) the desire of his characters. To follow them step by step, in the fundamental Neo-Realist (Zavattinian) tradition as it were, but as much on the cusp of their words (in what they reveal) as on the cusp of their behaviour.'<sup>31</sup> This is another possible definition of cinema improvisation and the concert sequence at the end of *BLED NUMBER ONE* is a prime example of Ameur-Zaïmeche's desire to fall in with that of his characters; a fictional character in the case of Louisa, whom he follows as her desire to sing leads her to the only stage on offer, the one in the psychiatric hospital; and documentary characters when the irrepressible desire of the other patients to sing in front of the delighted but bewildered audience wells up and is caught on camera, lending a whole new dimension to this moment of release. Addressing themselves directly to the crew, two women exclaim 'They're really the mad ones' and 'The lunatics are on the outside, the lunatics are on the outside'. In the wake of *MOI, UN NOIR*, writes Fieschi, the camera reveals a whole new function; it is no longer merely a recording instrument but a device that provokes, simulates, sets off events, conflicts and journeys which would never otherwise have occurred, at least in that form.'<sup>32</sup> Like Rouch, Ameur-Zaïmeche relies on the camera to create situations that cannot be foreseen and the overlap between these situations and documentary reality enables all the protagonists to improvise a new trajectory for the sequence. In his own way, he is meeting the challenge of *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*, when Rouch got black and white students to improvise on situations that were to develop according to their inspiration. It is by fully acknowledging this fiction, whose viability is underlined by hardened actors running the improvisational moves from the inside, that Ameur-Zaïmeche, in what only appears to be a paradox, attains another reality, going through the documentary to reach untapped realms of the imaginary. The – fundamental – difference is that he never *asks* the actors to improvise. Rather, he relies on his characters to grasp the fiction and, in a partially involuntary gesture motivated by their desire, glide it gradually towards an elsewhere that defies all rationalisation, thereby allowing a glimpse of that subconscious element he so often seems to be pursuing on the borderline between fiction and documentary.

While Ameur-Zaïmeche claims to be a fiction filmmaker, others see themselves as documentary-oriented, although they are prepared to use the stepping stones of improvisation to venture into the realms of fiction. *L'APPRENTI* (2008), Samuel Collardey's highly-praised first feature film, bears all the hallmarks of the documentary. Mathieu (Mathieu Bulle), a student at agricultural college, spends a few days a month gaining practical experience on Paul (Paul Barbier)'s farm. Collardey, acting as both director and chief cameraman, assisted by Charles Wilhelem on camera and Vincent Verdoux on sound, followed the teen-

ager for a week or two every month over a ten-month period. Apart from a few sequences shot in Mathieu's college, during weekend outings or in his mother's apartment, Collardey focused on the time he spent on the farm, in order to monitor his gradually burgeoning relationship with Paul, and the ultimate parting of the ways at the end of the school year.

Although the documentary bias is clear, several factors place *L'APPRENTI* in the fictional camp. The two 'actors' were chosen by the director; first Paul, following several visits to the farms of the Haut-Doubs region, then Mathieu, who took part in a casting call in a nearby agricultural college. Thus, it was the film that brought the two together. Collardey makes no secret of the fact that there was a script:

[...] in a classical fictional format, given substance by things that Paul and Mathieu would tell me about themselves. And also by interviews with Paul's former apprentices. I needed to write in order to formulate my longing to direct. I felt it was important to put my intentions down on paper before coming face to face with reality. But in the very first week of shooting, I put the script to one side and starting inventing the film as I went along, suggesting an action or a subject of conversation to the protagonists as we went through the scenes.<sup>33</sup>

Collardey did not grab a hand-held camera to capture scenes in the flow of everyday life, he saw the shoot as a daily ritual, which gave it a very special role. The crew spent all day on the farm. Lighting was installed in the interiors, particularly the kitchen and the cowshed, in order to allow for impromptu shooting without having to rig up technical paraphernalia every time. Collardey opted 'to shoot in 35 mm, despite the technical constraints, the demands in terms of lighting and location and the solemnity it imposes on those who are being filmed, while attempting to grasp reality, its surprises and the nature of people'.<sup>34</sup> This shows his determination to achieve a documentary reality by fictional means, bringing into play the border separating the two.

Although the situations are very close to their own everyday lives, to Paul and Mathieu they are essentially linked to performance, in which, as with Rouch, they are required to *play themselves*. The dialogues are entirely improvised and the thick regional accents sometimes make it difficult to grasp certain words or expressions, although this does not detract from the clarity of the scenes in which the outcome depends on the inspiration and commitment of the actors. The director's expectations are often precise but this is never explicit. The montage takes the form of a lengthy work-in-progress, which takes place after each visit, and the structure of the film therefore evolves month by month: 'Every time we returned from a shoot,' explains Collardey, 'we would watch the rushes and reflect on which scenes to shoot next; "what should we film in the next episode?"'<sup>35</sup> This respect for time, which has to take its course so that

things can emerge, makes it possible to follow the progress of the complex relationship between Mathieu and Paul. Their exchanges begin to take on a more intimate, deeper significance, as seen in the counterpoint between the two heart-rending sequences at the end of the film. Sitting on the grass in a magnificent landscape, Mathieu confides in Paul, telling him how much he has suffered from his parents' separation. Shortly afterwards, Paul talks about the joys of having a son and the grief that followed his little boy's illness and premature death. No written dialogue could have given these two moments as much impact and yet they give the impression of having been prepared like a fictional film, recalling – and the reference is far from innocuous – the veracity of Maurice Pialat's *L'ENFANCE NUE* (1968) and the serenity of *LA MAISON DES BOIS*, a television series in seven episodes shot in 1970 by the same director. The strength of *L'APPRENTI* is derived in large part from this method, in which time plays a paramount role. The passing of the seasons, a key element in farming life, with the effect it implies on bodies that are at one with nature, provides a powerful temporal gauge, enhanced by the natural light. On a different level, throughout the film Collardey follows the teenager's painstaking attempts to fulfill his dream of playing one of Johnny Hallyday's songs on the guitar. The *mise-en-scène* is openly acknowledged here, with Mathieu playing out the scenes on camera. It is also, however, a reflection of all the apprenticeships that make up the actual subject of the film: learning to be a man, to run a farm, to play the guitar. Collardey's recognition of this fictional element allows us to accept the sequence in which Mathieu puts on his earphones and sings Hallyday's hit at the top of his voice, in the cowshed, with the cows as his only audience. He is clearly 'playing' the actor, but the situation still retains its fundamental truthfulness; by miming the singer he is in a fantasy land of entertainment where hamming it up is the name of the game, as it was for the characters invented by the heroes of *MOI, UN NOIR*.

In choosing the series of 'episodes' relating the story of Mathieu and Paul, Collardey is imposing a fiction, even if the episodes seem familiar to the actors. In another sequence, they are supposed to perform in the snow. They do up an old sled and are then left free to slide around as they please – but no one could possibly have foreseen that the teenager would choose to lie down on Paul's back. This moment of play is perhaps the most crucial in the depiction of the pair's growing closeness. To release their speech, they first needed to release their bodies, and it is through this physical intimacy that they are able to confide in each other in the closing sequences of the film. This is the strength of the fiction in *L'APPRENTI*; it seems likely that without it, without the simple but always meaningful suggestions of the director, this documentary truth would never have existed. Collardey's documentary bias leads him to blur the frontiers between the two genres, without ever denying their existence, and this deliber-

ate play on the in-between makes it possible to scratch the surface and discover unprecedented forms of reality. In a different context, the Canadian animation filmmaker and improviser Pierre Hébert came up with the following explanation:

The model that interests me in the connection between various disciplines is that of conversation rather than fusion. I am too attached to border zones to want to eradicate borders. On the contrary, this is a way of deliberately taking them into account, neither granting absolute value to the borders nor to their eradication. They have to be tackled in their historic context, in other words from the angle which threatens to destabilize them. Borders, after all, are places of contraband, illegal immigration and war.<sup>36</sup>

In this increasingly indecisive toing and froing, Ameer-Zaïmeche and Collardey seem to be corroborating John van der Keuken's remarks: 'I am a filmmaker who improvises. Improvising also applies to images. To me, *improvising* and *not improvising* are infinitely more contradictory than *documentary* and *fiction*, for instance. This second kind of contradiction doesn't work, as far as I'm concerned. But *improvising*—now there's a real category.'<sup>37</sup> Van der Keuken, who was branded as a documentary filmmaker himself, never hesitated to intervene during a sequence, either to direct it or to get it 'replayed' by the characters-turned-actors. To the same degree as Rouch, and with similar techniques to Ameer-Zaïmeche, he did not view filmmaking as simply going along with his characters' desires, but as a way of giving them a defining impetus. In *AMSTERDAM GLOBAL VILLAGE*, for example, he decides to make a number of dreams come true, and these form the backbone of the film: the dream of a return to Bolivia for an immigrant folk musician working as a cleaner in an Amsterdam supermarket; the dream of a Chechen refugee he accompanies back to his war-torn country; the dream of an elderly Jewish singer looking for the apartment in which she hid with her son to avoid deportation; the dream of a young messenger boy with a moped who longs to own his own car so that he can join the 'aristocracy' of the profession. Van der Keuken starts out from the situation of his characters and together with them builds adventures that are both the implementation of their true wishes and a succession of events that bear all the hallmarks of fiction – but a fiction entirely improvised in a constant confrontation with reality. These characters, improvising in the real world the adventures of an unforeseen fiction, could be seen as a new reincarnation of Rouchian fabulation. But improvisation is also, as with Rouch, a *modus operandi* for cameraman van der Keuken, who breaks in with his hand-held camera, violently zooming in or misframing and making spur-of-the-moment decisions, and these impromptu tangents act as assertions of his presence in the space of the shot. An element of fiction, then, creeps into these real-time decisions, such as

introducing someone into the field, scrutinising a face, capturing a facial expression, tracking a gesture, all of which have the potential to change the whole course of the film.

For van der Keuken as for Rozier, Ameur-Zaïmeche or Collardey – although one really needs to mention every improvising filmmaker – improvisation is not an end but a means of transgressing the visible, with the purpose of reaching another reality in which the realms of imagination and dreams are no longer obstacles to a requisite rationality, but open doors leading to uncharted territories of human complexity. The exploration of this unknown world by improvisation does not imply a reliance on chance or accident, even if these may play a role, but is a way of accepting not to know, of being overtaken by elusive forces and reacting to them so that they can be followed and mastered, so that the film is also ready to take them in. When van der Keuken defends his status as an improvising filmmaker rather than a documentary or fictional one, he is not implying that these categories do not exist, but that *in his case* the dichotomy does not work. Improvising to him means making the fictional and documentary elements indiscernible, so that other cinematic forms and other connections between the cinema and the world, in which the powers of truth and falsehood alternate constantly, can be invented. He is consequently far closer to fictional filmmakers than to directors such as Frederick Wiseman or Raymond Depardon, whose utopian desire for ‘neutrality’ in the face of an event seems to be a principle that brooks no contradiction. From Renoir to Rozier, from Rouch to Ameur-Zaïmeche, from Rossellini to van der Keuken, beyond genres and categories, another history of cinematic modernity is being played out; not so much attracted to fruitless attempts to control the world as fascinated by the mysteries of Man brought face to face with his complexity: and what if improvising were simply ‘revealing the romantic dimension of reality’?<sup>39</sup>



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## 4. Acting cinema

### The body filmed, the body filming

In a two-part text<sup>1</sup> devoted to Hans Namuth's renowned POLLOCK (1951), Hubert Damisch, considering the hypothesis of a cinematic equivalent of Jackson Pollock's art, said: 'I will only retain one of the many suggestions, the one that bases its argument on the narrative processes that characterize the work of John Cassavetes to identify a kind of acting cinema, in the sense in which we refer to Jackson Pollock's action painting.'<sup>2</sup> Damisch himself draws on a passage from Ray Carney's book on the films of John Cassavetes, in which the author claims that the latter:

refuses to straighten out narrative loops and twists so that individual scenes will smoothly advance the plot. The acting releases energies that the story can't control. The fidelity to impulse makes Cassavetes' films the Jackson Pollocks of cinema. He would rather be true to the scribble of his characters' inchoate expressions and to their undefined swirls of feeling than to the straight line of the story.<sup>3</sup>

Damisch goes on to develop this idea briefly, taking an example from the end of *FACES* (1968), in which Cassavetes appears to be letting the impetus of the characters' desire take sole command of the sequence, so that the movement of the film becomes entirely reliant on the movements of the bodies. By recognising the importance of these bodies' remarkable presence, one is able to show that improvisational cinema is, at least in part, defined by a deployment of the hypothesis of acting cinema that extends far beyond a possible rejection of linear narrative. Acting must be understood in both senses of the word. The 'energies that the story can't control', as Carney put it, rely on the *actors'* performance and on the reactivity of the entire film crew, who have to *act on* unforeseen demands. Hans Namuth gives his undivided attention to Pollock's body, whose gestures he cannot predict, the painter's performance allowing no room for a re-take to hone the framing or focus. The improvised performance of Pollock the artist is countered in real time by the improvised performance of Namuth the cameraman, whose acute grasp of image composition owes much to his photo reporting background. On the face of it, this short feature is far more a precursor of television recording, which was later to give a starring role to jazz musicians,

than of the work of Cassavetes. And yet Namuth's documentary project is not that far removed from the dual ambition of a filmmaker whose own television experience was far from cursory: to lead the actors towards the same kind of creation in the moment as Pollock and to achieve the same reactivity in a fictional film as Namuth had demonstrated by means of his camera. This is the crux of Cassavetes' art: to lead his actors to that instant of performance in which, within the confines of a precise project, creation in the moment takes over from a predetermination whose only purpose is to facilitate what could once again be termed a form of overflow.

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

Many Cassavetes scholars have highlighted the importance of this freedom of the bodies' movements in space. 'The greatness of Cassavetes' work is to have undone the story, plot or action, but also space, in order to get to attitudes as to categories which put time into the body, as well as thought into life',<sup>4</sup> wrote Gilles Deleuze, perpetuating the analysis of Jean-Louis Comolli, for whom '[the characters in *FACES*] are built up gesture by gesture and word by word as the film progresses. This means that they actually create themselves, with the shoot acting as a moment of truth and each stage of the film developing a new pattern of behavior, its length coinciding precisely with that of the film.'<sup>5</sup> Vincent Amiel, in turn, wrote about how 'in the extraordinary final sequence of *FACES*, Cassavetes throws his characters into a desperate hand to hand combat in

which urgency alone prevails, with no time for reflection, pose or choice.<sup>6</sup> One can sense behind these words how crucial it is for an element to elude the mastery of the actor if it is to become the character's expression of truth; this is the ultimate goal of many of Cassavetes' sequences. To achieve this, he invented a highly complex method, based on the close, not to say intimate, relationship he had with his actors. Among fiction filmmakers, Cassavetes is undoubtedly the one who explored most consistently the porous border between the actor and his role. As far back as *FACES*, he started writing for actors who were also friends; little by little, he then built up a troupe, not to say a clan, around him. Each character was written with an actor in mind and reflected his personality and relationship to the world. During the invaluable rehearsal period, the dialogue was prepared jointly, paving the way for the second stage in the process of interpenetration between actor and character. Cassavetes' idea was to imbue the characters with the social inhibitions of the actors, although the latter inevitably protected themselves when it came to writing it down – a defensive reflex that the director naturally anticipated. This explains the highly unusual but decisive role played by the written word in his work and the virtual lack of any improvisation of dialogue during the shots. For it was on set that the trap closed in: by insisting that they use the dialogues that had been written jointly in rehearsal, Cassavetes was preventing his actors from hiding behind their words – words that were soon to reveal their limitations in the face of the emotions at stake. The multiplicity of shots forced the actor to express his feelings in other ways, driving him towards what Cassavetes called the truth of the body. In other words, no flexibility in the dialogues could be allowed if the actors were to succeed in creating and improvising with their bodies. This collaborative writing process was not, as has so often been claimed, proof of a lack of improvisation in his work; on the contrary, it was the cornerstone of creative improvisation itself.

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

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

The actors had to tackle a variety of situations in which the narrative continuity was so self-evident that it did not provide the slightest clue to the characters.

From *FACES* on, all Cassavetes' plots could be summed up in a few words. The narrative and dialogues served the same purpose as the melody and chord grids in a modern jazz standard, opening up a vast field of investigation for the improviser, who needed all his skills to reinvent in the most personal and spontaneous way the common elements underpinning the collective experience – much like Thelonious Monk shattering the familiar melody of *Tea for Two* or Albert Ayler's frenzied performance of Gershwin's *Summertime*. *FACES* played a similar role in Cassavetes' work as *My Favorite Things* did for John Coltrane, who performed and recorded the hit from the musical dozens of times, as though he could never exhaust its potential. The theme of *FACES*, and indeed of the director's entire opus, is given in the final scene by Chet (Seymour Cassel):

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

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

*HUSBANDS*, Cassavetes' subsequent film, opens with Harry, Archie and Gus, played by Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk and Cassavetes himself, attending the funeral of their friend Stuart. After the ceremony we find them huddled together despondently on the back seat of a taxi, aggrieved that the minister's sermon failed to do justice to Stuart's exceptional personality. In the subway they exchange a few platitudes about the premature ageing of sportsmen, which encourages Gus to talk about his passion for basketball. Archie follows this up by saying 'I want to play' and this acts as a springboard for a succession of se-

quences in which the dialogue is reduced to a few sentences, with the three friends finding themselves powerless to express their grief through speech. They compensate by channelling their energy into moments of shared physical effort that become the only way of facing up to their loss. Harry, Archie and Gus improvise a race in the street, which leads directly into a basketball game in a gymnasium and ends with a visit to the swimming pool. During this seven-minute chain of events, the occasional dialogues avoid any direct reference to the deceased but, as Archie says, as he gets his breath back, 'It's good for you. Sweat it all out.' Everything is contained in the physical proximity of the characters; speech seems to have been drained out of them and it is their bodies that have taken over. There are innumerable shots of the three friends hugging or playfully punching one another, culminating in a remarkable drinking sequence which sees them collapsing into a formless, pathetic heap of drunken bodies. Having driven their bodies to the brink of physical exhaustion, they now purge them by spewing out endless pints of beer. In these opening sequences of *HUSBANDS*, improvisation has allowed the movements of the body to take precedence over ordered speech.

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

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

If it is difficult to perceive the improvisational element in Cassavetes' work, this is because he never actually asked his actors to improvise. Instead, he gradually encouraged them to get rid of their performance techniques and mastery, en-

couraging them to act in the moment for its own sake. He turned the cinema into an art of performance, not an 'actor's performance' in the film festival and navel-gazing sense of the term, but as an improvisational process which blends predetermined writing and 'a physical act whose material characteristics cannot be completely recorded.'<sup>9</sup> His cinema is, above all, a cinema of the body, mainly because he is one of the only filmmakers to have encouraged his actors to *speak with their body*. Each has their own distinctive body language, as recognisable as the sound of a voice or the tone of a jazz musician, often described as an extension of their own voice or even as the 'sound of their body'. In the transition between the spoken word and the body in the work of Cassavetes, sound also has a vital role to play. The sudden bursts of unexplained laughter, cries and flashes of anger belong far more to the physical than to the spoken register and are often the first signs of the 'letting go' mentioned earlier, intense moments when the body takes over, no longer guided by a specific decision or intention. '[...] believing is no longer believing in another world, or in a transformed world. It is only, it is simply believing in the body,' wrote Gilles Deleuze, who went on, 'it is giving discourse to the body and, for that purpose, reaching the body before discourses, before words, before things are named.'<sup>10</sup> Cassavetes' approach does not involve placing the body before speech as much as using words to improvise the body, but it is much the same. He rapidly understood that the potential of gesture could not be pigeon-holed by classic 'directing'. By releasing the body, he was reiterating the idea of gesture as a force to be reckoned with, 'a powerful pointer of personalities, interests and passions.'<sup>11</sup> Cassavetes' films, just like experiments with free jazz, were a way of exploring the powers of the body, pushing back the limits by striving, to the point of exhaustion, for 'that immemorial intensity of the body, which cannot be reduced to its narrative nature any more than to the social convention which underpins that narrative', as Christiane Vollaire<sup>12</sup> put it, when referring to the break between classical dance and its contemporary counterpart.

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

in which the cameraman's role as improviser is put forward as a way of showing constant receptivity to an elusive reality, with acting cinema shifting from the unpredictable movements of the actor's body to the equally unpredictable movements of the cameraman(men)'s body.

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

Film only became my means of expression once I had removed the camera from its tripod and found the courage to shoot at eye level and arm's length, when I began to include in the flow of images what was actually in front of me at every moment, incorporating it into my initial ideas: when I began to improvise [...].<sup>13</sup>

One must first recall that in the case of 'reality cinema' improvisation does not *obviously* emerge on the side of the filmed but *conceivably* on that of the filmer. This does not mean one should dismiss the element of improvisation that crops up every day in the lives of every living creature; but one should recognise that if improvisation is to be considered as a creative act, it must be deliberately generated, consciously perceived as an *act of improvisation*. Van der Keuken also recalls, in his own way, the importance of technical developments in the emergence of new, more manageable cinematic forms; in his case, for instance, the 'crew' was limited to two people, a cameraman – himself – and a sound technician, almost always his partner Noshka van der Lely.<sup>14</sup> He also believed that it was vital for him to act as cameraman, in order to ensure his physical involvement in events. Improvisation was a way of reacting to the whims of chance while summoning in the moment all previously acquired information. In other words, to improvise was to 'recognise the gestural element in the gradual construction of thought',<sup>15</sup> to make on-the-spot decisions, in the heat of the performance, while being acutely aware of a work-in-progress being formulated in real time. This was not simply another way of doing things; it called into question all the guiding principles of classic cinema, founded on an initial script, with a director imposing his own outlook on the world. Van der Keuken, a tremendous jazz fan, took his cue from music to define his approach to improvisation as

a need for instability, which is also a way of taking things further. Like in improvised music. The unstable is also a form of movement. It is a form of rage. One cannot be satisfied with something just being the way it is. So one destroys that moment of stability in order to shake things up again and release something different.<sup>16</sup>

Van der Keuken never hesitated to reframe in order to capture a fleeting gesture or expression, zoom in to draw attention to an unexpected detail or respond with rapid camera movements to a sudden off-screen diversion, before swiftly

returning to his initial shot.<sup>17</sup> In his quest for polyphony, he refused to impose a single view of a world, bringing its complex nature to the fore by a relentless destabilisation of the eye. His work is underpinned by his own body's reactions to given situations and the body of the cameraman at work is woven into the images, contributing to the inner rhythmical beat of the shots. Improvisation allowed him to evoke the presence of a body filming, a body participating in the movement of the world, at once player and witness. Being an improvising filmmaker means intervening physically in the flow of events and trying to respond, like a jazz musician, to the myriad calls to strike the right note or the right chord at the right moment. It is not enough to record, one needs to solicit, orient, elicit. Van der Keuken never denied that his mere presence affected events and his awareness of this influence was a way of acknowledging an obvious 'documentary *mise-en-scène*'. This was a gruelling commitment, both intellectually and physically, and van der Keuken admitted that he always stopped shooting when his energy gave out, because the body knows its limitations. Being prepared to put one's own body on the line, surrounded by others, creates a link between the person carrying the camera and those in front of the lens, making it possible for the latter to interrupt the shoot by intervening directly on camera or moving out of field. Van der Keuken, like Rouch, was determined to film in close proximity to his subjects, in permanent physical contact, and it is no coincidence that they both clear-sightedly chose the hand-held camera as the only way to film the world.

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

co-directed with Robert Drew the famous *Primary* (1960), a depiction of the election campaign between Kennedy and Humphrey during the Wisconsin primaries, concludes his UNESCO report, entitled 'The Birth of the Living Camera' in the following terms:

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

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

## Disinhibition in focus (I): play

The advent of live television in the 1950s and 1960s lent an unprecedented dimension of performance to recording, the creation time and reception time now being the same. In the very first sequence of *ADIEU PHILIPPINE* (1961), Jacques Rozier paid a clear tribute to these television-inspired techniques, by filming the multi-camera recording of *Jazz Memories*, a musical programme directed by Jean-Christophe Averty. The opening sequence of this first feature film heralded his cinematic approach. The spontaneity that increasingly lightweight cameras and reliable live sound allowed him often influenced his choices of mise-en-

scène. In *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* (1969), for instance, during the girls' vacation on the Atlantic coast, a day is devoted to a boat trip organised by Patrick (Patrick Verde), a young man they have just met by chance on the beach. Rozier alternates between the actors' dinghy, filming with a small hand-held camera, and a second dinghy, which he shares with the cameraman and another camera, with the sound being recorded live on a modest tape recorder.<sup>20</sup> Despite its length (ten minutes), the sequence seems to have no scripted reality or foreseeable continuity. If it were not there, the film would lose some of its beauty but not its consistency. It therefore owes its existence to an inspiration of the moment, somewhat arduously recorded by two cameras and a tape recorder. Rozier is challenging all the stages of cinematic creation and radicalising this new plethora of improvisational possibilities. In doing so, he has an ambitious purpose in mind: to discover new forms of cinema, forms that will no longer be predetermined but will be invented in the course of the shoot and 'fixed' during the montage. This decision to move away from the cumbersome techniques of classic cinema in order to explore new avenues is reminiscent of the young jazz musicians of the early 1930s, who, tired of the big bands that were preventing them from improvising at will, reverted to smaller ensembles, inventing a new way of playing based on freedom for the soloists and impromptu exchanges. The aim of these young boppers, shared some years later by Jacques Rozier, was to draw on collective performance as a means of releasing new individual modes of expression.

In this sequence, as in the aforementioned one with the eels,<sup>21</sup> but far more boldly, Rozier aimed to bring about a situation of disinhibition by releasing the actors' bodies from all the strictures of the shoot. Faced with an unpredictable ocean, on a makeshift vessel and with no help from the director, the actresses found themselves with only one solution: to go with the tide – in every sense of the term – and allow improvisation to take the lead. The surrender to the moment by these scantily dressed girls made a graphic contribution to Rozier's purpose, although, like his friend Pialat, he was careful not to reveal its underlying significance. Their squeals of delight, their fear of falling in the water and the expressions of pleasure on their faces inevitably conjure up a first time that is not merely that of a maiden voyage on a choppy sea. Without ever evoking the erotic subtext, Rozier manages to create a remarkable portrayal of the body's surrender to love, that mixture of apprehension and pleasure that is so characteristic of the moment when physical expression brings the course of love, perhaps for the first time, to its conclusion. Rozier was not striking an attitude with his improvisation, he saw it as a necessity. For him, it was the only way of showing this surrender without conveying the 'already there' impression that so often prevails in this kind of scene. This made it impossible to opt for an on-set reconstitution of some prior improvisational work; Rozier the improviser be-

lieved in the 'live' expression of feeling in the time span of the take, in a present experienced with maximum intensity, a time without narrative. As Jacques Lourcelles wrote:

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

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

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

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

In the sequence from *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT*, everything conspires to engender an imbalance stemming from a 'game' that does indeed hark back to childhood, but also to a more adolescent awareness of the pleasure that comes from shared danger and physical intimacy. Rozier's aim is indeed to take these bodies to the edge, and even invent different cinematic bodies, first by countering predetermined speech, seen as an obstacle to the manifestation of the body, and then by placing this body under pressure, on the precipice. The sequence with the dinghy, like the one with the eels, is not so much concerned with the result of improvisation as with the intensity of its genesis during the actual performance, that possible surrender to the moment. These moments of 'letting go' already featured in Rozier's first short film, which we mentioned earlier. *RENTRÉE DES CLASSES* (1955) could serve as a manifesto for improvising filmmakers aiming,

like Rozier, to build their films around these moments of disinhibition – moments that, far from threatening their project, only serve to crown it in glory. In this film, Rozier pays tribute to the Renoir of *BOUDU SAUVÉ DES EAUX* and the Vigo of *ZÉRO DE CONDUITE* (1933) in his portrayal of the little boy from a village in the South of France who decides to play truant on the first day of term following the summer vacation. The mischievous kid leaves his classmates and makes for the river below, where he lets himself drift along with the current, still fully-dressed, while playing with a grass snake who acts as an impromptu guide. Back at school, he throws the class into disarray by slipping the animal into his neighbour's exercise book. The film, which lasts twenty minutes, highlights three recurring themes in Rozier's work: childhood, water and the presence of animals as possible triggers for improvisation. The snake heralds the eels in *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* but also, in the same film, a wonderful riding scene in which the three girls, accompanied by Patrick and Gilbert, leave the forest track to gallop along the beach. The erratic shots of the horses succeed one another, with Rozier simply concentrating on their movement; it was during the montage that he included the final shot of Gilbert, alone with his horse and unable to catch up with the girls, who have got away from him yet again. Although this lends meaning to the sequence, Rozier is fascinated above all by the way the bodies give into the momentum of the horses, as he was when the same bodies were buffeted by the dinghy or when panic grabbed hold of the girls in *ADIEU PHILIPPINE*, as a horde of bees disturbed their picnic on a Corsican beach. On each occasion, he kick-starts the situation so that the actors genuinely lose their inhibition during the take, their unforeseen gestures revealing something that has far more to do with an unprecedented rapport with the world than a simple performance technique.<sup>25</sup> The forces of nature and irrepressible presence of the animals contribute to this Bazinian view of the cinema, equally defended by Renoir, which consists of 'doing with "documentary" actors what one would do "in nature with an animal".'<sup>26</sup> By bringing actors and animals face to face in the same shot, Rozier wants the bodies of the actors to hark back to a form of animal spontaneity; but while its erotic dimension does not escape him, he goes further, turning the improvised sequences into a documentary portrayal of young people's behaviour at a given period in twentieth-century history.<sup>27</sup>

*RENTRÉE DES CLASSES* also highlights the importance of play for a number of improvising filmmakers. This starts out with the presence of children, who are required, as far as possible, to play themselves and not to act out a role, one of the ways of achieving this being to distract them from the camera and turn the situation into a game. In *LA MAISON DES BOIS*, Pialat multiplies the sequences depicting the little pupils in the boarding school run by Jeanne (Jacqueline Dufranne), as they make the most of being out in the open by joining in team

games. Living in the moment is also a way of forgetting, if only for a moment, the horrors of war. Cassavetes, in *A WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* in particular, constantly lures his child actors into play but does not direct them. In one of the film's most impressive sequences, Mabel (Gena Rowlands) holds a party for her children and three of their friends. Cassavetes' intention is to show the boundless energy Mabel channels into organising the games to prove that she is a 'good mother'; but the games are also a way of getting the children to forget about the camera while integrating them into Mabel/Rowland's improvisation, which contains an element of madness not unconnected with the innocence of childhood. One could also cite *LE RAYON VERT*, the only film in which Éric Rohmer responds to the chaotic presence of several children, left to do as they please on camera, and also the only film in which he seems to have faith in the virtues of real improvisation. In these examples, the children are totally absorbed in their games and are not improvising, but they contribute towards creating an atmosphere conducive to improvisation, which forces the actors to adapt to their frequently unexpected reactions; this is the point of Pialat and Cassavetes' *mises-en-scène* when they bring adults and children together in the same games. So when improvising filmmakers sought to reproduce the same childlike, of-the-moment disinhibition, but with adults this time, they also naturally turned to games: 'What we have been waiting for since childhood is to upset the order that is stifling us' wrote Georges Bataille. This applies to Rozier, of course, but also Jacques Rivette, in *CÉLINE ET JULIE VONT EN BATEAU* (1974), in which the young women repeatedly seek, explicitly in this case, to recall the emotions of childhood through play. Ameur-Zaïmeche began his first film with a football match involving young men from each community in the  *cité des Bosquets*; a few sequences later, he got his amateur actors to improvise a game of golf on a piece of wasteland surrounded by high-rise buildings, making the childlike pleasure of play a cornerstone of fabulation.

The desire to depict disinhibition crops up again, unsurprisingly, in the sled sequence of *L'APPRENTI*. In his script, Collardey had planned to stage a moment of interplay in the snow between Paul and Mathieu.<sup>28</sup> Faithful to his guiding principles, he chose the situation but left it open, so that the protagonists could be free to move as they pleased. Paul's descent, face down on the sled with Mathieu on his back, a descent that takes place body-to-body, amid laughter and shouting, and culminates in a glorious snowball fight, reveals without a single word being spoken the relationship that has burgeoned between Paul and Mathieu, in the wake of the first weeks of apprenticeship (and shooting). Collardey, with his hand-held camera, tries to capture what he can of this moment of complicity, in which the body's potential to reveal inner feelings is ecstatically portrayed. The trick was to lead man and boy toward a situation of play that would be familiar to any child who enjoyed snow. Nothing could

have prepared Collardey, however, for the physical closeness that springs out of that first shot. The whole beauty of the sequence stems from the improvisation, which perpetuates the director's masterful *mise-en-scène*. In order to turn chaos and disinhibition into methods of creation, it is necessary to plot a course but allow time for those moments when the course gets sidetracked, leading improvisation to reveal a basic truth, like the sled, with its two bodies on board, hugging the curves of the hill before Mathieu suddenly lets himself fall into the snow.

## Disinhibition in focus (2): dance

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

Alex Descas spent two months on a cock fighting farm in Martinique. He got to know the fifty cocks that the farmer rented out for the shoot. He was covered in scars. None of us could get near the cocks but with Alex they were like cats. His relationship with them, therefore, was not improvised; this sequence only exists because of what he achieved during those two months. Very early on, Alex, Isaach and I chose the music they listen to in the film. Marley's *Buffalo Soldier* became the tune of the whole crew.<sup>30</sup> The scene [of the dance with the cock] could be seen as improvisation, and yet we'd all been expecting that scene. It reminds me of a great document that shows Coltrane improvising in a recording studio. He is so involved in his music that he doesn't see the sound engineer gesticulating and calling him. And yet he isn't actually alone: the musicians around him have trodden the same path by his side. Something has already been built up between them. This solo is the culmination. Like in the sequence

with Alex and the cock, these are unbelievable moments, the accomplishment of a process. All of a sudden, an actor begins to carry the whole film – and all we need to do is to pluck it.<sup>31</sup>

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

In *BEAU TRAVAIL* (1999), in which warrant officer Galoup (Denis Lavant) recalls his years in the Foreign Legion in the Gulf of Djibouti, Claire Denis tackles dance in a more concrete manner by getting Bernardo Montet<sup>32</sup> to choreograph the collective training exercises for the actors playing the legionnaires. These perfectly mastered choreographies, filmed in static shots in the open spaces of the desert, seem to act as a pendant for the final sequence, in which Galoup, surrounded by mirrors in a nightclub setting, dances alone to the *The Rhythm of the Night*, a disco hit by Corona. The previous scene, which shows Galoup's motionless body stretched out on a bed, a revolver poised on his abdomen, ended with a close-up of biceps in which a vein throbbed to the regular rhythm of a heartbeat. This inner vibration permeates the entire body in the nightclub sequence, encapsulating an improvisation that seems to spill over from the film itself, given its unexpectedness and lack of narrative credibility. The geometric figures of the soldiers at work give way to an improvised explosion of gestures by Lavant, in the guise of a tap dancer. Yet again, in this final shot, nothing has been resolved, there is just 'a body overcome by grief or pain, thrashing about in search of who knows what; maybe an oasis of freedom in which the pain he has suffered can be 'released' or transferred, or can simply exist; for in the everyday arena, it is not welcome.'<sup>33</sup> Daniel Sibony was not actually writing about Claire Denis' film here, but about transcendence and excess in dance [*Trans-en-danse ou la danse comme excès*']. He goes on: 'The dance space is a place to which the play of a being is transferred when it goes beyond what-we-are, what we are permitted to be.'<sup>34</sup> Sibony is not talking about improvisation here, yet one of the strengths of such improvised moments of dance lies in their physical communication of excess, and the release of overflowing energies, which cannot be expressed in the corseted framework of everyday life. In dance choreography, however improvised it may be in preparation, the dancer needs to master his body and tame its incessant energy flows through his technical virtuosity. Non-programmed dance improvisation enables the actor's body to be far more radi-

cally 'attuned to the shapeless',<sup>35</sup> as Christiane Vollaire so aptly phrases it. Galoup's improvisation must be taken in this sense, concluding the choreographed gestures of *BEAU TRAVAIL* to provide a possible means of expression for zones of desire that will remain mysterious and hazy, unstable and contradictory. This sequence, like a Coltrane solo on the same theme, perpetuates the improvisation carried out by the young Alain (Grégoire Colin) to Eric Burdon and The Animals' *Hey Gyp*, in *US GO HOME*, a film made by Claire Denis for the television channel Arte in 1994. This body only just emerging from adolescence seems to be overtaken by forces that are both vital and uncontrollable. While it does not make as blatant a reference to the powers of desire, the same intention comes into play in the sequence from *L'APPRENTI* in which Mathieu sings *Je te promets* at the top of his voice as he cleans out the cowshed. If this 'excess of joy'<sup>36</sup> does not conjure up the same imaginary powers as Jocelyn's dance with the cock or the solos of Galoup and Alain, its brief is, nevertheless, to let the body tell its own story by surrendering to sheer in-the-moment improvisation.

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

twosomes, in stark contrast to the relaxed vivacity of their comrades. The whole issue of the film is summed up in the difficulty of getting these black and white bodies to come together in movement, in finding a common beat in the midst of this polyrhythm.

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

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

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

On the one hand, the frame, which is rarely frozen, is seeking itself and its subject; on the other, one can move in and out of the frame, take it over completely, walk in front of the camera, without affecting the film, in fact quite the reverse. It looks as though

the camera is moving around the bodies and faces but is constantly preventing itself from enclosing them in a prison-frame. The indefinite is what remains in the shadows and yet cannot be dissociated from the bodies.<sup>39</sup>

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

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

Each of these examples illustrates the longing to escape conscience and causal links through improvisation. The montage can be a way of 'rationalising' these sequences of disinhibition by harking back to earlier events, but the strength of the images stems from a conviction that only a lack of intention can conceivably turn these improvisations, not into scattered, disintegrating moments, and even less into moments of dramatic continuity, but into moments of crystallisation from which unforeseen, unexpected and ineffable worlds may emerge. The acts then only exist in themselves, in the present of an improvisation experienced as

an 'attempt at dispossession, in the hopes that this will pave the way for something that can never be produced within the framework of the intention and project.'<sup>40</sup> So that the enigma of dance as the 'turbulent transition between thought and the act of the body'<sup>41</sup> may suddenly, in the space of a few shots, take possession of the entire film.

### **Improvising/sculpting: UN COUPLE PARFAIT (2005), by Nobuhiro Suwa**

The gestures of the painter in Namuth's *POLLOCK* and the dancers in van der Keuken's and Rouch's films find an echo in the gestures of the sculptor who haunts Nobuhiro Suwa's improvised film, *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*. In her essay *Cinéma et sculpture. Un aspect de la modernité des années 60*,<sup>42</sup> Suzanne Liandrat-Guiques bases a number of her hypotheses on texts by André Bazin, compiled in the four volumes of the first edition of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* She highlights the term 'cameraman-sculpture' to describe 'the deployment composed by a set of expressions in which the mummy, the petrification or crystallisation, the statue and the mould all overlap'.<sup>43</sup> The statue motif underpins a number of analyses, featuring among others *VOYAGE EN ITALIE* (Roberto Rossellini, 1953), *LE MÉPRIS* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), *L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE À MARIENBAD* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *MÉDITERRANÉE* (Jean-Daniel Pollet, 1963) and *SHADOWS* (John Cassavetes, 1959) and the author concludes her stimulating comments in the following terms:

The cinematic modernity expressed through these films harks back to an idea of the cinema conceived as a set of properties that enable it to overcome the limits of the representation and resemblance of things, to delve beyond the ontological realism of the cinematic image to pave the way for a purely thought image.<sup>44</sup>

In 2005, it was the turn of Japanese filmmaker Nobuhiro Suwa to tackle this modernity by directing, in Paris, what could be seen as a variation on *VOYAGE EN ITALIE: UN COUPLE PARFAIT*. Alain Bergala has highlighted the brief pages that represent the only written element in Rossellini's film.<sup>45</sup> Although they hardly qualify as a script, they do show the importance given to Katherine Joyce (Ingrid Bergman)'s visits to museums and historical sites. Each place is referred to by name, and briefly described by means of authentic city guides: the sculpture department in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, the cave of the Cumaean Sybil, the Pozzuoli solfatara, the ossuary of the Fontanelle cemetery and the excavations at Pompeii, where Katherine and her husband Alexander (George Sanders) see a petrified couple emerging from the ashes. Even

though Rossellini seems to have planned Katherine's 'cultural' tour, however, he did no such thing with the rest of the film. Each scene was invented during the shoot, and the dialogues were written at the last moment or even left to the inspiration of the actors, who often found themselves bewildered by their director's unorthodox methods.<sup>46</sup>

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

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

Suwa gave us a score, a kind of chart in which each of the different-sized boxes represented a sequence. Each one was coloured in accordance with the intensity of the

scenes and he had drawn little characters to show the scale of the diagrams. He also pointed out where the emphasis lay in each scene in terms of the characters. This worksheet helped me right through to the editing stage.<sup>50</sup>

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

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

relationship between Marie and the statues the theme of the film, which like a jazz theme, shaped all the ensuing improvisations.

In the first sequence, Marie walks through the trees and stops for a few seconds in the garden, opposite L'HOMME QUI MARCHE, before continuing her walk. The following shot is a very geometric close shot of *La Cathédrale*, with Marie entering from the right, revolving slowly around the work before moving out of frame, once more leaving the statue's two hands centre shot. One can hear the voice of a female guide describing *L'Éternelle idole*, which is revealed a few seconds later in front of a pane of glass in which the reflection of a group of visitors can be made out, then Marie slowly approaches the sculpture just as the voice, still out of field, is quoting Rilke's famous lines: 'Something of the mood of a purgatory lives in this work. A heaven is near, but not yet attained; a hell is near, and not yet forgotten. And here too, all this radiance comes from the contact of two bodies, and from the contact of the woman with herself.'<sup>54</sup> The third shot begins with the long corridor leading to *Ève*, just visible at the far end, in front of a large window. At the beginning of the corridor, on the right, the imposing *Torse de la Muse Whistler*, a 1907 bronze, recalls the mutilated antique sculptures filling the Naples museum, which so fascinated Rodin. It is at this point that the camera changes over: the three highly contrived static shots are succeeded by a very mobile close-up on Marie's eyes, who then sits down in front of the window, just below *Ève*, to wipe away a few tears. The final shot, which is once again stable, is a slow tilt-up spanning the impressive statue in its entirety, as a few notes on a piano accompany a match-cut with the hotel room in which Marie is getting ready for the wedding.

The couple's journey is reflected in the succession of works, from the first encounter with L'HOMME QUI MARCHE to the unfinished *Ève*, her arms hugging her body, a posture described by Rilke as 'lean[ing] forward as if to listen to her own body'.<sup>55</sup> But above all, Suwa leaves Marie, alone in front of the statues, to face these confrontations in the moment, with no other words but those of Rilke evoking the uncertain nature of this purgatory, while the instability and vulnerability of feelings and desire are expressed in the way the fingers of the two hands of *La Cathédrale* brush against one another, in the precarious equilibrium of *L'Éternelle idole* or in the body of *Ève*, a sculpture Rodin found particularly difficult to work on because of the ever-changing forms of his model, whose condition had not been revealed to him.<sup>56</sup> Suwa is careful to avoid any reference to the couple's own childlessness, as this would give far too explicit a significance to the pregnant *Ève*. Although his choice guides Marie's steps through the sculptures, he does not pre-empt the emotions that will be unleashed as she comes face to face with them. It is in this sequence that the acumen of actress Valeria Bruni Tedeschi most tangibly informs her character. The aim is not to meld the actors with their roles, but to place them in the situation of living in

the moment a course meticulously mapped out by the director. It takes only four shots to convey the mood, just as a few simple chords were all Duke Ellington and Miles Davis needed to create the mood of their compositions. The ensuing improvisations, therefore, all depend on a preordained atmosphere, determined as much by Rodin's sculptures as by the actress' ability to find her conscious or unconscious inspiration in them. Her role is all the more important as she has to take the lead in the exchanges with Bruno Todeschini, who plays Nicolas. From the very beginning of the film he seems resigned to the separation, whereas Marie is determined to understand, tries to find explanations and wears her partner down with questions. This battle of wills, which is specified in the stage directions, forces her to take the initiative and set the rhythm of the scenes.

The nature of the improvisations is shaped by the tension between Marie's apparent calm and her inner turmoil, and this tension is echoed in the contrast between the statues' impassibility and what Leo Steinberg termed Rodin's 'hasty, over-eager output.'<sup>57</sup> This tension brings about a singular relationship with time, crystallised in the endless moments of silence that give the exchanges in the hotel bedroom so much impact. The space, using minimal lighting effects and filmed in one static shot, its time limit entirely dependent on the actors' inspiration, also plays a part in emphasising this temporality. Rejecting improvisation's almost systematic recourse to the hand-held camera, here the camera never comes between the protagonists. For Caroline Champetier, it would have been:

impossible to introduce this 'supplementary body' into the hotel scenes, for instance, in which everything is played out in the space between the two bodies as they move apart, come together, knock into one another and move apart once more. The camera has to stand back, choosing a precise spot that will span most of the space, showing the actors entering, leaving or staying in the field, and the takes have to be long enough to capture something of the characters' mood.<sup>58</sup>

The device that allows this time span to be implemented can only operate if the actors themselves take the time to appropriate it. This certainly happens when Valeria Bruni Tedeschi returns from the museum, but is most consummately portrayed by Bruno Todeschini, who astutely refuses to rise to the bait of his partner's demands, not only by allowing the waiting and silence to build up but by avoiding any physical intervention in the shot. Such economy is almost unheard of in an improvisational context and once again recalls, in the way it underlines each detail, each breath, each gesture, the style of Miles Davis during his *Kind of Blue* period (1959), when his phrases, pared down to the extreme in their harmonic structure, were gradually condensed into a few isolated notes, played in a myriad different ways as though he was trying to sculpt them in

space. Light years away from the boppers' over-exuberance or the exaggerations of the early free jazz musicians, Davis takes his time, relying on incantation and silence to convey the whole tragic dimension of this 'endlessly consumed present', as Michel-Claude Jalard<sup>60</sup> so magnificently described improvisation. And how can one not recall here Davis' trumpet solo in *ASCENSEUR POUR L'ÉCHAFAUD*, echoing Florence (Jeanne Moreau)'s distraught face as she wanders through the streets of Paris.

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

These figures of condensation in improvisation techniques are juxtaposed with others that are more akin to phenomena of proliferation, particularly between the sculptures and the body of the young woman, and these mark a deliberate attempt to show the influence of the statues on the couple's story. One of the differences between *VOYAGE EN ITALIE* and *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* lies in the emphasis placed on the bodies as objects of desire. In Rossellini's film, Katherine does everything in her power to resist physical temptation and is protected from the lure of the flesh by her idealisation of the platonic love she once had for a young poet. This determination is weakened, however, by her visit to the museum in Naples: by means of a series of match cuts, Rossellini depicts Katherine entering into a strange relationship with a young discobolus, and

plays on the agitation provoked by the statue, which becomes a presence in its own right. Although Katherine's embarrassment betrays the cause of her agitation, Rossellini gives it an entirely different significance a few seconds later when, in a superb crane movement over the *Hercules Farnese*, he features in the same shot what Bergala terms 'the tip over between the human point of view of this 'being which finds itself free in the world, with no expectations of any kind' and the point of view of 'something dominating it', lying in wait for the right opportunity to bestow misery or grace upon it.'<sup>61</sup> The same overhanging camera movement reoccurs as we know in the final sequence, known as 'the miracle', when Katherine and Alex rediscover one another in the hope, perhaps, that love may still prove possible.

In *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, no superior force tears the heroine away from terrestrial contingencies. Here, everything is transmitted through the body, or more precisely through a form of contamination between the statues and Marie's attitudes, which in turn condition those of Nicolas. In focusing on the link between Rodin's statues and the rekindling of desire, Suwa is responding, perhaps unconsciously, to Godard's request to his actors and crew, when he asked them to go and see these same sculptures before shooting the love scenes in *PRÉNOM CARMEN*. Furthermore, by opting for dialogue improvisation in a language he does not master himself, Suwa is able to concentrate all his attention on the bodies, bearers of a truth that words find great difficulty expressing. The improvisation that follows the museum visit is a first attempt to obtain a physical manifestation of the feelings experienced in front of the works. Sitting by the window in her underwear, Marie asks Nicolas to listen to her reading a brief passage from Rilke's *Rodin*: 'Here was life, a thousand-fold in every minute, in longing and sorrow, in madness and fear.' But Nicolas does not hear the words that evoke lost passion, any more than he sees Marie's sculptural body, imploring him just afterwards to 'Look at me, look at me.' A few scattered piano notes, already heard in the final shot in the museum, ring out once more, as though Marie has remained in this other space, in this other time, in the emotion she is clumsily trying to share with Nicolas. The second museum scene goes some way towards reducing the gulf between the two characters. This time Marie is no longer alone with the statues. It is not the unfinished *Ève* that overwhelms her, but a meeting with a long-lost friend, visiting the museum with his young son. The improvised exchange between Marie and Patrick (Alex Descas) seems to make the statues revert to their immobility and bring out the apparent triviality of life. As they fondly remember the past, with its dramas (the death of Patrick's wife) and joys (the son playing at their feet), Marie is able to link the violence of the emotions she experienced in the midst of Rodin's timeless works and the uncertainty of her relationship with Nicolas. This unexpected meeting in front of *Le Secret*, another of Rodin's variations on two right hands,<sup>62</sup> like *La*

*Cathédrale*, conditions the final sequence in the hotel when, in the middle of an ordinary conversation, Nicolas and Marie touch one another at last, and approach the bed kissing, the young woman appearing to be gently guiding her partner towards a position that recalls *L'Eternelle idole*. They do not make love, but remain in Rilke's 'purgatory' before separating for the night, Marie having announced her decision to leave the following morning. On the station platform, she puts her case on the train before saying goodbye to Nicolas. But in a long, uncertain and fragile sequence shot, in which the secret aspirations of the bodies seem to be refusing to follow the injunctions of the will, the train departs without her, leaving Marie and Nicolas face-to-face on the platform, lost for words, like two statues.

By letting the actors decide on the outcome of the film, Suwa was taking his faith in their improvisation skills to the extreme. Improvisation implies a quest: each shot represents a communal search for unexpected events that may crop up at any moment. Following the second visit to the museum, Todeschini forgets to switch a lamp on, although it represents the only source of light apart from the window, through which one can just glimpse the fading daylight. The actor only realises his omission once he is in mid-take but carries on performing – and Suwa chose this dark take to accentuate the contrast with the solar brightness of the museum. At the editing stage, he had no hesitation in introducing two inserts from the same sequence, with no cut-away shot, in order to illustrate the research process and render the creative work more visible. Improvisation requires time, together with an acute awareness that the truth stems from the actor's ability to integrate blunders or hesitation within the discourse: 'Improvisation is a series of mistakes that have turned into a declaration or a poem' said the multiple instrumentalist William Parker.<sup>63</sup> How many incredible phrases by Thelonious Monk came about in just this way, by insisting on a discord that the trained ear would simply have qualified as a 'wrong note'? The takes in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, which can sometimes last up to twenty minutes, include numerous examples of tentative gestures or hesitant words betraying both the actors' exhaustion and the uncertainty of the situation. But it is precisely these uncertainties that confer such density to the characters' relationship. Suwa and his crew, both actors and technicians, join forces almost naturally with the modernity of Rodin, who was 'the first whose sculpture deliberately harnessed the forces of accident', as Steinberg put it;<sup>64</sup> Rodin, to whom 'what [is] more beautiful than a beautiful thing [is] the ruin of that beautiful thing.'<sup>65</sup>

The absence of any predetermined written dialogue or meticulous shot-by-shot shooting script paves the way for another cinema, defined by Suwa as 'an empty circle that can be filled by each one of us',<sup>66</sup> another kind of work in which the upstrokes and downstrokes are perceptible, and the scenes are not 'summaries of scenes.'<sup>67</sup> This can lead Suwa to alter the filming regime in mid-

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sequence, going from a static long shot to a mobile close shot, underlined by the image's change in texture. This was the case in both museum sequences, with Caroline Champetier improvising an enormous close-up of Marie with her hand-held camera to reveal the intimate recesses of the face. This should not to be read as a conclusion or judgement, merely as a desire to accompany a movement. The real subject of improvisation is the process itself, with all its vicissitudes, but it is also its unfinished nature, which conveys according to Steinberg 'an outpouring of effort so identified with the act of living that it hates to turn itself off',<sup>68</sup> like the two motionless figures, indifferent to the bustle of the station, refusing to sever the tenuous tie that still binds them together. Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini have gradually overcome, through improvisation, the instant of freedom that emerges from a succession of moments in which different strata of time overlap. The memory of the emotions felt in each scene, the memory of events experienced by the characters, the intimate memory of the actors, the memory of Rodin's gestures. All these memories erupt into the present in an improvisation that always simultaneously involves old and new, far removed from the myths of immediacy and emancipation that have so often overdefined it.<sup>69</sup> Improvisation to Suwa provides a contemporary means of mobilising a mechanism that in its very fixity recalls the 'views' of early cinema, while revisiting the modernity of an art that has cast aside any pretention at utopian synthesis, in order to draw, quite consciously, on practices that appear on the surface to be entirely alien. After all, was not Rodin, as a contemporary of the Lumière brothers, the first to reconcile *improvising* and *sculpting*?



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## 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’.<sup>1</sup> 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 (autographic) act whose material characteristics cannot all be noted although they can be imitated or even counterfeited.<sup>2</sup>

*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’<sup>3</sup> 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 Improve*, 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 Improve* 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.'<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup>

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'<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.'<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup>, 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*',<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> proved to be a watershed. Many filmmakers had already explored the links between theatre and cinema,<sup>12</sup> 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<sup>13</sup> and Jacques Rivette.<sup>14</sup> 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.'<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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'AMOUR FOU*, Sébastien (Jean-Pierre Kalfon), a young theatre director, is planning to stage *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,<sup>17</sup> 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 '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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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 Jouvett 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.'<sup>21</sup> 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<sup>22</sup> 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',<sup>24</sup> 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<sup>25</sup> 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.'<sup>26</sup> 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',<sup>27</sup> 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. Zohra 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,<sup>28</sup> 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,<sup>29</sup> 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:<sup>30</sup> '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.<sup>31</sup> 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-Zaïmeche in the mosque sequence of

DERNIER MAQUIS<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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:<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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;<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup>

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-

depends 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.'<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup>

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'.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

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.<sup>42</sup> 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 matter 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. Filmmakers have succeeded in adapting the nature of Bazin's external witness to their own aesthetic universe. In *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, whose treatment of confinement is very close to that of *LES PARENTS TERRIBLES*, Suwa rigorously applies 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 seldom wavers, is countered by Cassavetes' multitudinous outlooks in each sequence of *FACES*, external outlooks that convey a desperate awareness of a relentless 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 improvised 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 excessively 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 SOUFFLE*, 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*, expressed 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 impetuosity 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 common 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.<sup>43</sup> 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, improvising 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',<sup>44</sup> 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 OCOEE*, 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 OCOEE* 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-

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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.



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## 6. The rules of the game

### Directing from the inside (I): the director and actor

The analyses of improvised sequences have brought to light a number of devices, including that of 'directing from the inside', with the director as actor of his own film. The most radical example is that of Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, who so far has played the lead in all his feature films. Although his presence in *WESH WESH, QU'EST-CE QUI SE PASSE?* Can be justified by a perfectly legitimate commitment to a cast of amateurs, his status as both director and actor is actually an offshoot of a method in which there is an inherent possibility of improvisation. The first manifestation lies in the construction of his future roles. Although these represent the main characters, they are only rarely at the heart of the action and always maintain a certain distance, tinged with a degree of opacity. This presence/absence bolsters the apparent passivity and provides an ideal vantage point from which to orient the scenes-in-progress and make directorial choices without having to outline his underlying intentions. The movement that gravitates around the character played by Ameur-Zaïmeche allows him to be actor and director *at the same time*, within the movement of the performance itself, a strategy that has been implemented in a variety of ways throughout his films.

In *WESH WESH, QU'EST-CE QUI SE PASSE?*, Ameur-Zaïmeche makes Kamel a character who intervenes only sporadically in the action. He is older than the others and following his clandestine return to France after serving a dual sentence he tries unsuccessfully to find a proper job, steering clear of the small-time dealing that characterises everyday life in the housing project. In a number of improvised sequences depicting endless hours of stultifying boredom, all shot on location, Ameur-Zaïmeche tries out his actor/director position for the first time, before going on to acknowledge it explicitly in *BLED NUMBER ONE*. The scene in which he chats to three ten-year-old boys on the steps of one of the buildings is particularly striking in this respect. Despite their age, the boys have clearly grasped Ameur-Zaïmeche's position as director but also the complicated situation of his character Kamel. The scene unfolds in a volley of questions and answers until they are persuaded by the incredulous Kamel to perform a demonstration of kung fu, which leads the camera to focus all the attention on

them. Kamel/Ameur-Zaïmeche, having directed the sequence towards this unexpected permutation, in which the children's idleness gives way to the exuberance of a martial art that encourages discipline and self-control, finds himself the spectator of their choreographic display. Several moments in the film underline this position, the other protagonists showing remarkable attentiveness to Kamel's initiatives. Although the aim was not to introduce this hounded, often silent character into every sequence of collective improvisation, in *WESH WESH* Ameur-Zaïmeche was already sowing the seeds of a contemporary alternative to all the dual director/actor experiences disseminated in the films under discussion here.

In his second film, *BLED NUMBER ONE*, he fine tunes the character, lending him a more rounded dimension. Kamel receives a warm welcome from his village community, who are intrigued when he returns home after several years away. This situation, which reflects that of Ameur-Zaïmeche himself – he left his native Algeria when he was very young – is the starting point for a plethora of collective sequences in which Kamel acts as a magnet, a curiosity. But his pleasure at being among family and friends cannot hide his discomfort at the archaic social and religious practices that still paralyse Algerian society. This malaise once again turns Kamel into both a central and an off-centre figure, as though he is gradually slipping away from a world in which he cannot find his place. The actor/director interplay has a far more prevalent role here and there is no shortage of moments in which Ameur-Zaïmeche orients his *mise-en-scène* to fit in with Kamel's performance. In the sequence in which Louisa goes down to the beach to comply with the Taleb's edict, she is accompanied by other women from the family and, more surprisingly, by Kamel, who transforms the sacred bathing ritual into an improvised moment of shared erotic pleasure. Kamel/Ameur-Zaïmeche takes the women down to the sea and then joins them in the water. The stable, tight shot of the conversation between Louisa and the Taleb is countered by the open expanse of beach and the cameraman's stalwart efforts, with his hand-held camera, to capture the bodies being tossed by the waves. The improvisation directed by Kamel/Ameur-Zaïmeche takes on a clearly political slant: the reassuring platitudes of the Taleb on the role of women in Algerian society are forgotten in this moment of physical harmony, in which freedom is expressed just as much by the bodies brushing against one another as by the laughter and shrieks that run through this improvised sequence.

One need look no further to understand that improvisation is far more than an aesthetic consideration. These directorial choices, in their dismissal of any preformatted attempt at political correctness, are effectively targeted at providing Algerian women with the means to improvise their lives: not a single word is exchanged in this sequence, which appears to be a sensuous response to the

exhortations of religious dogma. The presence of Ameer-Zaïmeche at the core of the film enables him to avoid peremptory dialogue in favour of gestures that may be open to interpretation but are, nevertheless, imbued with powerful political significance. When the men from the village remind Kamel about the traditional separation between men and women during the ritual of Zerda, Ameer-Zaïmeche opts for a long shot in which Kamel can be spotted in his orange cap, in the middle of the women and children gathering for the ceremony. Once again this is a physical reaction to the spoken word, but it is also a play on Kamel's ambivalent status as both character and director, an ambivalence taken to its extreme in the two sequences in which the guitarist Rodolphe Burger sings alone at dawn, on a hill, with Kamel/Ameer-Zaïmeche just in front of him, looking into the distance, lost in thought.<sup>1</sup> These two sequences, although they were actually improvised during the shoot, turned out to be the film's balancing poles when it came to the montage, an example of how unusual directorial approaches can pave the way for unprecedented cinematic forms.

But when the director/actor 'directs' a sequence from the inside, he does not simply give it a gentle push in the right direction. This method does not preclude an element of cruelty, one that already existed in Rossellini's cinema, for instance. In *BLED NUMBER ONE* again, Ameer-Zaïmeche takes advantage of his dual status by encouraging his amateur cast to reveal a number of somber reflections on camera. When in the fictional story, after beating his sister Louisa because of her disobedience to her husband, Bouzid joins the night barrage<sup>2</sup> organised by a group of men from the village, its anachronistic brutality triggers Kamel's anger. The sequence is highly confused and once again largely improvised. The men rapidly take sides against Kamel – '[Kamel] doesn't understand but don't worry, we'll teach him, we'll take him in hand' – thereby tacitly condoning Bouzid's violence towards his sister and condemning the attitude of Kamel. By igniting the hostility of the little community, Kamel/Ameer-Zaïmeche is setting a trap and one of the protagonists falls right into it when he alludes to the 'natural' domination of a brother over a sister. Another example: the only guests at the little party held to celebrate the return of Kamel (and no doubt of Ameer-Zaïmeche himself) are the men, who after a few glasses of beer start to dance with self-conscious exuberance. Kamel/Ameer-Zaïmeche gradually retires from the scene in order to replace this fictional episode with a documentary approach that brutally highlights the absence of the women and the pathetic nature of the men's drunken gesticulations. In both sequences he allows a truth to filter through by leaving the camera running; nevertheless, it is the weight of his presence at the heart of the *mise-en-scène* that releases it with such force. In our last example, *DERNIER MAQUIS*, Ameer-Zaïmeche's role is still more unequivocally that of a director at the core of the film. The authoritarian stance of Mao, the boss of the small pallet manufacturing business that forms

practically the only backdrop for the film, leads him to abandon the no man's land between the centre and the margin that was occupied by Kamel. The nature of his presence changes and his direct impact on the course of events becomes far less decisive, with the concomitant risk of amalgamating the role of the boss with that of director. Ameer-Zaïmeche is aware of the danger and therefore remains within his role, handing over the direction of the improvised sequences to experienced actors such as Abel Jaffri. We will be returning to this strategy later, which involves giving specific instructions to one or several actors in order to orient a sequence in a particular way.

Although Ameer-Zaïmeche has renewed the forms of what we have termed the director/actor's 'directing from the inside', he is, nevertheless, emulating a number of improvising filmmakers who relied on a similar method to avoid adhering to a neatly mapped-out script. This principle can be traced back to the character played by Jean Renoir in *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* [*THE RULES OF THE GAME*]. Octave has a pivotal role in the cynical, cruel games being played out between the masters and their servants: the series of sequences in which he tries ineffectually to restore order in the Château de la Colinière, draped in an incongruous bearskin, is a classic. Throughout the film, however, Renoir, as actor-cum-director, takes tremendous liberties with the shots; Octave's performance, during Christine (Nora Gregor)'s speech in the Colinière hall for instance, comes across as entirely improvised. Christine's conventional attitude is countered by an in situ, purely gestural banter set up by Renoir between his own Octave character and his friend La Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio), and this shifts the centre of gravity of the scene. Only Renoir, in his dual role of director and actor, could have rocked the boat to this extent, in a sequence that in the original script was merely intended to depict Christine's monologue.<sup>3</sup> Pialat, in a further nod to Renoir, experimented in turn with directing from the inside, to great effect. The earliest manifestations can be seen in *LA MAISON DES BOIS* (1969-1970), in which he takes on the role of the village schoolteacher, an ideal front that enabled him to direct without revealing his ultimate purpose, while responding in real time to the children's input. To Pialat, the director's presence in front of the camera was a way of creating a certain confusion between what was happening behind and on camera, and he astutely exploited the problems this could engender, particularly during episodes of improvisation.<sup>4</sup> This is the case in two of the most outstanding sequences in *À NOS AMOURS*, which reflect the devices discussed earlier in relation to the films of Ameer-Zaïmeche and in which Pialat plays the father of Suzanne (Sandrine Bonnaire). The scene known as 'the dimple scene' is indicative of an understated approach that involves guiding one or two of the actors in a particular direction, whereas the scene depicting the family meal, interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the father, expresses a more brutal approach, intended to provoke reactions leading to exasperation.

In the first sequence, Pialat gradually encourages his young actress Sandrine Bonnaire – who was making her first film appearance – to distance herself from her character Suzanne in order to identify more closely, on camera, with her special relationship with the director. Each screening of this scene reinforces the tenuous nature of those few moments when the fictional father/daughter relationship spills over into the relationship between director/actress, revealing the tender attraction of the almost sixty-year-old man for the sixteen-year-old girl. Pialat, as director and actor, directs Bonnaire from the inside, playing on the ambiguity of his dual role to seal off their exchange from prying outside eyes – everything in this scene hinges on the complicity between the two protagonists. This rare tour de force stems from Bonnaire's ability to respond within the flow of the shot to Pialat's improvisation, drawing on improvised responses of her own, which in turn open up new avenues. Dialogue is the most challenging aspect of improvisation and Bonnaire succeeds not only because she is a great actress but because the improvisation is rooted in emotions that despite their association with 'documentary truth' find their ideal expression in the fictional *À NOS AMOURS*.

In the second equally famous sequence, Pialat calls on his dual role once again to nourish his fictional relationship with the cast. Although in the script the father was supposed to have disappeared (he had either abandoned his family or died), Pialat, having only allowed the chief cameraman into his confidence, decided to make him resurface at the end of the film, when all the family gather together. It is patently Pialat just as much as his character who sits down at the head of the table to spell out a few cruel truths targeted both at the fictional characters and at the actors, without ever losing sight of the fact that this sequence is designed to become an integral part of the film. The confrontation carries all the violence of the fictional family's relationship but in order to achieve this degree of violence or repressed hatred, Pialat had to tap straight into the jealousy, resentment and frustration that had built up during the shoot. Collective improvisation is the only way to achieve such a concentration of contradictory emotions and having Pialat the director acting within the core of the sequence was once again a prerequisite in the success of the one and only take. Improvisation here is not simply a way of extending fiction through documentary but serves as an instrument for a reassessment of the film as a whole. This improvised sequence from *À NOS AMOURS* transcends the family saga to become a complex study on the power of money, the corruption of art through cupidity, the ambiguity of filial and amorous feelings and the onset of age and death.

A number of analysts have, quite rightly, compared the films of Pialat and Cassavetes, highlighting a number of similar improvisational methods. Pialat's role in *À NOS AMOURS* recalls Cassavetes' numerous performances in his own

films, which chief cameraman, editor and producer Al Ruban summed up in the following terms:

He was responsible for *carrying* the narrative. This didn't necessarily mean playing the lead, just enabling the story to unfold so that the other characters could go on acting [...]. In the films he appeared in, he always had a pivotal role. So even as an actor he would continue directing operations at a structural level.<sup>5</sup>

These comments reveal Cassavetes' ability to improvise his *mise-en-scène* during the shoot in order to fall in with the actors' performances. Ruban continues: 'His mind never stops spinning, no matter what side of the camera he's on.'<sup>6</sup> *HUSBANDS* (1970), which followed *FACES*, is the film in which his directing from the inside is at its most creative, as though it were an experiment pushing his dual role to the limit. All his cinema is built around an invention of gestures and figures, a test of the body's aptitudes. Already in *FACES*, in the highly mobile sequence in which three of the characters drunkenly invent a series of pathetic sketches, Gena Rowlands revealed how Cassavetes' directing veered towards physical movement and exhaustion. Although the shoot began with clear markers on the ground, these were soon abandoned in order to give the body more freedom and allow the actors to take over the space, and this forced the cameraman to improvise his movements in turn. In *HUSBANDS*, a number of sequences put the actors' bodies to the test and Cassavetes, from the inside, held the strings, orienting the improvisations, channelling the suggestions of the rest of the crew and fuelling energy into moments of total exhaustion.

To recap briefly, the story concerns four well-established forty-somethings, Harry (Ben Gazzara), Archie (Peter Falk) and Gus (Cassavetes), who are attending their best friend's funeral. They try to cheer themselves up by wandering around the streets of New York, playing basketball, swimming and finally indulging in a memorable drinking binge. The following day, unable to readapt to everyday life, they decide to spend the weekend in London, where they play around, drink and end up spending the night with some girls they have picked up. The balance between the three protagonists illustrates the nature of the role held by the directors/actors in films with an improvisational element. From the very first sequences, a hierarchy emerges between Harry, Archie and Gus: the first is the most abrasive and instinctive; the second, the one who keeps asking himself questions without ever finding the answers; and the third, both the most sensible and the most tormented. Gus is actually the ringleader, the one the others constantly turn to, the one who makes the decisions for them all. In the many improvised sequences, it goes without saying that the impetus provided by Gus reflects the orientations imposed by Cassavetes the director within the flow of the performance. *HUSBANDS* is one of the rare films in which an attentive observation of the actors' performances reveals such a concrete form of

hierarchy, and this allows the audience to discover how a director can guide two actors, who themselves orient the ensuing course of events by reacting in the moment to his proposals. In all these sequences, Cassavetes acts as both guide and benchmark, but he is also prepared to accompany his partners for a while. At that stage, *HUSBANDS* becomes a remarkable documentary on collective improvisation, as rich and complex as a recording of free jazz, which was as misunderstood when it was first launched in 1960 (with the album *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation by the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet*) as most of Cassavetes' films on their release. In *HUSBANDS* and *FACES*, as in Coleman's record, there was the same belief in the collective, the same need to act as one, the same attraction to risk-taking, the same time requirements, the same semblance of chaos, the same tolerance for excesses that were liable to trigger the unpredictable. But also the same acute awareness of the need for a director, a role that both Coleman and Cassavetes took on with quietly confident authority. The filmmaker's presence in almost all the sequences of *HUSBANDS* is of a similar ilk to that of the saxophonist throughout the thirty-five minutes of *Free Jazz*: the choice of collective improvisation as creative method implies physical involvement in the act itself, and this is the only way to guarantee both the consistency of the work and the freedom of each participant.

One of the sequences in *HUSBANDS*, like the improvised sequence with the family meal in *À NOS AMOURS*, comes across as a test of Cassavetes' method. The evening following the funeral, we find Harry, Archie and Gus in the back-room of a bar, surrounded by a dozen other people. The beer is flowing freely and the three men, who are without question genuinely drunk, decide to launch a singing contest greeted with varying degrees of enthusiasm by the participants. This interminable sequence reaches its paroxysm when a young woman takes her turn and, despite trying her best, finds herself viciously criticised by the three men, who accuse her of not singing 'from the heart'. This insistence on sincerity harks back to Cassavetes' strictures as director, the attitudes of Harry, Archie and Gus with regard to the bewildered woman reflecting those of a director with his actors. This sequence borders on the unbearable because Cassavetes, who is just as drunk as the two others, is no longer capable of directing it: by losing his control over the improvisation, he becomes just another man taking advantage of the power given him by the shoot in order to torment an extra. It is inconceivable that Cassavetes did not realise this when he saw the rushes. Although this scene can justifiably be seen as a tacit demonstration of the necessity to control improvisation and the dangers it can hold when the director loses his grip, Cassavetes' main aim here is to show the clumsiness and ensuing stupidity and cruelty of these three drifters as they gradually become aware of the mediocrity of their lives. If he retained the sequence in the final cut, this was mainly because the vulgarity and brutality of this method actually served the

film's purpose: 'I believe this is a film that shows men as they really are, and that's good enough',<sup>7</sup> he said. This pathetic episode, a self-portrait of a group that does not attempt to hide its 'documentary' dimension, reveals a kind of masculine truth which he shares. Many years later, he was to produce a far more serene image of his work in his dealings with an inexperienced actress. In the opening minutes of *LOVE STREAMS* (1984), one sees him asking a young woman questions in a face-to-face encounter that has all the hallmarks of an audition. The almost sadistic obstinacy of *HUSBANDS* is replaced here by patience and tenderness. Thierry Jousse ascribes this to maturity,<sup>8</sup> but the numerous comments by people who worked with Cassavetes at various stages of his career tend to underline it as a typical example of his relationship to his actors, far removed from the cruelty of the trio in *HUSBANDS*.<sup>9</sup>

The work of Cassavetes also teaches us that being both director and actor is not the only viable method of directing from the inside. Although this is never specified in the credits, he always shot a number of sequences in his films himself, using a hand-held camera, as shown in the many photographs taken on location. This was another way for him to be more than the mere spectator of his own *mise-en-scène*. As Thierry Jousse put it, 'He takes an active role, placing the camera in the eye of the storm so that the flesh can surge forth with its power of truth.'<sup>10</sup> Initially, he was probably just trying to adapt to the movements of the actors, but his presence was also a way of orienting the overall movement of the sequence, of directing once again from the inside. Al Ruban, in the bonus to the DVD version of *THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE*,<sup>11</sup> recalls that Cassavetes used to follow the rehearsals with his hand-held camera, as though the *mise-en-scène* would grow out of this through-the-lens perspective of space and bodies. On the same DVD, Ben Gazzara points to the sequence in which Cosmo Vitelli, who has been shot in the stomach, is staying with his girlfriend's mother:

When [Cassavetes] picked up the hand-held camera he joined you in the scene [...]. In the scene with the mother, she lays me on the bed. John picked up the hand-held camera and he was in bed with me, and down my body with me, and over me, and lying with me, like another actor. Like a love affair between the director and the actor. And of course nobody used the hand-held camera as well as he did. Like he was making love to you in good moments. He came up to your face and stayed there, how long he stayed there, waiting for you to do something to surprise yourself.

Gazzara's words sum up perfectly the way Cassavetes became both actor and director when he was improvising, even physically stepping into the shot: actor through the bond linking him to the actors on camera and director in the way he used this proximity to bring about an element of the unforeseen in the faces or gestures of those same actors.

Cassavetes was not the only director to try to abolish the dividing line between technique and actor. Jacques Rozier also turned to the hand-held camera whenever he felt it was appropriate, particularly in several sequences of *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT*. In *L'AMOUR FOU* it was not Rivette himself who did the hand-held shooting; to film *Andromaque*, the play being put on by one of the characters, he handed over the reins to director and cameraman André S. Labarthe. More infrequent improvisers, such as Jean-Daniel Pollet, found other methods, as in some of the dance sequences in *L'ACROBATE* (1975), in which Alain Levent, the chief cameraman, sits in a wheelchair in the middle of the dancers, in a totally unscripted sequence: 'Jean-Daniel pushed Levent around in his invalid's chair according to the whims of his emotions and intuitions' recalls an observer.<sup>12</sup> Thinking on the job: that could well have been the main motivation behind the specific directorial strategies of these actor-directors or cameramen-directors. This did not preclude delegation, but it did involve reducing the intermediaries and achieving optimum creative autonomy as a prerequisite for a kind of improvisation that brought the cinematic gesture closer to that of the improvising musician, alone with his instrument, finding his inspiration from and within the heat of the moment. One inevitably thinks of documentary filmmakers, notably Rouch and van der Keuken, who also filmed with hand-held cameras, accompanied by a one-man sound crew. Jean Rouch claimed that hand-held filming meant directing live, and Johan van der Keuken, wrote Serge Daney in relation to *Vers le sud*,

filmed as Charlie Parker or Bud Powell are said to have played, undeniably using all the notes but at an incredible speed. Lost in the crowd in Cairo, van der Keuken plays the cinema as one plays the saxophone. He plays all the frames, at top speed. The pans act as the storyline, with the tense misframes as riffs and the reframes as choruses.<sup>13</sup>

These choices do not stem from financial considerations, as is often claimed, particularly in the case of fictional films; they stem from a desire to balance the means and the end, which is always the same: to appropriate things in real time in order to elaborate one's own inventions and in turn trigger other movements, giving improvisation a chance in the face of tyrannical premeditation.<sup>14</sup>

## Directing from the inside (2): delegations

Other strategies involve orienting the sequences in such a way as to make certain actors the director's 'intermediaries'. Before we return to Cassavetes, however, other less eloquent examples, at least on the surface, deserve our attention.

In both *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, Nobuhiro Suwa's fictional film, and *L'APPRENTI*, the documentary-cum-fictional film by Samuel Collardey, it is possible to detect examples of what one could call directorial 'delegation'. *UN COUPLE PARFAIT* is composed, as we have said, of several sequences featuring improvised exchanges between Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Bruno Todeschini in the confined space of a hotel bedroom. Although the dialogues and movements are left to the inspiration of the actors, however, the roles within the scenes themselves have clearly been prepared. Marie is trying to find an explanation for their imminent separation and asks endless questions, driving Nicolas into a corner. Nicolas dodges the issue and refuses head-on conflict – the actor, in order to convey this relinquishment, seeks refuge on the edge of the frame or even moves out of frame all together. The initiative is left to Marie: she is constantly in motion, endlessly soliciting the attention of Nicolas and becoming exasperated at his passivity. In Suwa's preparatory drawings, this battle of wills is expressed through the size of the characters; each sequence picks up this established hierarchy, which is liable to evolve in the course of the take according to the director's instructions. This is an initial form of delegation: the director gives the creation of his characters a particular slant that will enable him to attribute a directorial role in one of the sequences to an actor. While he grants greater power to the actor who is supposed to be taking on the director's role (Marie flounders in vain for a long time and Nicolas gets the upper hand by his seeming indifference), the main purpose is to invent two-way situations in which each character can make suggestions within a framework whose underlying determination is belied by its seeming flexibility. This is where the consummate mastery of Suwa's writing comes in, already tried and tested in *M/OTHER*, released a few years earlier.<sup>15</sup> Last but not least, to place so much trust in the actors' shared initiatives it was vital to have two experienced actors such as Bruni Tedeschi and Todeschini, who had already struck up a bond in the theatre, long before their performance in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*. The quality of the improvisation owes much to the lack of escalation, preventing any 'saturation of the shot by the performance',<sup>16</sup> the major danger of any improvisation. In his next film, *YUKI AND NINA* (2009), Suwa continued to invent new avenues of improvisation, this time sharing the director's role with actor Hippolyte Girardot, who defined his presence on both sides of the camera in the following terms: 'It makes it possible to direct from inside the field. The actor is able to orient to an extent the *mise-en-scène*, he monitors the rhythms, the looks. It's incredibly useful to be doing that from inside the field while Suwa is doing the same thing from the outside.'<sup>18</sup>

In *L'APPRENTI*, Samuel Collardey finds himself in a similar situation but with one major difference: the two actors are both amateurs playing their own role, in a real situation. Technically, the approach is the same as that of Suwa, featur-

ing static long shots to give Mathieu and Paul, the two protagonists, plenty of freedom. Like Suwa, Collardey relies a great deal on lengthy takes to bring out the true nature of the characters' relationship and refuses to make use of the possibilities of montage in order to give them a new slant. Unlike Suwa's film, in which the hierarchy between the characters depended on the script and the preliminary drawings, *L'APPRENTI* approached it from a more documentary angle. Mathieu, as the title indicates, is a teenage apprentice on Paul's farm; it was, therefore, quite natural for Collardey to delegate part of the *mise-en-scène* to the latter, relying on him to guide the boy, much as Pialat had done with the teenager in *À NOS AMOURS*. Paul turned out to be an excellent actor, displaying a deep-rooted understanding of what was being played out in the situations chosen by Collardey to fuel his film. The success of *L'APPRENTI* relies almost entirely on the relay set up between the director (who is once again also the cameraman) and Paul, particularly in the dialogues, which despite being entirely improvised have an impact that had been carefully foreseen by Collardey. The bond between the two men was similar to the one that was gradually formed between the farmer and his apprentice, and this mutual trust generated the powerful sequence in which Paul reveals to Mathieu his grief at having lost his little boy some years previously. This deeply moving episode occurs just after Mathieu has tearfully confessed how upset he was at his parents' separation. This is improvisation at its most magnificent. The flame is passed on and the protagonists become truly attuned to one another – the ultimate proof that improvisation entails first and foremost the ability to listen.

These two duos, the first between two experienced actors and the second between two newcomers, lead us to explore an avenue that has been tried and tested by numerous improvising filmmakers: the mix of professional actors and 'amateurs'.<sup>19</sup> Rozier, Cassavetes, Pialat and Ameur-Zaïmeche have always taken this approach and there is no doubt that it is part of the appeal of improvised filmmaking.

Of all the films John [Cassavetes] did, there was always a mixture of professional and amateur [...]. I think it's an ingredient that once you get past the first day the professional actors feed on that. Not knowing quite what to expect from the other actors, and it makes them sharper, makes them pay attention more. And you have the amateur people – that's a difficult word for me to even say – but the other actors, and there's a great sense of wanting to be a part of something and to play these characters. So after they get over their initial excitement and settle into the role they really are playing themselves, and I mean playing wonderfully well. If you have the patience to go along with it. But at some point not far into each of the films there is really no difference, there is no distinction. They're all professional.'

Once again it is Al Ruban<sup>20</sup> who provides these precious clues, which are picked up by Ben Gazzara:

The way he [Cassavetes] worked with amateurs was really a lesson for anyone. If anybody on the crew or anybody in the cast would try to direct one of the amateurs, to help them get better, John would get livid. He wanted them to be as innocent and 'unprofessional' (a word he hated by the way) as they could be. And they got looser and looser and they got better and better.<sup>21</sup>

He takes as his example a sequence from *THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE* in which everything, including the dialogues, is improvised: Cosmo, played by Gazzara himself, is having a heart-to-heart conversation with Betty, his girlfriend's mother, played by Virginia Carrington, an amateur actress.<sup>22</sup> This new duo illustrates the complexity of the rapport established by Cassavetes between experienced actors and first-timers. Al Ruban refers to the insecurity of the former, who, unable to predict their partner's reaction, are therefore forced to adapt to the in-your-face performance of these amateur actors. Ruban, however, has overlooked the fact that the professional actor is capable of orienting the sequence and guiding his partner in a direction that matches that of the entire film.

When the wounded Cosmo arrives at Betty's for the last time in search of some tender loving care, the status of the two protagonists leads them to behave in totally different ways. Gazzara talks all the time, jumps from one topic to another, creates constant changes in atmosphere, comes to a stop in mid-sentence: it looks as though he has no idea how to cope with the freedom provided by Cassavetes in a film which relies so little on improvisation. This uncertainty is very helpful to his character, physically diminished and aware of impending death. When he runs out of ideas following a brief but violent exchange, he drinks a cup of coffee that has been left on the table only to spit it out immediately, his brief glance to camera betraying his bewilderment. But Gazzara immediately picks up the thread again, turning with a laugh to his partner to say: 'I don't know what to do with my hands... How long's that coffee been there?' It is the actor far more than the character who is behind this comment but it gives tremendous impact to the scene, showing once again how improvisation toys with the borders between fiction and documentary.<sup>23</sup> When Betty intervenes as though to come to his aid, it is actually to admit that she does not want him around any longer, that he is putting her and her daughter in too much danger. The density of this scene stems from its unpredictability, both as a subject for fiction (what is Betty going to do with the ailing Cosmo?) and as a working method (allowing the actors to improvise their dialogue). Cassavetes was by now a past master at directing actors by using the inexperience of amateurs to rekindle the performance of an actor as experienced as Ben Gazzara, whose in-

spiration here actually highlighted the talent of his less seasoned partner. This method, based on a great deal of preliminary work to build up trust and complicity between crew members, had already been used in *FACES*, particularly in the sequences between Seymour Cassel and Lynn Carlin, but most strikingly in *HUSBANDS*. The end of the London trip is shot in three hotel bedrooms, in which each of the men is trying to score with the girl he has picked up. The three girls, who had no acting experience, had been spotted in the street. The long face-to-face encounters seem to be staged as seminal moments of improvisation between the actors and the amateurs, the actors throwing themselves into exchanges sparked first and foremost by the bodies, gestures and laughter. Cassavetes knew better than anyone how difficult it was to improvise dialogue in a fictional framework, without lengthy rehearsals, with non-professionals who had only joined the cast in mid-shoot. He therefore deliberately confronted their bodies with those of the experienced actors and their mutual embarrassment illustrates, to a degree rarely seen in the cinema, just how difficult it is to launch into an intimate relationship with someone one has only just met. It needs all the talent of Cassavetes, Falk and Gazzara to *accompany* the three young women, another example of their contribution to this exercise in directing from the inside.

The last case study of directorial 'delegation' concerns a mix of professionals and amateurs once again, but this time in the context of collective improvisation. This is no doubt the most perilous situation for a director, as the sequence can so easily slip out of control. Jean Rouch found out the hard way in several sequences of *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*, when he asked a group of teenagers to invent collective discussions on camera on a number of broad themes intended to underpin the fictional storyline. This triggered an unstoppable flow of interjections that made a significant impact within the framework of the film<sup>24</sup> but also demonstrated the difficulties faced by collective improvisation when the basic rules, whether explicit or not, are missing. Many years later, Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche also experimented with this, mixing professional actors and amateurs playing their own role. In both *BLED NUMBER ONE* and *DERNIER MAQUIS*, Abel Jaffri, a highly experienced actor with a theatrical background in improvisation, is given the task of orienting the sequences in accordance with guidelines previously set up by Ameur-Zaïmeche. These guidelines are concealed from the other actors for the most part, in order to ensure maximum spontaneity. This is the case in *BLED NUMBER ONE*, when the small community, grouped around a table, tries to find a way of tackling the 'fundamentalists' who are threatening their village. Jaffri, as the only experienced actor in these long takes – which often exceed ten minutes – is responsible for orienting and stimulating the most apposite comments so as to fit in with the director's brief, but he also needs to be capable of detecting the unexpected lead that will gen-

erate an unforeseen moment of truth. An even more revelatory example of the potential inherent in these encounters is the scene in which, on the outskirts of the village, a group of young men threaten to kill Jaffri's character Bouzid because he has been drinking beer. The situation is purely fictional to the actor but only too real to the villagers playing their own roles, who only a few months previously were not the executioners but the victims of men pretending to defend the Muslim cause simply in order to terrorise the local villages. The impact of this single take stems from Jaffri's ability to get into his role, guided in turn by the other protagonists, who are finding this violent ordeal incredibly difficult to cope with. A final example is that of the mosque in *DERNIER MAQUIS*, when an uprising is launched by Jaffri and two other actors who all share responsibility for this 'fictional dimension' of a scene whose initial ambition was of a documentary nature: to show the ritual of prayer in a mosque.

There are other equally pertinent examples of the 'strategies' of *mise-en-scène* at play in this confrontation of experienced and amateur actors: several sequences in Pialat's *LA MAISON DES BOIS*, or the magnificent collective improvisations of *DU CÔTÉ D'OROUËT* by Rozier, with Bernard Menez acting alongside complete newcomers to the cinema, but also some scenes in Laurent Cantet's film *ENTRE LES MURS*, in which François Bégaudeau plays his own teaching role in front of a class of high-school students who have never been in front of a camera before. Here, Bégaudeau's dual status as French teacher and director's delegate is in a class of its own, so to speak, and is so ambiguous that one could almost refer to him as 'the director's authorised representative'. Cantet later gave some pointers on his method: the direction of the sequences was determined jointly during rehearsals, but Bégaudeau was entitled to orient the takes in the course of the shoot or even trigger unexpected incidents, with or without the help of a few 'pupils' in the know. The device devised by Cantet, therefore, made it possible for Bégaudeau to direct from the inside within a class created for the purposes of the film by volunteers from the same high school.

This rather obvious depiction of Bégaudeau's role as 'director's delegate' calls for a few comments on the characters played by the actors whose role was also to orient sequences that involve partial or total improvisation. These characters, often defined with the perspective of improvisation, had to be prepared to follow it through: 'The director's role is often interwoven with the fiction and metaphorised in a number of sequences that directly hark back to the method',<sup>25</sup> writes Thierry Jousse. In *THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE* Cosmo is the boss of a strip club and also directs the acts; in *FACES* Chet is the butt of the women's clumsy advances but appears to be directing operations in the long living-room sequence, while in other sequences it is the prostitute Jeannie (Gena Rowlands) who takes over, channelling the desire of the three men. The nature of the characters played by Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche, Bernard Menez in *DU CÔTÉ*

D'OROUËT or even Lynda Benahouda (Philippe Faucon's SAMIA) is different, but their pivotal roles give them the power, if improvisation is called for, to make the world revolve around them according to the director's instructions. They intervene like some foreign body, challenging unmitigated certitudes and upsetting the established order. These characters hark back to Renoir's Boudu or to the women played by Ingrid Bergman in the films of Rossellini, most strikingly in STROMBOLI (1949), but also in VOYAGE EN ITALIE. Obviously the appearance of this 'foreign body' cannot be limited to improvised films (it is after all one of the cornerstones of fiction), but it does pave the way for the creation of chaotic situations conducive to improvisation. Its presence<sup>26</sup> is then applied in original, not to say unprecedented ways, mainly because this foreign body also 'carries the fiction' in films in which the juxtaposition of professional and amateur actors gives form to the desire to rekindle exchanges between fiction and documentary.

### **Rohmer and directing actors: a model of improvisation?**

Directing an actor by giving him more freedom is also the driving force behind Éric Rohmer's work, particularly his series showcasing characters confronting the contemporary world. For a long time, Rohmer was extremely wary of the word *improvisation*, its negative connotations implying that the director had no hold or control over the work. For a filmmaker who was fascinated by composition and the mastery and erudition of musicians such as Mozart and Beethoven,<sup>27</sup> a concept that was linked to jazz could only trigger suspicion. It was not until 1986, at the age of 66, in LE RAYON VERT and the following year in QUATRE AVENTURES DE REINETTE ET MIRABELLE that Rohmer finally acknowledged improvisation as a creative process. Better late than never, one might say, given the fact that Rohmer's atypical method had always drawn on a particular kind of improvisation. It therefore came as no surprise that Rohmer not only turned to actors (and particularly actresses) with no cinematic experience but that the cornerstone of a whole facet of his work involved setting fictional situations within a documentary reality, an approach that frequently triggers improvisation, as we have seen.<sup>28</sup>

Rohmer's actresses<sup>29</sup> have often commented on his approach. Prior to shooting he would arrange frequent meetings on a one-to-one basis, spanning months or even a whole year, so that he could get to know the actress and build up a friendship without ever revealing the role that might (possibly) show off her talents. The character would emerge from these exchanges and what they revealed about her personality: her delivery, language,<sup>30</sup> tastes and habits; in

other words, her own special relationship to the world. In a series of fine brushstrokes, like a painter with his canvas or a sculptor with his clay, Rohmer would gradually hone a fictional character with whom the actress could only feel at one. There was no shooting script – the script focused on the situations and dialogues, and the movements were determined during rehearsals, in the actual space and with the actors: 'To begin with,' Rohmer explained when talking about *CONTE D'HIVER*, 'I give virtually no indications to the actors [...]. The rehearsal of the scene as a whole always comes first. I would be really bothered if I had to put a shooting script down on paper and then tell the actor to get into position without his knowing why and without his having *felt it instinctively*.'<sup>31</sup> His actresses bear this out by claiming that they were granted total freedom of movement during the takes, in which Rohmer always opted for continuity. His determination to shoot with live sound and in the order dictated by the script, with a skeleton crew, reveals affinities with the other improvising filmmakers we have been studying. His admiration for Renoir and Rossellini, whose improvisational tendencies appealed to him,<sup>32</sup> fitted in almost naturally with his ambition: to direct a film that would be improvised from start to finish, script and dialogues included. This film was *LE RAYON VERT*.

In his other films, the improvisational element is limited to movements and gestures, and although these are given a free rein, the space is perfectly circumscribed by firm framing and precise dialogues which contribute to his talent as director. The actors have no difficulty identifying with the characters, who are closely based on their own personalities, with the same delivery, intonation and gestures. Arielle Dombasle sums this up brilliantly:

Rohmer's strength, which is uncompromisingly modern, lies in creating films that are precise to the nearest comma while managing at the same time, within the scenes themselves, to keep the characters alive, to leave room for accidents and to bestow a touch of grace on the actors. This makes it look as though the actors are inventing their text. Rohmer keeps reality on a lead, but the performance is held in a quaver that may release the unexpected.<sup>33</sup>

Can one say, therefore, that this physical appropriation of the role counts as improvisation? No, if one considers that improvisation requires a conscious effort on the part of the actress, which is not the case here. But yes, if one considers that Rohmer allows the actress to invent her own movements without any indications from him. But in the end only one thing really matters: does Rohmer rely on improvisation as a conceivable overflow, a way for the actress to deviate the scene in an unexpected direction? Patently not. He knows exactly how each of them will tackle the situation and dialogues. There may be two or three possible outcomes but they have all been foreseen by Rohmer, who will, if necessary, eliminate the ones that do not fit in with his plan. He has a perfect grasp of

the 'performance [that] is held in a quaver that may release the unexpected', to quote Arielle Dombasle, and every fortuitous gesture, every unplanned incident blends into the preliminary composition. The actress is free to improvise as long as her extraordinary proximity to the character is used to round off the scene as Rohmer had planned, fuelling it with the life force that irrigates every moment of *LA COLLECTIONNEUSE*, *PAULINE À LA PLAGE* and *CONTE D'ÉTÉ*. Here, improvisation no longer denotes a possible *opening* but a *closure*.

In directing *LE RAYON VERT*, Rohmer appeared to be relinquishing his erudite mastery of dialogue. The lack of script and the fact that he chose the flexible 16 mm format and his own Compagnie Éric Rohmer as producer underlined his desire to make a film that could be invented as it went along and to interweave as far as possible the writing and shooting stages, calling on the inspiration of Marie Rivière, who was acknowledged in the credits for her 'collaboration with the text and performance'. Once again, the story is straightforward: a few days before her summer vacation, a young Parisian secretary, Delphine (Marie Rivière), discovers that her plans have fallen through. The alternatives all turn out to be equally disappointing. She quickly gets bored in her friend's family home in Cherbourg, feels uncomfortable in La Plagne, which reminds her of the break-up of a recent love affair, and cannot come to terms with the lighthearted happiness of Lena, a young Swedish tourist she meets on the beach in Biarritz. On the station concourse, as she is about to board her train back to Paris, she meets Vincent, and together the two of them wait for sunset and the brief flash of the '*rayon vert*' [green ray], which could well signal a new romance. Rohmer shoots each stage of her journey, as Delphine finds herself having to cope with vacation set-ups that inevitably bring her back to her own solitude and her inability to go with the flow of the world. The script may not be written down but it is, nonetheless, very Rohmerian: the heroine has to take a long and circuitous path before she finds, almost miraculously, what she has been searching for all along. The carefree nature of this project reveals a new side to Rohmer, described in the following terms by Fabrice Revault d'Allonnes:

Now that the Rohmerian mastery has been honed to perfection, he enjoys playing with it even more, *taking new risks*. This is the true significance of the transition from the *Contes* to the *Comédies*. It is also, by his own admission, the *raison d'être* of *LE RAYON VERT* and *Quatre Aventures* (shot in 16 mm, with no written scripts), in which he wanted to break away from the 'polished' films his *Comédie et Proverbes* audience was anticipating.<sup>34</sup>

New horizons were certainly opening up with this *risk-taking*, which should be seen from the perspective of the opening reference to Rohmer's mastery as being 'honed to perfection'.

His mastery applied first of all to his choice of actresses: unusually, Rohmer turned here to actresses who were already familiar with his world. Marie Rivière, Rosette and Béatrice Romand had already acted in several of his films and he chose them both for their unique personalities and for their acting talent. They all spoke in their own words, but Rohmer was well used to their way of talking and the dialogue situations, which are an integral part of the *mise-en-scène*, were structured around what he anticipated from the encounters between these young women. In the garden sequence that precedes the departure for Cherbourg, he knew, for example, that the contradiction between the faltering Delphine and the voluble Béatrice (Béatrice Romand) would spark an exchange that was likely to destabilise the former. Without writing any actual dialogue, Rohmer played on the personality of Béatrice Romand, who unsurprisingly lent her own name to the character. He knew that the actress would overplay the role of the know-all friend and her hamming-up of the improvisation is for the benefit of the scene. The numerous exchanges between Marie Rivière and Rosette are based on the same principle: the latter's carefree attitude counteracts the uncertainties of the former, as does Lena's in-your-face light-heartedness. These examples illustrate an important element of the method. Although Rohmer relies on the actresses' improvisation to give his film impetus, he nevertheless maintains total control over the course of each scene, because he can foresee what kind of reaction each actress will have to these mundane situations. Marie Rivière, not without a certain naivety, later outlined the role of improvisation in *LE RAYON VERT*: 'He wanted to prove that no one would be able to tell the difference between an improvised film and a film that he had written. And that turned out to be the case.'<sup>35</sup> Rohmer's response can be found in the following comments regarding *LE RAYON VERT* and *QUATRE AVENTURES DE REINETTE ET MIRABELLE*: '[I had] the impression of controlling the text just as though [I] had written it'.<sup>36</sup> Apart from the choice of actresses and situations, the rehearsal period with Marie Rivière was another way of preparing the improvisations, giving the actress a leading role akin to directing from the inside but with one difference: the orientations were clearly indicated by Rohmer himself and Marie Rivière had no decision-making role to play during the takes. Her only mission was to ensure that everything went smoothly.

But part of the beauty of *LE RAYON VERT* nevertheless emanates from the freedom provided by its improvisational dimension, even if this is minimal, and this is particularly noticeable in the discrepancy between the discourse that Rohmer normally places in his actresses' mouths and the free speech that prevails here. As Serge Daney wrote, 'Rohmer enjoys language, not speech (which is supposed to spring forth, unfettered and authentic) but discourse (which immediately "lines" the sincerity with a false air of "déjà vu")'.<sup>37</sup> *LE RAYON VERT* is an exception: here the filmmaker does allow the speech 'to spring forth, unfet-

tered and authentic'. Although it has been prepared, this speech that has never been fixed in a written form and never learned, this speech full of hesitations, precipitations and abrupt silences, is different from his usual chiselled discourse: Rohmer cannot control its rhythm. This comes down to saying that the timeframe is partly imposed upon him from the outside, placing him in an unprecedented waiting situation. The gestures, which are probably as free as in his previous films, also take on another meaning. They are no longer there, as Rohmer planned, to accompany a discourse, they complete the speech, take over, help out if there is an unexpected hiatus, express their own truth. The element of fabulation, and thereby improvisation, lies in these details, in this elusive speech and in these indecisive gestures that escape the actresses as much as they do Rohmer himself. Even more strikingly, it is the 'quaver' that reveals the truth of the characters who, to Rohmer's great surprise, suddenly 'overflow' from their role, like Marie Rivière, for example, when she genuinely begins to cry on camera (in other scenes the tears were planned). He therefore accepts, without necessarily expecting, that something may escape him as it escapes the character, and the banal nature of the successive situations of *LE RAYON VERT* pave the way for these minor overflows, giving this film a special place in his cinematic portfolio.

To prove the point, one only needs to compare it to his next film, *QUATRE AVENTURES DE REINETTE ET MIRABELLE*, which also claims to be an improvised film. The everyday situations of *LE RAYON VERT* give way here to four sketches in which fiction plays a starring role. Joëlle Miquel and Jessica Forde, two newcomers to Rohmer's world, contributed to the writing of their respective title roles but the little fictions chosen by Rohmer precluded any appropriation of the situations by inexperienced actresses. Although the dialogues were not written down they generated far more restrictive rehearsals than *LE RAYON VERT* and it is likely that he had already largely decided on the texts by the time they were performed: the fragility and uncertainty of Delphine's speech had once more given way to the director's own discourse. *LE RAYON VERT* is, therefore, in its own league among Rohmer's films, but this does not imply that it was an isolated or marginal experiment. On the contrary, it reveals that the filmmaker was prepared to hand over to his actresses a minute but crucial element of improvisation to *round off* each sequence and to bring the final touch. It does not matter, therefore, whether the gesture or movement is perpetuating a clearly defined project that in no way interferes with his consummate talent, improvisation is definitely a component of Éric Rohmer's creative approach. The fact that *LE RAYON VERT*, the most improvised of his films, is so 'Rohmerian', bears this out.

Improvisation can take many forms, which are often impossible to spot on first viewing. There are doubtless improvised moments in films that are other-

wise meticulously executed by a perfectionist director, but no one is ever prepared to reveal this momentary loss of control. Actors who work regularly with 'improvisers', however, are far more likely to let us into their confidence. In the bonus to Gaumont's boxed set of Maurice Pialat's films, Isabelle Huppert describes in great detail a sequence from *LOULOU* (1980). When Nelly (Isabelle Huppert) allows herself to be seduced by Loulou (Gérard Depardieu) in a discothèque, this sparks the anger of her husband André (Guy Marchand), who drags her away from the dance floor. The ensuing stormy exchange appears largely unprepared although it is likely that André's slap, triggered by Nelly's arrogance, was planned. This slap, however, sent Huppert into a totally unexpected fit of giggles and the rest of the sequence had to be improvised by the two actors, who showed masterful command over their performances. The laughter and ensuing improvisation gave this episode a powerful driving force that no written dialogue could ever have produced and it is easy to understand Pialat's satisfaction. 'My ideal', he confessed some years earlier, 'is the single shot which expresses a point of view on something that is being produced in the moment. As soon as it is broken down, fragmented, rewound, the truth slips away, because one is renewing something that by definition only happens once.'<sup>38</sup> In the sequence that follows the one in the discothèque, we find Loulou and Nelly in a (genuine) hotel bedroom. Suddenly, the bed accidentally breaks under the weight of the two lovers. The actors, who find the situation both hilarious and disturbing, turn to Pialat, who was probably standing inscrutably next to the camera. They pick up the thread, showing their amusement at this unexpected interlude, which is exacerbated by the voluble irritation of another hotel guest in a nearby room. Depardieu's awkwardness as he kneels by the bed (he utters a sheepish 'dunno what to do' to both his partner and to the director) reveals the vulnerability of Loulou's character, beneath his veneer of roguish insolence. When Isabelle Huppert entices Depardieu back to bed, their laughter provides an obvious clue to the characters' physical harmony, their relationship patently stemming, first and foremost, from the pleasures of the flesh. These examples show how great actors, in their potential for improvisation, can transform an ordinary scene into a moment of truth, providing the context is right. To complete this chapter, we should also mention the sequence in *LOVE STREAMS* (Cassavetes, 1984), in which Gena Rowlands is next to a pool trying desperately to make her daughter and ex-husband laugh. In a documentary on the shoot directed by Michael Ventura,<sup>39</sup> one sees Cassavetes persuading her to overcome her apprehension and improvise the scene from start to finish, dialogue included, with no rehearsal. Whereas Huppert and Depardieu were improvising in response to a mishap on set, Rowlands was forced to improvise at the request of the director. The performance, filmed in a single take with two cameras, one of them held by Cassavetes himself, is the most mysterious in the

entire film, but also one of the most important. It is Gena Rowlands' talent yet again that gives her this courage to work without a safety net, like the best jazz musicians.



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## 7. Filming jazz

### City rhythms: modern jazz in *films noirs*

Jazz was to make a spectacular entrance in the form of filmed music with the early talkies. 1929 proved to be a seminal year for filmmakers inspired by black music, ranging from *BLACK AND TAN*, Dudley Murphy's recreation of the stage at the Cotton Club, featuring the Duke Ellington Orchestra, Bessie Smith's love-lorn *Honky Tonk* in Murphy's *SAINT-LOUIS BLUES* to the numerous musical sequences in King Vidor's *HALLELUJAH*, with its famous all-black cast.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the kaleidoscope in which Murphy tried to find a visual equivalent to Ellington's polyrhythmic orchestrations,<sup>2</sup> however, filmmakers were far more fascinated by the photogenic aspect of jazz than by the soloists' individual performances. In the wake of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, the Jazz Age and Broadway's black musicals, the cinema was attracted by jazz as collective entertainment, the highly individual gesturality of the band leaders (such as Ellington's Jungle Band) and the virtuosity of the artists in their eccentric new dances proving secondary to the carefree eroticism that characterised the Cotton Club and the *Revue Nègres*. Hollywood soon latched on to the creative potential of this new musical form as big bands featuring white musicians made the musicals go with a swing and Fred Astaire popularised and revitalised the steps of Bill Robinson's tap dance invention. Meanwhile, black artists (notably Louis Armstrong) were relegated to a few quasi-exotic appearances in major studio productions, to shorts designed for coloureds-only theatres and from the early 1940s, to soundies,<sup>4</sup> screened in bars, restaurants and hotels. There was one notable exception, however: *JAMMIN' THE BLUES* (1944), a short feature by photographer Gjon Mili, shot by the remarkable chief cameraman Robert Burks, who went on to work with Alfred Hitchcock. Mili and Burks immortalised the poise of the postures and the elegance of each musician's gestures,<sup>5</sup> focusing particularly on saxophone soloists Lester Young and Illinois Jacquet and singer Mary Bryant. While it is perfectly true, as has often been said, that *JAMMIN' THE BLUES* represented a landmark, offsetting the obvious photogenic qualities of jazz by the extraordinary harmony and boldness of its musical staging, Mili also succeeded in highlighting the nature of jazz as a form of individual expression by breaking down the shots and capturing the facial expressions of each musician.

JAMMIN' THE BLUES coincided with the beginnings of bebop, a movement that marked a return to small musical formations following a decade in which increasingly imposing dance bands had reached a peak. The status of jazz musicians as creative entities was now recognised for the first time in cinema, just as the musicians' own awareness was kicking in with a vengeance: jazz was now hailed as a black *and* American art form, in a society in which segregation still featured in the Constitution and in Hollywood's own censorship codes. While the major studios continued to ensure the success of jazz-entertainment,<sup>6</sup> the discords and bitterness of the bebop improvisers were gradually finding their place in *films noirs* that explored the other side of the coin, 'the cursed side of the American Dream', as Jean-Louis Comolli put it.<sup>7</sup>

From the early 1940s, one could detect the influence of bebop in the composition of the images, through the musicians' brief on-screen appearances. The famous collective sequence in PHANTOM LADY (Robert Siodmak, 1944) is a case in point, when jazz drummer Cliff Milburn (Elisha Cook Jr) invites the bewitching Carol Richman (Ella Raines) to attend a jam session in a gloomy cellar. As Cliff listlessly accompanies a troupe of showgirls whose nebulous presence hovers out of frame, his attention is soon caught by Carol, who has been sent as a decoy, winking at him. After the show, Cliff and Carol join his fellow jazz musicians in a poky basement. This transition from the footlights to the disquieting entrails of the city reflects the life of the young black musicians finishing their daily dance band sessions and getting together in smoky Harlem clubs to invent new, free forms of jazz. There is a striking parallel here with the end of the big band decade and the birth of bebop.

Siodmak takes a new slant on jazz imagery, portrayed through its seductively photogenic bands, succeeding in only a few minutes in associating it with the disturbing world of *cinéma noir*. As soon as she enters the cellar, Carol is engulfed by the music, cornered by the close-up of a trombone that seems to be swallowing her up, as Cliff's threatening hand around her neck steers her toward the middle of the room. The physical energy of the music is magnified by an expressionist light effect and the confined atmosphere of the room is exacerbated by the bodies emerging from the shadows. The young woman's fear is soon overcome by the orgiastic intoxication that pervades the entire sequence, with jump cuts between aggressive high- and low-angle shots, close-ups of the faces and the musicians' quick-fire gestures and lecherous glances as they down endless drinks. Carol forgets her mission (to trick Cliff) as she is enticed into the powerful clutches of the jazz music, finally succumbing to an unambiguous simulation of the sexual act during Cliff's drum solo.

In a film epitomised by emptiness, the emptiness of deserted spaces and the existential emptiness of the characters, this underground sequence, which concentrates exclusively on overflow, is an additional menace, the sole justification

for this physical release being the erotic charge. In the underbelly of the city other powers are at work, and they are far more mysterious than the crime whose unexpected perpetrator is caught thanks to Carol's perspicacity and the integrity of a police officer. Bebop, with an energy that seems to permeate the bodies and spaces, becomes a perfect incarnation of these obscure forces. Siodmak, like Dudley Murphy fourteen years earlier in the final sequence of *BLACK AND TAN*, finds visual equivalents to black music. The serene polyphony of the Duke Ellington Orchestra gives way to the rhythmic vivacity and unexpected, sharp phrasing of the young bebop improvisers. It only takes *PHANTOM LADY* a few minutes to show that jazz is not simply there as a dance accompaniment or a picturesque backdrop for musicals. It has become, like the *film noir*, a symbol of an America that is somber and apprehensive. Improvising means acknowledging one's individual freedom in the collective whole but also opening the door to the unforeseeable, to a loss of control, encapsulated in that moment when the body of the lovely Carol seems to steal a march on her reason.

In *SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS* (1957), a late *film noir* by Alexander Mackendrick, the threat has spiralled into the terminal stage. America is now extenuated by widespread corruption. The media, show business, politics and police have been completely taken over by manipulation and blackmail, their only watchwords being ambition, sex, power and money. The vehemence and exasperation of the boppers reflect once again this decomposing world. Here, the influence of modern jazz is no longer limited to a few sequences. Bebop was now inspiring film composers and to write the score of *SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS*, Elmer Bernstein followed on from his work on Otto Preminger's *THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM* (1955), in which the piercing discords of the trumpet solo mirrored the torments of Frankie (Frank Sinatra) as he went cold turkey. By associating Preminger's grey city with the strident sound of the brass instruments, Bernstein had invented an urban music in which the suave sound of the strings had been abandoned in favour of a tenser, more rugged aural atmosphere and where the physical commitment of the musicians was as tangible as an improvisation by Charlie Parker.

In the New York streets of *SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS*, Bernstein's music, played on screen by the Chico Hamilton Quintet, carries even greater impact than on the studio set of *THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM*. Jazz haunts every shot in Mackendrick's film, particularly in the night sequences, lit by the renowned chief cameraman James Wong Howe. The luminous, vertical, conquering city is now a thing of the past. Only the horizontality of the streets remains, its perspective soon swallowed up in the shadows of a city where the future is reduced to a choice between the despairing lucidity of the blues and the violence of bebop. The vibrancy of Parker's implacable phrasing, Gillespie's shrill trumpet sounds, Monk's piano discords and Kenny Clarke's razor-sharp solos

sum up the sound of an America where it is up to every individual to survive in the jungle of dealers, gangs and revenge killings. Bebop is the vibration of the city, the beat of the world. When the drummer Chico Hamilton's quintet first appears in Mackendrick's film, a musician's arm crosses the screen in the foreground and launches the tempo with a click of the fingers. The flow of the lively introductory motif, which goes from bass to drums and from cello to guitar before melding into a polyphonic ensemble, encapsulates the swarming city, in which each twinkling neon is a blind alley, the ultimate victory of appearance and illusion.

It is in another sequence of the film, however, that jazz inspires just as much the *mise-en-scène* and shooting process as the shot-by-shot breakdown and montage. As the guitarist leaves the club, unaware that a reception committee is standing outside waiting to beat him up, we see Chico Hamilton, alone on the drums, launching into a dizzying hard bop number, which is then picked up by the trumpet and trombone. The scene shifts to the young man, outside in the dark, glimmering street, where threatening shadows spring out in a series of fleeting shots, followed by headlights and finally the massive bulk of the corrupt police officer chosen to carry out the dirty work. The sound of the jazz band had gradually merged into the noises of the city but it resurfaces again just as the blows are about to rain down. The blows themselves are not shown but the full-screen drum solo, along with Hamilton's gestural choreography, is sufficient to conjure up the violence of the altercation. In under a minute, Mackendrick manages to combine the incantatory force of modern jazz with the brittleness of the best *films noirs*. This blend of cinema and jazz, united in the same clear-sighted yet disenchanting poetic vision of the world, takes SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS into the realms of the 'bop movie'. A similar vision crops up again in many other films, the most striking being perhaps DEUX HOMMES DANS MANHATTAN, shot in New York the following year by Jean-Pierre Melville. In the final sequence of Melville's film, in the small hours of the morning, four musicians are improvising in an almost deserted café. No one is listening to them. They are playing for their own pleasure, and perhaps for ours, in a kind of meltdown of all the jazz sequences that encapsulated the beauty of the *films noirs* Melville so loved. By the 1930s, jazz had already become the music of America, but Melville was to turn it into the music of the American cinema, or to be precise *his* American cinema. In these enclosed, deserted spaces, jazz is an intimate musical expression, an inner music, a circuitous way of bringing moments of beauty into the gloom, cynicism and inhumanity of the city. In 1957, once again, another equally inveterate admirer of America was to play his part in mythicising this encounter between jazz soloists and *films noirs*: the sound of Miles Davis' trumpet in ASCENSEUR POUR L'ÉCHAFAUD epitomises the despair of Florence (Jeanne Moreau) as she wanders round the black-and-white streets of a pre-

New Wave Paris and lends overwhelming intensity to Louis Malle's film. Much later, Francis Ford Coppola in *COTTON CLUB* (1984) and Spike Lee in *MO'BETTER BLUES* (1990) took a spirited new slant at the parallel between the rhythmical invention of jazz musicians and physical violence, discovering new plastic links between music and the moving image.

In the late 1950s, it was the turn of a black-and-white TV series, *Johnny Staccato*, to inject new life and expression into this overlapping history of jazz and *films noirs*. Staccato, an alluring jazz pianist-cum-detective, was played by John Cassavetes, who had just completed *SHADOWS*, with a score by Charlie Mingus and Shafi Hadi. Cassavetes did not just have an acting role, he also directed five episodes and hosted the series. Elmer Bernstein wrote the music but it was Staccato's brilliant combo of Westcoasters at Waldo's, a smoky jazz club hung with reproductions by uncompromisingly modern artists, dominated by Soutine and Picasso's Cubist paintings, that really stole the show. This modernity, spanning film, jazz and painting, was echoed in the new approach to filming shown by television, then on the up and up. The plots, interweaving small-time crooks and drug dealing with an improbable beat generation of aimless artists, moved at an incredible pace, with no downtime or room for sophisticated storylines, the quick-fire performances and jump cuts providing a vibrantly dynamic beat. Only the twenty-minute jazz interludes in each episode give breathing space to Staccato's wanderings through the streets of New York, accompanied by Bernstein's music and the taut voice-over of Cassavetes.

Whereas in *SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS* the figures seemed to be lost in the disturbing depths of New York, in *Johnny Staccato* they (and particularly Cassavetes) herald a new conquest of the city, which is often filmed in the small hours, in sheer white light, to the sound of the Westcoast soloists. The postwar generation has taken over. The end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s was to bring cinema and jazz together once again, but with a desire for new forms of expression, carried by a different generation of directors and by young unknown actors in a juxtaposition of the cinema and the modern world. Through the New Waves in film, the resounding success of television, the fashion for happenings and the photographic revolution, art was now tackling a world in which speed was of the essence. But by that time jazz had already moved on – 1960 was also the year of a providential manifesto of anger and exasperation: *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation by the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet*.

## More pointers from the small screen...

Television in the late 1950s was not merely defined by series in which each episode reflected a new economy that had little to do with Hollywood movies. It also branched out into location shooting and the first recordings of events such as the Newport Jazz Festival, which Bert Stern made into a remarkable film celebrating the innovative talent of musicians from every generation, who had gathered together in this famous bay south of Rhode Island. The opening shot features a pontoon in Newport harbour, its painted stilts forming luminous columns, with pleasure craft in the foreground. As the opening credits of *JAZZ ON A SUMMER'S DAY* start to roll, a tilt-down shot turns these geometric, coloured shapes into shifting, unreal reflections in the water. Several months before the release of *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation by the Ornette Coleman Double Quartet*, featuring Jackson Pollock's *White Light* on the sleeve, photographer Bert Stern was already heralding the improvisational interplay between light and shade on the waves and the sinuous lines of *The Train and the River*, played by Jimmy Giuffre, Bob Brookmeyer and Jim Hall. The cuts chosen by Stern for *JAZZ ON A SUMMER'S DAY* seemed simple enough on the surface. Making the most of the fact that the festival coincided with the America's Cup, he invented endless tenuous links between the sailboats gliding across the bay in the sunshine and the images of Anita O'Day, Thelonious Monk, Sonny Stitt and Louis Armstrong on stage at the Newport Jazz Festival. Deliberately distancing himself from the contrasting black-and-white effects used in detective films or the mythical *JAMMIN' THE BLUES*, Stern posited unprecedented affinities which in their form heralded the advent of free jazz, marking the start of a new era in the relationship between jazz and cinema, or even between jazz and contemporary art.

Nevertheless, the subtext of *JAZZ ON A SUMMER'S DAY* is ambiguous. When the director alternates between shots of Thelonious Monk playing a particularly discordant version of *Blue Monk* and images of the regatta that look more like commercials, it is not clear whether he is setting out to illustrate the gulf between the two worlds or if he is simply fascinated by two forms of beauty that are themselves 'discordant'. These uncertainties gradually fade, however, and the jazz begins to impress its own movement on the film: Stern then overcomes the facile temptations of impressionism and allows himself to get caught up in the music and the swaying bodies – those of the musicians and those of the young audience dancing – that are recorded by an increasingly alert hand-held camera. When, in the final sequence, the voice of Mahalia Jackson rings out *a cappella* in the still of the Newport night, before a rapt audience, the whole painful history of America suddenly flood back. The tragic beauty of her voice underlines the political implications of *JAZZ ON A SUMMER'S DAY*, which was made

at a time when racial tension was threatening to trigger riots in the major industrial cities of the United States.

Over and above this identity dimension, however, jazz in the early 1960s, and particularly free jazz, contributed in far more radical ways than Stern's film to the expression of artistic practices that were 'closer to what constitutes life and its aspirations for change', as Alexandre Pierrepont put it.<sup>9</sup> The *jazzistic field*, to coin his phrase, began to gain new ground and provide concrete inspiration for visual artists, filmmakers, writers and choreographers, who also became drawn to improvisation. Live television ensured far more widespread coverage of jazz performances. Other experiments grew out of increasingly lightweight reportage techniques, which made it possible for the cameraman and sound technician to follow the musicians on a daily basis. When Christian Blackwood decided in 1968 to accompany Thelonious Monk and his musicians on tour, with his hand-held camera, he never expected his footage to be edited twenty years later by Charlotte Zwerin in *STRAIGHT, NO CHASER* (1988), a film which revealed with great perception, for the first time, the physical commitment of these jazz musicians, their everyday work, their incessant and unpredictable conversations and the original balance between on-the-spot invention and composition.

The very first shot shows Monk in concert, standing next to his piano and spinning round as he listens to an improvisation by saxophonist Charlie Rouse. Blackwood is on the edge of the stage, riveted by the musician. He starts improvising in turn, trying to fix an expression, zooming in and out on the body in motion, which seems to be capturing the energy of Rouse's solo, before suddenly veering toward the piano so as not to lose track of the music, in a continuation of the number that has just been played. *STRAIGHT, NO CHASER* shows how vulnerable improvisation can be, how improvising means running the risk of nothing happening, of the music never materialising. In a recording studio sequence for producer Teo Macero, Monk criticises the sound engineer, who failed to record what seemed to be no more than a first contact with the piano. When someone retorts that they thought this was only a rehearsal, Monk replies with equanimity: 'You rehearse every time you play', which is a way of saying that in jazz you can never know when and if inspiration will strike. Each performance forms part of a work-in-progress, which will only end with the musician's death or, in Monk's case, the decision never to go near a piano again. To him, jazz was based on the unforeseeable and on the ability of each player to be at one with him in the music, and speeches or preparation were superfluous. The others needed to react with their own music and if they failed to understand, or sometimes made mistakes, the end result was no less beautiful. The point of rehearsals was not to set things in stone prior to the concert but to pave the way for improvisation, to agree on a few basic principles without laying

down a predetermined programme. Just a few chords jotted down on paper and the music would emerge, in a 'hereafter' of writing. 'When you think it's nice to go in, blow. Pick it.' says Monk to one of his musicians who is worrying about when to step in with his solo. In the film, Charlie Rouse explains why there are still a few flaws in the studio recordings:

Usually we'd take the first take. Sometimes we'd take the second but never the third. [Monk] would say once you've played it the first time that's where the feeling and everything is, and after that you start going downhill. [...]. It's more of a challenge to do that. You know that you've got to play it correctly the first or second take or that's it. He would take it anyhow. If you mess up then that's it. That's your problem. You have to hear that all the rest of your life.

The beauty stems precisely from these uncertainties, from this indispensable concentration, from this conviction that the technical perfection of the fifth take will never replace the freshness of the first. Filmmaker Philippe Garrel spent many years doing just that, never shooting more than one take, whatever its faults. The impression of precarious balance and vulnerability that permeates his films owes much to this leap in the dark.

STRAIGHT, NO CHASER is a document on collective creation, but it is also the portrait of an improviser whose whole life strives towards that moment when his fingers touch the piano. Without television, we would only be left with the sound of the dialogue between Monk's body and his instrument. Yet everything is in that performing body, those springing leaps from his stool, that concentration, that perspiration, the breathing during the silences, the contorting arms, the hands that defy technique, the foot beating time on the floor, the eyes riveted on the keyboard. Watching Monk play, seeing Coltrane on the rare images that have survived or observing the Sam Rivers/Tony Hymas duo in Pascale Ferran's *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE* (2001) gives us greater insight into how their music is born, lives and dies within the instant: this quest for the ephemeral is engraved on their bodies. The piano solos in which Blackwood uses the half-light of the stage to single out Monk's body are a brilliant encapsulation of the effort that goes into improvised creation and of the physical commitment it involves. The beauty of these images does not lie in the framing, the light or the attention to detail; as with Cassavetes and Rozier, it comes from this living body, from the sound of this body and from the mutual trust between the person filming and the person being filmed. *STRAIGHT, NO CHASER* is yet another demonstration of the importance of shared time in creating an impact on screen between those bodies. Christian Blackwood films Monk in hotel bedrooms with the loyal and discreet Nelly, Monk eating an apple in the street, Monk admiring a musician's new clothes, Monk fabulating, humorously acting out the role of a harmless loony for the benefit of his bemused and fascinated

fellow passengers in stations and airports. By cutting seamlessly from these everyday incidents to the stage performance, Charlotte Zwerin showed a clear understanding of how moments from life could spill into moments of music. Monk's rhythm as he walks says as much about his relationship to the world as it does about his exceptional sense of imbalance when he is improvising a blues number.

Modern and unpredictable though he was, Monk held back from free jazz, a radical movement that has left few traces on film. Few filmmakers have been brave enough to hand over the reins to the music, opting for a mix of unbridled collective improvisation and moving images. The artist Michael Snow discovered the creative collective energy of free jazz as soon as he set foot in New York in the early 1960s, an energy he instinctively associated with his own involvement with the free polyphonies of New Orleans music. In 1964, this fascination led to the film *NEW YORK EYE AND EAR CONTROL*, for which he commissioned a musical performance from Albert Ayler, Don Cherry, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Gary Peacock and Sunny Murray, recorded in New York on 17 July 1964. 'Expression. Expressionism. Moving material, leaving marks. Hand. Tends towards Actions, Events, Music. Especially very Vocal, spontaneous music. Afro-American music' Snow wrote about his film.<sup>10</sup> Once again, it is a question of the connection between sight and sound seen through the spectrum of free jazz, but with an underlying scrutiny of America and its history.

Snow's vision found an unexpected ally in a filmmaker who was theoretically a million miles from the New York underground scene. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *NOTES TOWARDS AN AFRICAN ORESTIES* (1968-1969), is, according to the words that accompany the opening shots, 'a film about a film that was never made.' Pasolini's idea was to transpose Aeschylus' *Oresties* to the Africa of the late 1960s. Featuring location shots in Africa as he searches for faces and places, documentary shots of unknown origin and sequences that show him outlining his project to black students at Rome University, the film is a free-ranging montage, interrupted by a lengthy performance in which Pasolini introduces a free jazz rendition of Cassandra's scene at the beginning of Aeschylus' tragedy. The instrumental trio, Gato Barbieri on saxophone, Don Moye on drums and Marcello Melio on bass, launches into an incantatory number inspired by John Coltrane's *Spiritual* before moving into a free accompaniment of the singing duo Yvonne Murray and Archie Savage. This astonishing 'graft' is probably the most effective example of the importance of free jazz on the 1960s creative art scene. By including it in his African *Oresties*, Pasolini was showing how this music, imbued with the tragedy of the African people, was also the newest, most inspired, most human and most committed artistic expression of the decade. This clearly political reading of free jazz is reflected in Pasolini's decision to show a facet of the creative process, the inspiration that can spring from a mere

facial expression, the beauty of a look, an unexpected gesture, a windswept tree. For Pasolini, the filmmaker of preparation and mastery, this moment of free jazz when he allows the musicians all the time they need is also a kind of tribute to other ways of creating *together*, with even more freedom than in his African notebooks.

## John Coltrane, in the frame

In order to get a precise idea of the role of television in preserving the most valuable traces of modern jazz' greatest improvisers, we need to move away from these films, which have already achieved a certain recognition, and venture into the less 'noble' images of daily TV. The first television programmes radically wrong-footed the whole Hollywood imagery of jazz, opting for 'a restoration of listening powers to the detriment of the attractions of the visible',<sup>11</sup> as Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli put it. The most representative of these was *The Sound of Jazz*, created in 1957 for CBS by producer Robert Heridge, in association with jazz critic Nat Hentoff. *The Sound of Jazz* served as a model for a number of other programmes, such as *Jazz Scene USA* by Steve Allen, *Jazz Casual* by Ralph J. Gleason a few years later and the BBC programme *Jazz 625*, hosted in front of an audience by Humphrey Lyttelton. The staging was always the same: in front of a handful of spectators scattered around the set, against a sober backdrop featuring the cameras, projectors and sound recording equipment, the host would briefly introduce the group and musical numbers. All that counted here was the music – musicians were no longer entertainers but artists in their own right.

This solemn, almost austere format not only depicted a radical change in the image of jazz, it brought out the concentration required by the musicians – the programmes were broadcast live for the most part, and there was no possibility of doing a retake if the first one went wrong. For Dan Morgenstern, jazz was the perfect medium, with its obvious improvisation, risk-taking and performance aspects: '[Television] is a medium made for events, and every jazz performance is an event [...]. The secret is the music's spontaneity, which, when combined with high artistic quality, conveys the feeling of being present in a unique moment of creation.'<sup>12</sup> The impression of a work-in-progress was accentuated by the inventiveness of the cameramen and directors, who found the new television medium an ideal stamping ground for experimentation, so much more flexible than the 35 mm film format. Franco Minganti, talking about *The Sound of Jazz*, remarked that,

the improvised nature of jazz comes across even more forcefully because of the producer's habit of asking the cameramen to 'improvise' their mise en scène and find original ways of framing; meanwhile Jack Smight – who later became a remarkable director – would edit live from the control room, introducing innovations of his own.<sup>13</sup>

This comment conjures up the credit sequence in Rozier's *ADIEU PHILIPPINE*.

Two excerpts from programmes devoted to the saxophonist John Coltrane and his quartet illustrate how live recordings of musicians, focusing exclusively on the music itself, enabled jazz musicians to convey on screen, for the first time, the full measure of their talent for on-the-spot invention. The first is taken from the programme *Jazz Casual*, broadcast on 7 December 1963,<sup>14</sup> and the second from a concert recorded by Belgian television on 1 August 1965 at Comblain-la-Tour. The circumstances were very different and go some way to explaining the striking gulf between them. But this contrast also highlights the extraordinarily rapid metamorphosis of Coltrane's music: in the space of eighteen months, the apparent stability of the quartet was thrown into disarray by a paroxysmal form of music that seemed to be constantly taking it to breaking point. The understated décor of *Jazz Casual* shows, first and foremost, a desire to show not only the work of the musicians but that of the technicians: a recording studio more akin to a workshop or rehearsal room, a few chairs stacked up behind the piano, a pile of instrument cases in the back left-hand corner and the recording equipment in full view, with a camera and its cameraman full field. The contrasts between the blacks and whites are accentuated by the searing light of the projectors, its heat rapidly producing visible traces of perspiration on the faces of drummer Elvin Jones and bass player Jimmy Garrison, while its effect on Coltrane and pianist McCoy Tyner is far less obvious. Unlike public performances, these programmes allowed a certain leeway in the layout of the musicians. It is worth noting, for instance, that while Coltrane has understandably placed himself in the center, Elvin Jones' position opposite him is far less orthodox. Coltrane's decision makes perfect sense, however, as his solo on *Impressions* turns rapidly into a duet with Jones lasting over three minutes, during which time McCoy Tyner and Garrison remain silent. By occupying the terrain, with Coltrane in the middle of the semicircle formed by the three other musicians, the intense concentration of all the protagonists becomes apparent, even when they are reduced to silence. At that particular stage in his career, the impressive physical presence of Coltrane, wrapped up in his music and impervious to any outside solicitation, was all that was needed to engender an atmosphere of reflection, even of meditation.

Coltrane was free to choose the numbers and even their length; the programme featured *Afro Blue* (seven minutes), *Alabama* (five and a half minutes)

and *Impressions* (fourteen minutes on screen but the music continued to the closing credit roll). *Impressions* was undoubtedly the star of this small-scale concert, which was recorded in continuity. This was naturally due to its length but also to its structure. Following a brief introduction by Coltrane, McCoy Tyner launches into a solo lasting four minutes and twenty seconds, with the bass and drums, Garrison takes over with his own almost four-minute solo and Coltrane wraps it up in a four and a half minute piece, three of which feature a duet with Jones, before picking up the theme once again. Everything appears smooth and serene, the equivalent length of the successive solos giving each musician an opportunity to express himself. The director and cameramen have no difficulty matching the shots to the music. Despite a somewhat cumbersome set-up (several tripod cameras, including dollies) the choice of images is often inspired, capturing Garrison's attentive involvement during Tyner's solo and highlighting the exchange between Coltrane and Jones with particular effect. The camera positioned behind the drummer makes it possible to see how his whole body is reacting to every phrase, as he responds to each of Coltrane's rhythmic suggestions by picking up the phrasing and carrying it through to the following phrase. Thanks to these images, we soon grasp that this is not a tenor solo with drum accompaniment but a quick-fire demonstration of call and response at which both men are past masters.

There is another possible interpretation of this face-to-face encounter, which views its simultaneity as a challenge to the classical succession of solos by McCoy Tyner and Garrison. Unlike the music, which permeates the sound space, the image tends to localise the sound, and it is obvious that by focusing on the tenor saxophonist and drummer the shot inevitably excludes the pianist and bass player. This exclusion is exacerbated by the layout of the musicians, which stresses the proximity of Coltrane and Jones. Some were to see this as the first sign of the quartet's impending break-up but it is difficult to go along with this retrospective interpretation. It would be more accurate to see these images as a record of one of the rare periods in which Coltrane appears, at least fleetingly, to have found what he was looking for, and this is borne out by the two other numbers featured in the programme, *Afro Blue* and the ballad *Alabama*, both performed with consummate mastery and skill. However, as we know, Coltrane's quest was far from over, and while *Jazz Casual* represents a moment of serenity, the same cannot be said of the concert that took place on 1 August 1965.

These images were filmed a long way from the comfort of the recording studio, during a festival which has since gone down in history, held from 1959 to 1966 in the little Belgian town of Comblain-la-Tour, in the fields surrounding the football pitch. The technical set-up was much the same (several mobile tripod cameras) but the constraints of live public performance made the recording

more complicated, as the crews of the period were on unfamiliar ground. The appalling quality of the film accentuates the precarious nature of the recording, giving its impression of urgency particular potency. *Jazz Casual's* essentially sequential solos are countered here by simultaneity and collective improvisation, and this introduces an element of uncertainty in the choices of the director and cameramen. For anyone who is remotely familiar with jazz, it is easy to understand what is going on when the musicians perform one after the other. But how should one film a collective experience? How can the jazz be conveyed when it is impossible to separate the musicians? How can one acknowledge 'the legitimacy of everything',<sup>15</sup> in Coltrane's 1965 music, as Michel-Claude Jalard put it? In the face of these relentless questions, the director was forced to improvise, to respond on the spot to unforeseen calls. His disorientation can be deduced from his insistence on filming Coltrane's face in close-up, as though all the music was concentrated on that one face, before he finally decides to portray the second part of the number through a static shot of the whole quartet (or should it be trio, given McCoy Tyner's relegation to the left-hand corner of the frame?).<sup>16</sup> One can readily imagine how bewildered the audience must also have felt by the tension that pervades this musical moment. But the regular beat can still be discerned and the audience seems more than attentive, indeed *fascinated* by the musicians' total physical commitment, by the intensity of the collective performance.

The economy of shots, their slow succession producing a feeling of petrification in the face of the all-powerful music, makes it possible to concentrate on the incredible density of the web of sound. The lull of a comfortable chain of events gives way to the necessity of living the moment, living to the full what Gilles Deleuze was to call 'purely optical and sound'<sup>17</sup> situations. Movement has given way to lived time, and horizontality to verticality, 'resulting in a certain stasis within the dynamism itself, which further reinforces the cyclical character of the music',<sup>18</sup> as Jalard put it. The music seems to be doomed to excess, to the inevitable exploration of the limits heartrendingly portrayed in these searing images of the concert in Comblain-la-Tour.<sup>19</sup> The grainy images are redolent with the threat of loss and the bodies of Jimmy Garrison and Elvin Jones, in the halo of condensation which encircles each of their gestures, seem to be literally consumed, like the music itself. Coltrane's body shows no trace of exhaustion, as though it were not his body playing but an all-devouring inner flame. Many years later, Johan van der Keuken, recalling these images, was to write:

I'm still fascinated by the incomplete, blurred information [...]. I can remember the intense emotion that took hold of us whenever we heard or saw a copy of a film, videotape or television program featuring John Coltrane, Elvin Jones, Jimmy Garrison and McCoy Tyner: a vague image, almost swallowed up by the interference. It's the most direct experience of the quartet we have left and by extension the most direct

experience one can imagine. One needs a myth for the blurring to take effect: what we were witnessing could not be conveyed in images, it was too grandiose, too intense. We'll never be able to get any closer. It's like those shrill notes of Coltrane's in later years, which almost sound as if he couldn't manage them: self-pitying, strident, hoarse, broken – because they couldn't be played.<sup>20</sup>

These extraordinary moments, these rare traces of Coltrane in concert, convey the impression today that we are witnessing an exceptionally intense act of collective creation.

When at the end of *My Favorite Things* Coltrane turns his back on the audience and fades into the shadows, he is already elsewhere, concentrating on the next stage. Although he was gradually abandoned by McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones and Jimmy Garrison, and later by many of his fans, he never deviated from his course or his ultimate purpose. On 2 July 1966, at the Newport Jazz Festival in Rhode Island, an amateur photographer took a few awkward shots of him with his silent camera. When one sees these last moving images, when one sees Coltrane blowing with the same energy into his soprano saxophone and then into his tenor saxophone, it is like 'hearing' for the last time the cry of the man who wanted to play those notes that 'could not be played', the man who wanted to *play the unplayable*.

### **An experiment in collective improvisation: QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE (2001), by Pascale Ferran**

We will end with a film that addresses every one of the questions raised in the preceding pages. In *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE*, Pascale Ferran, in Coltranian mode, set herself the task of filming the unfilmable. In her case, however, the idea was not to play the unplayable, but rather to shed light on the process of collective creation in jazz, from the first exchange of notes to the album itself, ready to be 'consumed' in the music stores. When music producer Jean Rochard first suggested she film a recording by saxophonist Sam Rivers and pianist Tony Hymas, a duo created specially for the occasion, she politely turned him down. She felt that her limited knowledge of this kind of music did not entitle her to benefit from a project that would certainly fire the enthusiasm of her more musical peers. It was only after much hesitation, therefore, that she agreed to visit the Ocoee studio in Florida, on 14, 15 and 16 December 1998. The originality of the challenge finally won her over: the two musicians were given four days, with no prior rehearsal, to record an album, ensuring it was ready for release by the fourth day. To quote Ferran herself, the confined context resembled 'the

process of collective creation in fast motion, an exceptional opportunity to convey a part of this collective exercise, human relations, the experience lived by each one, the atmosphere on set, the technique.<sup>21</sup> Through these words, one senses that filming jazz was to her a way of filming something of the cinema itself.

There was a standard recording set-up, featuring two areas, one in which the musicians could improvise, which from the opening sequence of the film was regarded as a stage, and another for the sound engineers and producer Jean Rochard. Ferran quickly decided not to shoot anything outside the four walls of the studio (we only see daylight once, when the musicians are leaving the studio at the end of the fourth day) and to keep the crew to a minimum: one sound technician (her brother Jean-Jacques Ferran), a boom operator (Éric Thomas), a camera operator (Katell Djian – Ferran did not want to be the only woman among all these men) and herself. Four days and theoretically four people, although the spatial layout was admittedly off kilter, with three of the film crew (Ferran, the boom operator and the camera operator) in the performance venue with the two musicians.

The first day was marked by bitter tension between Hymas and Rivers and Ferran restricted herself to directing the camera operator. By the following day, however, she too was carrying a camera: two women filming two men with two hand-held cameras. This was a way of relinquishing a degree of control – the director was no longer simply someone giving instructions with which her colleagues had to comply – and physically tackling the work, attenuating the hierarchy in relation to the jazz duo. By taking hold of a camera herself, she was creating a situation of proximity and exchange with the musicians, in a set-up that she could experience from the inside. The spontaneous aesthetic of small cameras is something that leaves Ferran cold and she opted for sturdy digital Beta cameras, each weighing over twenty pounds. The two camerawomen were to carry these cameras up to seven hours a day and the visible exhaustion of Sam Rivers and Tony Hymas was soon mirrored by the similar exhaustion of Katell Djian and Pascale Ferran. The last takes of the day, in which the framing was less polished and the focusing more erratic, betrayed a physical weariness that was encapsulated by the faces of the musicians: these were tired images for tired bodies.

Ferran's lack of English made her even more attuned to the music and the physical attitudes of the musicians. The main problem throughout the shoot was to find the right distance between the film crew and the musicians: the idea was not to disturb them, and yet it was obvious that the presence of cameras would affect the outcome. 'When one plays music, there is a kind of abandon to physical pleasure which can sometimes be uncomfortable to watch', says Pascale Ferran:

When I was filming Tony Hymas, I felt a deep-rooted empathy with him. There are shots that I decided not to include in the film because I felt I had overstepped the mark, I felt I was getting into intimate territory. The fact that I could not understand the language no doubt contributed to my awareness of the bodies. It's incredible how the essential can be conveyed by the body language. Speech can easily remain on the surface, come to some arrangement with reality, but the body goes straight to the essential.<sup>22</sup>

This perfectly sums up what is going on in *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE*: the feasible or unfeasible 'togetherness' of two bodies, which will bring the music to life (take the bodies of Hymas and Rivers on that draining first day), but also the feasible or unfeasible 'togetherness' of four bodies (Hymas, Rivers, Ferran and Djan) to bring a film to fruition. Everyone needs to find his place in this common space. If Ferran only ever talks about her relationship with Hymas in her interviews, and never about her relationship with Rivers, it is because a choice had to be made, which she discreetly attributes to the realm of desire. When the two women filming and the two men performing finally come together in harmony, the music may possibly emerge. 'There were moments,' says Ferran, 'when both the film crew and the musicians were inspired at the same time, moments when they would play divinely well; we felt then as though we were in the right place.'<sup>23</sup>

Until the remarkable musical sequences in the second part of the film, however, the music finds it difficult to make its mark. On several occasions, 'on moral grounds', Ferran acknowledges the presence of the film crew in the confined space of the studio – the hub of the creative process – and recognises her own responsibility for the early failures. In the montage, she retained the 'good mornings' addressed to the crew by the musicians, the revealing remark by Tony Hymas at the end of the first day ('It's quite terrible to be filmed!') and the few sentences uttered to camera by a strained and falsely relaxed Rivers on his arrival at the studio the second day ('This is the studio where we want to create this wonderful music. I don't know what we want to create [...]. I don't have any idea and this is interesting to me.').<sup>24</sup> These tangible signs of tension were also linked to the uncertainties of improvisation. There was no set programme, just a list of musical numbers, many of them technically arduous, played in random order and complemented by free improvisation. Following a joint reading of the theme – when there was one – and a few pointers relating to the improvisation techniques, the shots succeeded one another, and as they were all recorded, the music was as likely to be in the first shot as in the tenth. The musicians might suddenly interrupt an improvisation and immediately pick up the number again. The film crew had to be on constant alert: if they missed the

opening of a phrase, an exchange of glances or a gesture the take would end up on the cutting-room floor.

At this stage, Ferran needed to enter into another relationship with time. In the jazz of Rivers and Hymas, there was no first time, a time for preparation, research and rehearsal, followed by a second time of performance and implementation.<sup>25</sup> In jazz, music can be there at any moment, as we saw in *STRAIGHT, NO CHASER*, in another studio sequence. Ferran therefore needed to record everything that was going on and adapt to a timeframe that was different from that of film, a timeframe over which she had no command. Ferran's choice of two cameras was particularly useful in coping with the length imposed by jazz, as this was the only way of avoiding a split in time while keeping a constant watch on the two musicians.

Having been obliged to improvise throughout the shoot, in other words to relentlessly eliminate possibilities, while the action was in full flow – improvising entails making choices that, by definition, eliminate others – Ferran was able to let go during the montage. Contrary to popular belief, musicians, even improvising musicians, also rely on montage. Hymas refers to this twice during the film, the first time when the musicians find it impossible to play *Jennifer*, one of the pianist's own compositions, all the way through, and the second when he points out to the producer that one of the numbers is too long and will have to be cut. The example of *Jennifer* is significant: to the musicians, montage was the ultimate solution, a way of circumventing a problem when it became impossible to play a single number in continuity. It never, therefore, implied *writing*. On the topic of montage as a possible form of writing, musical and cinematic improvisation differ. Whereas the element of composition in the sense of *fixing through the written*, when it exists, precedes improvisation in music (the theme, the chord chart), in film improvisation it is on the contrary the ultimate phase in the creative process.<sup>26</sup>

When it came to editing, Ferran did not choose the 'right shots' in an attempt to idealise an encounter between two leading musicians who needed to overcome the antagonisms of origin and culture before they could play. In *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE*, the conflicts always arose when it came to reading the score and this was due to the two men's diametrically opposed attitudes to the written. Like a lot of black jazzmen of his generation, Rivers suffered from the commonly-held notion that 'naturally talented' Afro-Americans were incapable of approaching music through composition. This explains his almost sacred attitude to the written form, which comes across very clearly in the film. Hymas, who knows how sensitive the topic is, remains very patient but does not always succeed in masking his exasperation. Ferran does not attempt to cover up what she refers to as 'scenes from married life'.<sup>27</sup> By preserving the raw nature of the situation, she gives as honest an account as she can of what really went on: the

work, the repetitive gestures, the suspense, the waiting, the exhaustion, the discouragement, the anxiety that gradually spread to each of the protagonists, but also the joy when the music burst forth. The continuity that underpins any jazz improvisation finds itself challenged and unravelled by interruptions on every front. At the beginning of the last day, right up to the visible liberation that follows Rivers' recording of *Everafter*, it is patently obvious to everyone, including the audience, that this album may never materialise, and that consequently the film may never materialise either. This is where *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE* is so successful: it shows the degree to which vulnerability and uncertainty are inherent in the collective creative process whenever one takes the risk of improvising, the risk of living cinema and music to the full, as a common experience.

*QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE* is both a film on jazz and a film on a particular notion of cinema: two types of creation attempting to coexist, two types of creation that have much in common but are also quite different. Music and cinema, therefore, but perhaps more accurately jazz and documentary, or better still, musical improvisation and cinematic improvisation. In both cases, perfect mastery of the technique is a must. Great improvisers are, first and foremost, great technicians and this applies just as much to Hymas and Rivers as to Pascale Ferran and her crew. But one must also stop striving for perfection and accept the trembling hand, the less accomplished phrasings, the poorly framed or blurred shots and even the bitterly ironic absence of a sequence. As the two musicians fell into each other's arms at the end of the fourth day, entering into physical contact for the first time, the batteries of both cameras simultaneously ran out. Initially, Ferran was tempted to give up the whole film but she later accepted it as a sign of fate: *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE* did not need this sequence.

'Music,' says Pascale Ferran,

is a quest, something I feel I don't understand. But to me it is the art form that most resembles the cinema. Cinema has nothing to do with painting and very little to do with literature. You can shoot a film with your feet but if a time takes shape, if the rhythm is right, then it may turn out to be a good film. Since *PETITS ARRANGEMENTS AVEC LES MORTS* [1994], it has been clear to me that cinema is music.<sup>28</sup>

By her own admission, when making her first film she had in mind the perfect written mastery of art music. Since *QUATRE JOURS À OCOEE*, she has been convinced that the cinema can also sometimes mean jazz improvisation. Filming the creative act has altered her relationship to the cinema: 'I hope I'm moving toward a greater receptivity to the present',<sup>29</sup> she commented on its release, referring to her future work. In a statement of intent on *LADY CHATTERLEY* (2006), her next film, Pascale Ferran wrote:

I am considering shooting with a skeleton crew, in Super 16, sometimes with two cameras. To be honest, I might almost consider shooting the film in video but I'm

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holding back on account of the light, the effect of light on the bodies and landscapes; apart from that, I wouldn't see it as an aberration. I don't think I would have dared to throw myself into this project if I hadn't already made a documentary. I feel it is vitally important to achieve a cinematic rendition of the extraordinary impression of a first time that emanates from the book.<sup>30</sup>

Between *PETITS ARRANGEMENTS AVEC LES MORTS*, her first film, and the sensuality of *LADY CHATTERLEY*, she had lived through the adventure with the Strasbourg National Theatre acting school in *L'ÂGE DES POSSIBLES* (1995) – but above all, improvisation had intervened.



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## Conclusion

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 oeuvre, 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-Zäïmeche, Philippe Faucon 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.'<sup>1</sup> It found its ultimate expression in the tensions between Tony Hyman 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 Djan.

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.'<sup>2</sup> 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-Zäïmeche 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.



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# Notes

## Introduction

1. *Le Jazz et l'Occident*, coll. D'Esthétique, Paris, Klincksieck, 2008, p. 193.
2. There is little significant documentation relating to the links between art music and improvisation, but the reader may refer to Umberto Eco's essay *The Open Work* (trans. Anna Cancogni), Harvard University Press, 1989, originally published in 1962, Denis Levaillant's *L'improvisation musicale: essai sur la puissance du jeu*, Paris, Lattès, 1981, a work as rich as it is polemical, and the less controversial but equally interesting publication by Jean-François de Raymond, soberly entitled *L'Improvisation*, Paris, Vrin, 1980.
3. Jean-François de Raymond, *L'Improvisation*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
5. Pierre-Henry Frangne, 'Entre captation et fiction: tensions et inventions du cinéma face à l'acte de création', in Pierre-Henry Frangne, Gilles Mouëllic, Christophe Viart (eds.), *Filmer l'acte de création*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009, p. 16.
6. Gilles Deleuze, 'Le cerveau, c'est l'écran', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 380, Feb. 1986, pp. 25-32, reprinted in *Deux régimes de fou. Textes et entretiens, 1975-1995*, Paris, Minuit, 1992, p. 265. (This was published in English as *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995*, revised edition, David Lapoujade (ed.), Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (trans.), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2007, but the present quotations were translated for the purposes of this book and were not taken from this edition). He continues. 'One can conceive of similar problems, at different times, on different occasions and under different conditions, jolting diverse sciences, and painting, and music and philosophy, and literature, and cinema. The tremors are the same but each of the terrains is different.'
7. Christian Béthune, *Adorno et le jazz*, coll. D'Esthétique, Paris, Klincksieck, 2003, p. 58.
8. Vincent Amiel, *Le Corps au cinéma, Keaton, Bresson, Cassavetes*, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 2.
9. Norman McLaren's extraordinary *BEGONE DULL CARE* (1949) immediately springs to mind.
10. Petr Král, *Le Burlesque, ou morale de la tarte à la crème*, Paris, Stock, 1984, p.60.
11. 'Entretien avec Jean Renoir' by Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut, *Cahiers du cinéma*, special issue devoted to Jean Renoir, no. 78, Christmas 1957, reprinted in Jean Renoir, *Entretiens et propos*, coll. Petite bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, 2005, p. 156.

## I. Writing and improvisation

1. By opposition to 'popular music', 'art music' is a term used to describe a musical score that has been written down by a composer, who thereby becomes the sole author of the work.
2. Jean-François de Raymond, *L'Improvisation*, Paris, Vrin, 1980, p. 15.
3. In addition to the biographies or monographs that have been devoted to the aforementioned directors, a useful source of reference can be found in the issue entitled 'Improviser' in the magazine *Théâtre S* (no. 24, 2nd semester 2006, Presses universitaires de Rennes).
4. Improvisation contests are a case apart and have little bearing on the topic under discussion.
5. Anne Boissière, foreword to *Approche philosophique du geste dansé. De l'improvisation à la performance*, Anne Boissière and Catherine Kintzler (eds.), Presses universitaires du Septentrion, Université de Lille 3, 2006, p. 9.
6. Ibid.
7. Laurence Louppe, 'L'utopie du corps indéterminé, Etats-Unis, années 60', in *Le Corps en jeu*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 1993, pp. 223-224.
8. 'L'improvisation ou les paradoxes du vide', in *Approche philosophique du geste dansé*, op. cit., p. 36.
9. *Le Jazz et l'Occident*, Paris, Klincksieck, coll. D'Esthétique, 2008, p. 153.
10. Ibid., p. 157.
11. The two requisite, self-sufficient qualities that are cornerstones of jazz are a specific appropriation of musical time known as swing, and a specific appropriation of sound. These two characteristics may not include improvisation in its primary sense but both are determined by the musician's desire to assert his personality, a facet that finds its ultimate expression in improvisation.
12. *Philosophie du geste*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1995, p. 56 [emphasis added by Michel Guérin].
13. 'L'improvisation et les paradoxes du vide', in *Approche philosophique du geste dansé*, op. cit., pp. 15-40.
14. Ibid., p. 24.
15. Ibid., p. 26.
16. Ibid., p. 25.
17. Ibid., p. 27.
18. Ibid., p. 25.
19. Ibid..
20. See, in particular, Christian Béthune, *Adorno et le jazz: analyse d'un déni esthétique*, Paris, Klincksieck, coll. D'Esthétique, 2003.
21. See Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli, *Free Jazz Black Power*, 1st edition: Champ Libre, 1971. Reprinted: Gallimard, coll. Folio, 2000.
22. *Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants*, Prestige, Original Jazz Classics, 1956.
23. 'L'improvisation et les paradoxes du vide', op. cit, p. 32.
24. This idea is developed at length in Jean-Louis Comolli's summa *Voir et pouvoir. L'innocence perdue: cinéma, télévision, fiction, documentaire*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2004.
25. *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, coll. Auteurs, 2001, p. 205.

26. It is important to have access to the script before shooting: the published texts are usually limited to a shot-by-shot breakdown of the completed film, which sheds no light on the creative process.
27. *Le corps au cinéma: Keaton, Bresson, Cassavetes*, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 108.
28. Ibid.
29. Hélène Frappat, *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, op. cit., pp. 137-138. Marilù Parolini was co-scriptwriter on *L'AMOUR FOU*.
30. Suzanne Schiffman: 'On a suivi le graphique', in *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, op. cit., p. 143. This chart is very similar in principle to the chord charts used as a basis for improvisation by jazz musicians.
31. 'Comme la terre autour du soleil', in Hélène Frappat, *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, op.cit., p. 135.
32. Interview with Jacques Loiseleux by Alain Philippon, in Alain Philippon, *À nos amours de Maurice Pialat*, Yellow Now, coll. Long Métrage, 1989, p. 102.
33. *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, op. cit. p. 30.
34. As we have already stated, improvisation made its first appearance in the guise of medieval 'games' and 'mystery plays', devised for public entertainment. Rivette is therefore harking back here to the distant origins of improvisation.
35. 'Vouloir l'involontaire et répéter l'irrépérable', in *Approche philosophique du geste dansé*, op. cit., p. 159 [emphasis added].
36. Jean-François de Raymond, op.cit., p. 31.
37. 'Vouloir l'involontaire et répéter l'irrépérable', in *Approche philosophique du geste dansé*, op. cit., p. 158.
38. Preface to *Roberto Rossellini: le cinéma révélé*, Cahiers du cinéma, coll. Petite bibliothèque, 2005, p.7 (1st edition: 1990).

## 2. Creation in action

1. 'Mes prochains films', interview with Jean Renoir by Michel Delahaye and Jean-André Fieschi, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 180, July 1966. Reprinted in *Jean Renoir. Entretiens et Propos*, Jean Narboni (ed.), Paris, Cahiers du cinema, coll. Petite Bibliothèque, 2005 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1979), pp. 176-177.
2. Interview with Rabah Ameur-Zaïmeche by Jean-Philippe Tessé, press release for *DERNIER MAQUIS*, 2008, Sophie Dulac Productions.
3. 'La marche et l'idée', interview with Jean Renoir by Michel Delahaye and Jean Narboni, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 196. Reprinted in *Jean Renoir. Entretiens et Propos*, op. cit., p. 211.
4. Despite appearances, this has nothing in common with certain reality TV shows, which conform to a precisely-determined script, making them totally alien to the freedom that characterised Rozier's shoots.
5. *Jean Renoir, le Patron*. Reprinted in *Jean Renoir. Entretiens et Propos*, op. cit., pp. 286-287.
6. 'Le temps déborde', interview with Jacques Rivette by Jacques Aumont, Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean Narboni and Sylvie Pierre, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 204, September 1968,

- p. 8 [emphasis added]. Published in English under the title 'Time Overflowing', Amy Gateff (trans.), in *Jacques Rivette: Texts and Interviews*, British Film Institute, 1977, n. pag.
7. Ibid.
  8. Paris, Ramsay Poche Cinéma, 2006 (1<sup>st</sup> edition Belfond, 1974).
  9. Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, coll. Petite Bibliothèque, 2005 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1979). This refers to interviews given to the *Cahiers du cinéma* and to comments made on television programmes, particularly the two-part *Jean Renoir, le Patron*, directed by Jacques Rivette for the series 'Cinéastes de notre temps' by Janine Bazin and André S. Labarthe.
  10. Ibid., p. 216.
  11. Ibid.
  12. *Jean Renoir, le Patron*. Reprinted in *Jean Renoir. Entretiens et Propos*, op. cit., p. 283.
  13. Ibid., p. 296.
  14. Jean Renoir, *Ma vie et mes films*, Flammarion, coll. Champs contre-champs, 1974, p. 154.
  15. 'Roberto Rossellini et l'invention du cinéma moderne', introduction to *Roberto Rossellini. Le cinéma révélé*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, coll. Petite Bibliothèque, 2005, p. 8.
  16. Ibid., p. 10.
  17. Jacques Lourcelles, *Dictionnaire du cinéma. Les films*, Paris, Robert Laffont, coll. Bouquins, 1992.
  18. Comments by Roberto Rossellini, published in *Bianco e nero* in February 1952 and reprinted in Mario Verdone, *Roberto Rossellini*, Paris, Seghers, coll. Cinéma d'aujourd'hui, 1963, p. 25.
  19. Jacques Lourcelles, 'Voyage en 'talie', *Dictionnaire du cinéma. Les films*, Paris, Robert Laffont.
  20. E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, New York, Phaidon, 1951 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1950), p. 391.
  21. Interview with Rossellini by Fereydoun Hoveyda and Jacques Rivette, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 94, April 1959. Reprinted in *Roberto Rossellini. Le cinéma révélé*, op. cit., p. 91.
  22. 'Techniques de la Nouvelle Vague', *Cahiers du cinéma*, special issue 'Nouvelle Vague: une légende en question', 1997, pp. 36-43.
  23. Ibid., p. 36.
  24. *Libération*, 9 June 2004.
  25. Ibid.
  26. 'Le jazz à l'œuvre', interview with Jacques Rozier, in Gilles Mouëllic, *Jazz et Cinéma. Paroles de cinéastes*, Paris, Séguier-Archimbaud, 2006, pp. 65-66. The irony is that Rozier had only used a simple guide track when shooting *ADIEU PHILIPPINE*. Given the confused sound, it took him a long time to recapture the voices, particularly as the dialogues were largely improvised.
  27. The sound engineer was Michel Fano.
  28. 'L'avenir esthétique de la télévision. La TV est le plus humain des arts mécaniques', *Réforme*, no. 548, 17 September 1955, reprinted in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 631, February 2008, pp. 80-82.
  29. He also foresaw the excesses of reality TV.

### 3. The influence of Jean Rouch

1. This text was reprinted in the review *CinémAction*, no. 81 (4<sup>th</sup> quarter 1996), under the title 'Jean Rouch ou le ciné-plaisir', pp. 41-45. It has been translated into English on the Official Jean Rouch Tribute Site <http://der.org/jean-rouch/content/index.php> under the title 'The Camera and Man' and it is this translation that we have used here.
2. 'La Caméra et les hommes', *CinémAction*, no. 81, op. cit., p. 43. 'The Camera and Man', op. cit., p.6.
3. Ibid., p. 44. Ibid., p. 8.
4. 'Étonnant: Jean Rouch, *Moi, un Noir*', *Arts*, no. 713, 11 March 1959, and 'L'Afrique vous parle de la fin et des moyens', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 94, April 1959. These two articles were reprinted in Alain Bergala (ed.), *Godard par Godard*, vol. 1, Paris, Éditions de l'Étoile-Cahiers du cinéma, 1985, pp. 177-178 and 180-183.
5. See in particular Alain Bergala, *Godard au travail*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, pp. 35-39.
6. Each of the heroes in *MOI, UN NOIR* chose an 'American' name that they had either seen in movie theatres or on hoardings in Abidjan: Edward G. Robinson, Lemmy Caution and Dorothy Lamour.
7. Op. cit., p. 44.
8. 'Le montage: concerto à deux regards et quatre mains', in *Jean Rouch et le ciné-plaisir*, op. cit., pp. 168-169.
9. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 214. Deleuze is referring here to the serial dodecaphonism invented by 'the Viennese', Arnold Schoenberg and his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern. Distancing themselves from the codifications of a tonal system that was already on its way out, the composers drew up new rules based on series of sounds whose only connections were to each other. In Godard's case, the links between the series of images and sounds were given a new lease of life, with no reference to the usual rules of classical cinema. Seriality not only allowed tremendous freedom in composition, it acknowledged, through the written form, the all-powerful role of the author. This parallel between music and cinema, which is worth expanding upon at length, should nevertheless be put into perspective: whereas the material used by musical composers is immutable, that of the filmmakers is a source of endless reinvention.
10. Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 2006.
11. *Godard au travail*, op. cit., p. 26.
12. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 22 September 1965.
13. In this sense, Godard resembles filmmakers such as Orson Welles, whose talent for invention in the moment is equally remarkable. Unlike Welles, however, Godard is always aware of the strictures of filming, both in terms of budget and in terms of length.
14. 'You need to take truth literally when it comes from the mouth of Lemmy Caution, American federal agent and unemployed person in Treichville, when he hangs outside the church waiting for girls or explains to Petit Jules why France lost in Indochina, in a speech that is a mixture of Céline, Audiberti and ultimately nothing at all, for the speeches of Jean Rouch and his characters (whose resemblance to real

- persons, living or dead, is absolutely not coincidental), are as fresh and pure as Botticelli's Venus or the *Noir* emerging from the waves in LES STATUES MEURENT AUSSI.' (Excerpt from 'Étonnant: Jean Rouch, *Moi, un Noir*', op. cit., p. 178).
15. In his demonstration, Deleuze associates the 'cinema of experience' approach of Canadian Pierre Perrault with Rouch's *cinéma vérité*.
  16. *The Time-Image*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 150.
  17. The film was released in April 1961. It conjures up RENDEZ-VOUS DE JUILLET (1949) by Jacques Becker, who had been Renoir's assistant. Jacques Becker, who gave Jean Rouch his first lesson in cinema on the plane that was taking them both to Africa.
  18. Van der Keuken makes a subtle allusion to Rouchian 'fabulation' in his comments on the film THE EYE ABOVE THE WELL (1988): 'There are a number of situations in this film which are mises-en-scène. This involves playing with what I would call 'the approximate'. These are genuine mises-en-scène, but directed in an approximate manner. They resemble a simulation of a fictional film, because one is perfectly aware of the camera's presence, and this provides an extra layer: these people are acting but we know that they are depicting their own lives, this is a documentary account of the way they cope in a situation which calls on them to act. It is both real and a form of amateur dramatics.' (in Johan van der Keuken, *Aventures d'un regard*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1998, p. 172).
  19. Pierre Perrault's trilogy on the Isle-aux-Coudres also comes to mind, as a model for the fictional rendition of reality stemming from an improvised remark. In POUR LA SUITE DU MONDE (1963), LE RÈGNE DU JOUR (1966) and LES VOITURES D'EAU (1969), Perrault recorded the mutation of communities through the spectrum of age-old rituals, recreated for the purposes of the film, perpetuating the ancient language as preserved in these remote areas. The adventure of living, creative speech takes precedence over the images that only appear to be there in order to accompany the words.
  20. The fact that these same films represent the most vibrant aspect of French cinema today is a further example of the role of improvisation as an expression of contemporary creation.
  21. *John Cassavetes. Autoportraits*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1992, p. 15.
  22. 'Le jazz à l'œuvre: entretien avec Jacques Rozier', in Gilles Mouëllic, *Jazz et Cinéma. Paroles de cinéastes*, Paris, Segquier-Archimbaud, 2006, p. 61.
  23. Ameer-Zaïmeche directed his fourth film in 2011, LES CHANTS DE MANDRIN (Prix Louis Delluc), using working methods that were very akin to those of the trilogy.
  24. The *double peine* refers to immigrants who are sentenced to imprisonment in France and then deported to their native country.
  25. A Taleb (plural: Taliban) is a student in a Koranic school. In the context of the Shiite clergy, his studies are to prepare him for the role of Mullah.
  26. The song was composed by Meriem Serbah.
  27. Although the crew did not discover the magnificent voice of this man, who was accustomed to calling to prayer, until the actual day of shooting, this was to become one of the most memorable moments of the film.
  28. Yet again this is a way of directing improvisation 'from the inside'.
  29. 'Comme Armstrong jouait de la trompette', in *Jazz et Cinéma. Paroles de cinéastes*, op. cit., p. 61.

30. This blurring of fiction and documentary gave Ameur-Zaïmeche the opportunity to integrate two remarkable sequences into *BLED NUMBER ONE*, in which singer and guitarist Rodolphe Burger, flanked by Kamel/Rabah gazing peacefully into the distance, improvises, as dawn is rising, a heart-rending number based on a poem by William Blake, with microphone and amplifier in full view.
31. 'Dérives de la fiction: notes sur le cinéma de Jean Rouch', in Dominique Noguez (ed.), *Cinéma: théories, lectures*, special issue of *Revue d'esthétique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, updated and expanded, 1978, pp. 260-261. The ideas developed here should be seen as a tribute to Fieschi's outstanding article.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
33. [www.tfmdistribution.com/film/lapprenti\\_49](http://www.tfmdistribution.com/film/lapprenti_49), interview conducted by Claire Vassé (consulted on 5 February 2010).
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Pierre Hébert, *L'Ange et l'Automate*, Montreal, Les 400 coups, 1999, p. 46.
37. Johan van der Keuken, *Aventures d'un regard*, op. cit., p. 33 [emphasis added by van der Keuken].
38. One of Ameur-Zaïmeche's plans is to fulfil the dream of the immigrant workers in *DERNIER MAQUIS*, who want to buy a truck and take it to Africa so that they can make a living from transportation. This trip would represent both the men's actual journey and the fictional arena invented by the filmmaker.
39. In his autobiography *Nous ne sommes pas d'ici* (Grasset, 2009), Michel Le Bris attributes this expression to the writer Bruce Chatwin (p. 292).

## 4. Acting cinema

1. 'L'écran Pollock 1: à point nommé' and 'L'écran Pollock 2: dans l'après-coup', excerpts from a conference given by Hubert Damisch on 28 February 2005 at the Centre Pompidou within the framework of the series by *La Revue parlée*, 'Comme une histoire de l'art'. The texts were published in *Les Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, no. 94, winter 2005-2006, pp. 76-87 and reprinted in Hubert Damisch, *Ciné fil*, Paris, Seuil, coll. La librairie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, 2008, pp. 59-84.
2. *Ciné fil*, op. cit., p. 81.
3. Ray Carney, *The Films of John Cassavetes. Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 65, cited in Hubert Damisch, *Ciné fil*, op. cit., p. 81.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 192.
5. Jean-Louis Comolli, 'Dos-à-dos', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 205, October 1968, pp. 37-38.
6. Vincent Amiel, *Le Corps au cinéma, Keaton, Bresson, Cassavetes*, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 57.
7. John Cassavetes, *Autoportraits*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1992, p. 175.
8. *Idem.*

9. Gérard Genette, *L'œuvre de l'art 1: immanence et transcendance*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 71.
10. *The Time-Image*, op. cit., p. 172.
11. Michel Guérin, *Philosophie du geste*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1995, p. 15.
12. 'Danse contemporaine: les formes de la radicalité', in *Approche philosophique du geste dansé: de l'improvisation à la performance*, Anne Boissière and Catherine Kintzler (eds.), Presses universitaires du Septentrion, Université de Lille 3, 2006, p. 187.
13. Johan van der Keuken, *Aventures d'un regard*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1998, p. 57.
14. The work of Noshka van der Lely is outstanding, and her ability to follow van der Keuken's unpredictable movements, boom in hand, while simultaneously checking through her headset the sound quality of the shot, are quite exceptional. In collective improvisation, it is vital to ensure the complicity and complementarity of all the protagonists.
15. Michel Guérin, *Philosophie du geste*, op. cit., p. 20.
16. Johan van der Keuken, *Aventures d'un regard*, op. cit., p. 23.
17. The fact that van der Keuken was a photographer obviously contributed to his quick-fire reactions and ability to understand in the moment the wealth of composition of an image. Hans Namuth and Bert Stern, to whom we shall be returning, were also renowned photographers and the sharpness of their documentary perception owes much to this early training.
18. Report written by Leacock on 30 June 1965 for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Leacock had a rather old-fashioned view of the relationship between cinema and theatre, as we shall see, as the latter played a crucial role in the new mechanics of improvisation.
19. See the photographs by Sam and Larry Shaw in John Cassavetes, *Autoportraits*, op. cit.
20. A similar device to that used by Rouch in *LES MAÎTRES FOUS* and *MOI, UN NOIR*.
21. See [chapter 3](#), note 4.
22. Jacques Lourcelles, article entitled 'Du côté d'Orouët', in *Dictionnaire du cinéma*, Paris, Robert Laffont, 1992, p. 440.
23. Frédéric Pouillaude entitled his contribution to *Approche philosophique du geste dansé* (op. cit.) 'Vouloir l'involontaire, répéter l'irrépérable', p. 145.
24. Christiane Vollaire, 'Danse contemporaine: les formes de la radicalité', in *Approche philosophique du geste dansé*, op. cit., p. 198.
25. This inevitably conjures up the famous sequence in *LOVE STREAMS* (John Cassavetes, 1983) in which Sarah (Gena Rowlands) gives her brother Robert (John Cassavetes) what amounts to a zoo: the animals create havoc by rapidly taking over not only the garden but the house, to the accompaniment of a huge storm.
26. Cited by Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du cinéma. Émotions, hypnoses, animalités*, Paris, P.O.L./Trafic, 2009, p. 551.
27. To illustrate this documentary dimension in Rozier's work, one only needs to compare his second short feature, *Blue Jeans* (1958) with a film such as Marcel Carné's *LES TRICHEURS*, released that same year, a film theoretically 'about youth', in which the jazz acts as a guarantee for a totally factitious 'modernity'.
28. Collardey creates a number of other situations of play: the board game in Paul's kitchen, the pillow fight in the boarding school, Matthieu's arduous guitar practice.

29. One should recall that the shoot had to be organised around Mathieu's internship on Paul's farm: one week a month for an entire school year.
30. To Claire Denis, this concrete relationship with music was of seminal importance: 'The films start out with a music that I do my best to communicate to the actors with whom I am working but also to Agnès Godard behind the camera. Whenever possible, we use playback. Or else we listen to the music before shooting [...]. I try to ensure that we share a music, a sound, and not simply ideas. When everything goes well, we come together physically in the music. The film grows out of that and its physical dimension stems to a great extent from the music', 'Le jazz, pour penser le cinéma: entretien avec Claire Denis', *Jazz Magazine*, no. 521, December 2001, reprinted in Gilles Mouëllic, *Jazz et Cinéma. Paroles de cinéastes*, Paris, Seguiet-Archimbaud, 2006, p. 90.
31. 'Le jazz, pour penser le cinéma: entretien avec Claire Denis', *ibid.*, pp. 91-92.
32. A dancer and choreographer, Bernard Montet has been director of the Centre choréographique de Tours since 2003.
33. Daniel Sibony, 'Trans-en-danse ou la danse comme excès', in *La Part de l'Œil*, no. 24, 2009, under the section 'Ce qui fait danse: de la plasticité à la performance', p. 209.
34. *Idem.*
35. Christiane Vollaire, 'Danse contemporaine: les formes de la radicalité', in *Approches philosophiques du geste dansé*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.
36. Daniel Sibony, 'Trans-en-danse...', *op. cit.*, p. 209.
37. *John Cassavetes*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1989, p. 59.
38. *Aventures d'un regard*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
39. *John Cassavetes*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
40. Frédéric Pouillaude, 'Vouloir l'involontaire, répéter l'irrépérable', *Approche philosophique du geste dansé* (*op. cit.*), p. 154.
41. Daniel Sibony, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
42. L'Harmattan, coll. L'art en bref, 2002.
43. *Cinéma et sculpture. Un aspect de la modernité des années 60*, L'Harmattan, coll. L'art en bref, 2002, p. 22.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.
45. *Voyage en Italie de Roberto Rossellini*, Crisnée, Yellow Now, coll. Long Métrage, 1990.
46. The comments of George Sanders and Maria Mauban, the French actress who plays Marie Castelli, are edifying in this respect (see Alain Bergala, *Voyage en Italie*, *op. cit.*).
47. In *VOYAGE EN ITALIE*, Katherine and Alex go to Naples to sell a family home. In *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, Marie and Nicolas return to Paris to attend their friends' wedding.
48. This device could be considered a radicalisation of the experiment carried out in Suwa's second film, *M / OTHER* (1999), in which the director used a large number of meticulously composed static shots with the two actors improvising both dialogue and movement.
49. 'Son et lumière: entretien avec Caroline Champetier and Jean-Claude Laureux', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 609, February 2006, p. 15.
50. *Idem.*
51. The HD Varicam camera used for the long shots was then replaced by a DVX 100, which allowed for mobility while also changing the nature of the image.

52. The shoot therefore followed the events in sequence, a very rare occurrence when the crew are due to return to the same location, as is the case here.
53. VOYAGE EN ITALIE, op. cit., p. 34.
54. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, Daniel Slager (trans.), New York, Archipelago Books, 2004, p. 46.
55. Ibid., p. 44.
56. Ève was executed in 1881 with Anna Abruzzezzi acting as model. Rodin was to admit later in his conversations with Dujardin-Beaumetz: 'I could see the changes in my model but did not grasp the reason. I modified my profiles, naively following the successive transformations in her expanding shape. One day I learned that she was pregnant; everything became clear. Her stomach had only changed imperceptibly in profile, but one can see my faithful rendition of nature in the muscles of her loins and sides [...]. It had never crossed my mind that in order to portray Ève I would need to call on a pregnant woman; it was most fortuitous and contributed a great deal toward forging the figure's character. Soon, however, my model, who had grown more sensitive, found the studio too cold; she started coming less regularly and finally stopped all together. This explains why my Ève is not finished' (Auguste Rodin, *Éclairs de pensée. Écrits et entretiens*, Paris, Éditions du Sandre, 2008, p. 141).
57. Leo Steinberg, 'Rodin', *Other Criteria. Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 323.
58. Caroline Champetier, 'Sur le filmage, notes et propositions avant tournage', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 609, op. cit., p. 17.
59. Boppers and fans of free jazz also inspired another improvising filmmaker: John Cassavetes, particularly in *FACES* (1968).
60. Michel-Claude Jalard, *Le jazz est-il encore possible?*, Marseille, Parenthèses, 1986, p. 121.
61. Alain Bergala, *Voyage en Italie*, op. cit., pp. 60-61.
62. Once again one is reminded of Godard, who breathed life into these hands by Rodin in the encounter between the man (Alain Delon) and the woman (Domiziana Giordano) in *NOUVELLE VAGUE* (1990).
63. *L'Improvisation. Ordres et désordres*, texts compiled by Alexandre Pierrepont and Yannick Séité, *Textuel*, no. 60, p. 50.
64. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, op. cit., p. 385.
65. This sentence, cited by Léonce Bénédicte in the preface to the 1921 edition (Armand Colin) of Rodin's work *Les Cathédrales de France*, irresistibly conjures up Thelonious Monk's improvisation on *The Man I Love* (Gershwin), recorded in 1954 for the album *Miles Davis and the Modern Jazz Giants*. Monk keeps stressing the opening notes of the theme, as though he wanted to 'wear them out' before being swallowed up into the chord chart. It is only thanks to the (belated) help of Miles Davis, following long seconds of trial and error, that he manages to find his way back onto his harmonic path. Nevertheless, this was the version chosen by both men to feature on the album: the "ruin" of *The Man I Love* turns out to be even more beautiful than *The Man I Love* itself.
66. Caroline Champetier ([http://sites.radiofrance.fr/chaines/franceculture2/dossiers/2006couple\\_parfait/](http://sites.radiofrance.fr/chaines/franceculture2/dossiers/2006couple_parfait/)), consulted on 1 February 2010. Charles Mingus also uses the circle figure to define 'rotary perception', in other words the layout of the instrumentalists in collective improvisation: 'If you get a mental picture of the beat

existing within a circle you're more free to improvise. [...] each guy can play his notes anywhere in that circle and it gives him a feeling he has more space. The notes fall anywhere inside the circle but the original feeling for the beat isn't changed. If one in the group loses confidence, somebody hits the beat again. The pulse is inside you. When you're playing with musicians who think this way you can do anything. Anybody can stop and let the others go on. It's called strolling' (Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog: His World as Composed by Mingus*, Vintage Books, paperback edition, 1991, pp. 350-351, 1<sup>st</sup> edition Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

67. Jacques Doillon in *Le cinéma de Nobuhiro Suwa*, a series of interviews with the Japanese director's cast and crew. The series, directed and edited by Yannis Polonaci, forms part of the DVD bonuses of *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*, released in 2006 by CTV International. Incidentally, Doillon himself makes a brief appearance in *UN COUPLE PARFAIT*.
68. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, op. cit., p. 395.
69. The cellist Didier Petit goes as far as to claim that 'Improvisation invents nothing, and invention has never been its founding principle, its *raison d'être* or its aim, if one can put it that way. It is more a case of transposing, transforming, transfiguring our memory in real time' ('Inflexion', in *In Situ*, no. 9, cited by Alexandre Pierrepont, 'Jeux d'improvisation, jeux de construction', in *Textuel*, no. 60, op. cit., p. 27).

## 5. The temptation of theatre

1. Gérard Genette, *L'Œuvre de l'art 1. Immanence et transcendance*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p. 73.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
3. Christian Béthune, *Le Jazz et l'Occident*, Paris, Klincksieck, coll. D'Esthétique, 2008, p. 153.
4. Julian Beck, *The Life of the Theatre*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1972, no. 45, n. pag.
5. Judith Malina, cited in Pierre Biner, *The Living Theatre*, New York, Horizon Press, 1972 (author's translation), p. 48.
6. 'For Judith (Malina), the play moves like a pendulum between two liberating forces – jazz and drugs' wrote Pierre Biner in *The Life of the Theatre*, op. cit., p. 47.
7. *L'Improvisation*, Paris, Vrin, 1980, p. 111.
8. Gilles Deleuze, Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007 (revised edition), Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (trans.), p. 36. First English edition © The Athlone Press, 1987.
9. For more details on this production, see Pierre Biner, *The Living Theatre*, op. cit., pp. 54-55.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
11. In 1964, she directed *The Cool World*, with music by pianist Mal Waldron. Much later she devoted two films to saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman: *Ornette Coleman, A Jazz Video Game* (1984) and *Ornette: Made in America* (1985).

12. A useful source for understanding the convergences between these two art forms are the texts contained in *Conférences du collège d'histoire de l'art cinématographique*, no. 3, 'Le théâtre dans le cinéma', Paris, Cinémathèque française-Musée du cinéma, winter 1992-1993.
13. Cassavetes and Shirley Clarke were part of the same group of young New York filmmakers, who were at their most active at the dawn of the 1960s. The 16 mm camera Cassavetes used on *SHADOWS* was lent to him by Clarke.
14. In 'Rome is Burning' (1994), the episode devoted to Shirley Clarke in *Cinéma, de notre temps* by André S. Labarthe and Janine Bazin, one sees Rivette sitting in a corner of the poky room that was being used for the shoot. Much later Labarthe, on the subject of *L'AMOUR FOU*, would talk about 'an illumination that like any flash of lightning had been prepared by a host of experiences, readings, visits to exhibitions, theaters, concerts, films, Antonioni, Rouch, Shirley Clarke' (in Hélène Frappat, *Jacques Rivette, secret compris*, Paris, *Cahiers du cinéma*, coll. Auteurs, 2001, p. 135).
15. Jacques Aumont, 'Renoir le patron, Rivette le passeur', in *Conférences du collège d'histoire de l'art cinématographique*, no. 3, op. cit., p. 219.
16. Bernard Cohn, 'Entretien sur *L'Amour fou*, avec Jacques Rivette', *Positif*, no. 104, April 1969, p. 36.
17. Labarthe holds a string of interviews, for instance, with the actresses and with Kalfon, who is directing the play.
18. 'Théâtre et Cinéma', text published in *Esprit*, in June and July-August 1951, reprinted in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? II. Le cinéma et les autres arts*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1959, and again in 1985, with some of the main texts from the original four-volume edition. The page references are those of the 1959 edition, p. 78 in this case.
19. This does not mean it was a simple recording: the role of the montage remained paramount, as we shall be seeing shortly.
20. Marc Chevrie, 'Mais le lendemain matin...', in *Jacques Rivette. La règle du jeu*, Sergio Toffetti and Jean Esselinck (eds.), Centre culturel français de Turin-Museo nazionale del cinema di Torino, undated, p. 135.
21. 'Théâtre et Cinéma', op. cit., p. 90.
22. 'Mesure pour mesure: théâtre et cinéma chez Jacques Rivette', in *Études cinématographiques*, vol. 63, 'Jacques Rivette, critique et cinéaste', Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues (ed.), 1998, p. 27.
23. During the 12.30 hours of his next film, *OUT ONE: NOLI ME TANGERE* (1970), Rivette experimented with the limits of filmed theatrical improvisation: he abandoned the initial text in favour of a storyline inspired by Honoré de Balzac's *Histoire des Treize*, and left the theatre company completely free to improvise, particularly in the context of their theatrical exercises, which he filmed with a hand-held camera.
24. 'Théâtre et Cinéma', op. cit., p. 77.
25. *John Cassavetes*, Paris, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1989, p. 17.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
27. 'L'expérience *Shadows*', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 119, May 1961, p. 9, cited by Thierry Jousse, op. cit., p. 10.
28. See the DVD bonus of *OPENING NIGHT*, from the John Cassavetes boxed set, Orly Films-DD productions, Paradis Distribution, 2008.
29. The actors' comments from the DVD bonus of *OPENING NIGHT* once again provide great insight.

30. Ibid.
31. Indeed, several of his films feature actual stages, which play a vital dramaturgical role. Apart from *OPENING NIGHT*, one could mention the striptease joint in *THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE* and the jazz clubs in *Too Late Blues* (1961).
32. The courtyard of the small palette manufacturing business in *DERNIER MAQUIS* is also laid out like a theatre set, with a camera positioned on the surrounding hillocks in order to record the events during the shoot.
33. Although the Actors Studio did not call on improvisation in the sense defended here, it did put a new slant on the actors' film performance by insisting on genuine collective commitment, modeled on the method of Stanislavski.
34. 'Entretien avec André S. Labarthe' by Nicolas Azalbert, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 656, May 2010, p. 57.
35. 'Théâtre et Cinéma', op. cit., p. 84.
36. Bazin defined *découpage* as 'a compromise between three possible analyses of reality: 1° a purely logical descriptive analysis (the murder weapon next to the corpse); 2° a psychological analysis within the film, in other words one that matches the point of view of one of the characters in the given situation (the possibly poisoned glass of milk that Ingrid Bergman has to drink in *Notorious*); 3° lastly, a psychological analysis corresponding to interest of the audience; an interest that may be either spontaneous or triggered by the director, precisely thanks to this analysis: the doorknob turning without the knowledge of the criminal, who thinks he is alone [...] ('Théâtre et Cinéma', op. cit., pp. 85-86).
37. 'Théâtre et Cinéma', op. cit., p. 86. *LADY IN THE LAKE* (1947) is a film by Robert Montgomery in which everything is seen through the eyes of the detective Marlowe, except the prologue and epilogue.
38. *L'Improvisation*, op. cit., p. 148.
39. 'Théâtre et Cinéma', op. cit., p. 103.
40. Jean-Louis Comolli, *Voir et Pouvoir. L'innocence perdue: cinéma, télévision, fiction, documentaire*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 2004, p. 139.
41. *Aventures d'un regard*, op. cit., p. 12.
42. Ibid., p. 14.
43. 'Une partie de colin-maillard', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 346, April 1983, p. 51.
44. 'Rozière à son rythme', in Emmanuel Burdeau (ed.), *Jacques Rozier, le funambule*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, coll. Auteurs, p. 152.

## 6. The rules of the game

1. Allow me to draw attention here to my article entitled 'La guitare seule', which appeared in the 69<sup>th</sup> issue (spring 2009) of the review *Trafic*.
2. Faced with the threat from *desperados* claiming to be members of Radical Islam in order to attack villages, the local population organised nightly barricades. In the film the community is simply reproducing situations experienced first-hand only months earlier. The danger had still not completely disappeared by the time of the shoot, which was consequently quite stressful.

3. See *La Règle du jeu. Scénario original de Jean Renoir*, a critical edition devised, introduced and annotated by Olivier Curchod and Christopher Faulkner, Paris, Nathan Cinéma, 1999, pp. 145-146. In the scene described here, only the dialogues were provided, with no indications as to the mise-en-scène.
4. This could be seen as a further example of Jacques Rivette's famous maxim, which claims that every film is a documentary of its own shoot.
5. 'Entretien avec Al Ruban', in Thierry Jousse, *John Cassavetes*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1989, p. 144. We have already referred to the final sequence in OPENING NIGHT, in which Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands improvise at length on the theatre set and in which Cassavetes can be seen several times quite obviously directing his partner.
6. Idem.
7. John Cassavetes, *Autoportraits*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1992, p. 24.
8. *John Cassavetes*, op. cit., p. 32.
9. Among the filmmakers claiming to have been directly inspired by Cassavetes is Jean-François Stévenin, who took on the role of director and lynchpin actor in his own three films. In PASSE MONTAGNE (1978), DOUBLE MESSIEURS (1986) and MISCHKA (2001), Stévenin invented the mise-en-scène on set, constantly orienting the improvisations by his almost uninterrupted and crucial presence in each sequence.
10. *John Cassavetes*, op. cit., p. 85.
11. This refers to the boxed set edition by Orly Films-DD productions and its bonus, 'Conversation with Ben Gazzara and Al Ruban'.
12. Comment by Pierre-André Boutang, in the documentary *Souvenirs autour de Jean-Daniel Pollet*, directed by Noël Simsolo in 2005 for the DVD bonus of L'ACROBATE.
13. 'Vers le sud, de Johan van der Keuken', article published in *Libération* on 2 March 1982 and reprinted in Serge Daney, *Cinéjournal*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1986, p. 88.
14. In an interview devoted to his film TOURNÉE, Mathieu Amalric also talked about the possibilities for improvisation opened up by the dual actor/director role: 'In the end I played the role myself, although the decision was only made three weeks before the shoot. This turned out to be my saving grace, because in the train scenes for instance, I would say to myself, there's no point, there's nothing worth acting here, no scene, just the pleasure of filming languorous women. I wanted action, some kind of problem. So I grabbed my phone and started yelling down it like a producer who's just lost a theatre. The girls, who'd had no warning, got straight into the part, like actresses. That impulse ultimately determined the whole shoot', 'Tourner TOURNÉE: entretien avec Mathieu Amalric' by Jean-Philippe Tessé, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 657, June 2010, p. 36.
15. At the end of M/OTHER, Tomokazu Miura and Makiko Watanabe are credited as lead actors but also with writing the dialogue; they then reappear, with Nobuhiro Suwa this time, as scriptwriters. The way Suwa hands over these attributions to his actors is unprecedented and gives us an insight into his method.
16. As François Bégaudeau so aptly put it in 'Todeschini monté en puissance', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 609, February 2006, p. 10.
17. The wedding sequence, particularly the part when all the protagonists start looking for their car keys, provides a perfect example of this 'saturation of the shot by the

performance': the rather futile agitation that suddenly runs through the little community shows the limits of collective improvisation when it lacks any 'inside' direction.

18. 'Comme des ruisseaux vers le fleuve', interview with Nobuhiro Suwa and Hippolyte Girardot by Jean-Michel Frodon and Charlotte Garson, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 646, June 2009, p. 23.
19. This is used, for want of a better term, in the sense of *non professional*, in conjunction with its other meaning, which attenuates its pejorative connotation: someone who loves, seeks or cultivates certain things.
20. 'Conversation with Ben Gazzara and Al Ruban', bonus to the DVD edition of *THE KILLING OF A CHINESE BOOKIE*, op. cit.
21. *Idem*.
22. Who is also her mother in real life.
23. Cassavetes expressed this in his own words: 'There's no such thing as a 'good actor'. What does exist, on the other hand, is a continuation of life' (*Autoportraits*, op. cit., p. 27). By making inexperienced and professional actors perform together, Cassavetes was trying in a way to contaminate the performance of the latter by the life of the former.
24. The comments of the black and white students, which often seem awkward in the context of collective improvisation, offer great insight into the complex relationship between the two communities, and form the cornerstone of Rouch's whole project.
25. *John Cassavetes*, op. cit., p. 31.
26. The special case of the director-cum-actor bears out this idea: in a performance context, he remains the director, and as such is not only involved in the scene, acting as an objective observer, but is also a 'foreign body'.
27. See his work *De Mozart à Beethoven: essai sur la notion de profondeur en musique*, Arles, Actes Sud, 1996.
28. Rohmer never hesitates either in juxtaposing highly experienced actors and debutants; a special study could be made in *LE GENOU DE CLAIRE*, for example, in which Jean-Claude Brialy plays the lead opposite beginners Béatrice Romand and Laurence de Monaghan. The director succeeds brilliantly in making the most of this encounter, on which most of the script is based.
29. We will only take the example of the actresses here, as they play such a dominant role in Rohmer's cinema, and particularly in *LE RAYON VERT* and *QUATRE AVENTURES DE REINETTE ET MIRABELLE*.
30. Rohmer often used a small tape recorder to capture snippets of conversation, readings or brief improvisations, so that he could get as near to reality as possible when the time came to devise the characters.
31. 'De la façon la plus simple. Entretien avec Éric Rohmer' by Alain Bergala and Laure Gardette, in *Éric Rohmer: "Tout est fortuit sauf le hasard"*, Studio 43-MJC de Dunkerque, 1992, p. 165 [emphasis added].
32. 'Although Rossellini liked science, in no way was he a scientist, he enjoyed improvising too. It was that side of him that we liked', 'Entretien avec Éric Rohmer' by Aldo Tassone, in *Éric Rohmer*, Milan, Fabbri Editori, 1988, p. 17.
33. 'Entretien avec Arielle Dombasle' by Stéphane Delorme et Jean-Philippe Tessé, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 653, February 2010, p. 26.

34. 'Qui vivra verra: jalons éparés pour une petite histoire du cinéma rohmérien', in *Éric Rohmer: "Tout est fortuit sauf le hasard"*, op. cit., p. 11.
35. 'Entretien avec Marie Rivière' by Jean-Sébastien Chauvin, *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 653, February 2010, p. 35.
36. 'Entretien avec Éric Rohmer' by Aldo Tassone, op. cit., p. 24.
37. Serge Daney, 'Actualité de Rohmer', in *Éric Rohmer*, op. cit., p. 34.
38. Stéphane Lévy-Klein and Olivier Eyquem, 'Trois rencontres avec Maurice Pialat' (III), *Positif*, no. 159, May 1974, p. 13.
39. *I'm Almost Not Crazy: John Cassavetes, the Man and His Work*, 1984, 60 mn.

## 7. Filming jazz

1. This came about as a result of racial segregation.
2. The director drew his inspiration from formal research, already tried and tested in Fernand Léger's *BALLET MÉCANIQUE* (1924), to which he had actively contributed.
3. See the text by Daniel Soutif in particular, 'Harlem-Paris et retour: le Jazz Age de l'Amérique à l'Europe', in the exhibition catalogue *Le Siècle du jazz*, Paris, Musée du Quai Branly-Skira-Flammarion, 2009, pp. 53-75.
4. The soundies, which reached the height of their popularity between 1940 and 1947, were the forerunners of today's clips, featuring musical or comedy acts, sometimes including boy and girl dancers, alongside a large number of jazz musicians: 'Soundies was the term given to those short three-minute films and the playback system was called Panoram. For only ten cents, the public could watch a three-minute sequence from a 16 mm film, projected onto a mirror, which relayed the images onto a glass screen measuring forty-four by fifty-five centimeters. Each reel contained eight soundies, so consequently the public never knew what they were going to get, unless they inserted enough coins into the machine to see the whole film' (Krin Gabbard, 'Dix cents le film: le jazz dans les soundies', in *Le Siècle du jazz*, op. cit., p. 203.
5. No fewer than twelve musicians filled the screen in the ten-minute *JAMMIN' THE BLUES*: Harry Edison (trumpet), Lester Young (tenor saxophone), Illinois Jacquet (tenor saxophone), Barney Kessel (guitar), Marlowe Morris (piano), Garland Finney (piano), John Simmons (bass), Red Callender (bass), Sidney Catlett (drums), Jo Jones (drums), Mary Bryant (vocals) and dancer Archie Savage (who would turn up again much later as a singer in Pasolini's African notebooks). They performed *The Midnight Symphony*, *On the Sunny Side of the Street* and *Jammin' the Blues*.
6. Over the following decades, the cinema would pay tribute to its own jazzmen, notably in the form of technicolor biographies devoted to the Dorsey brothers (*THE FABULOUS DORSEYS*, Alfred E. Green, 1947), Glenn Miller (*THE GLENN MILLER STORY*, Anthony Mann, 1954), Benny Goodman (*THE BENNY GOODMAN STORY*, Valentine Davies, 1955) and drummer Gene Krupa (*THE GENE KRUPA STORY*, Don Weiss, 1959). These flattering portrayals were far more inspired by a rose-tinted Hollywood vision of jazz than by the grittier reality of Afro-American music.

7. 'Musiques noires pour films noirs', *Cahiers du cinéma*, special issue 'Musiques au cinéma', 1994, p. 93.
8. 95 mins, colour. The film was released in 1960 and is now available on DVD.
9. In *Le Champ jazzistique*, Marseille, Parenthèses, coll. Eupalines, 2002, p. 134.
10. 'Around about *New York Eye and Ear Control*' (1966), in *The Michael Snow Project, The Collected Writings of Michael Snow*, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier United Press, 1994, p. 24.
11. Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli, 'The eye keeps watch, the body listens (Filming free jazz)', in Franco La Polla (ed.), *All that Jazz: from New Orleans to Hollywood and Beyond*, Milano, Edizioni Olivares-Locarno International Film Festival, 2003, p. 65.
12. Dan Morgenstern, 'Jazz and Television: A Historical Survey', in *Jazz on Television*, New York, The Museum of Broadcasting, 1985, p. 8.
13. Franco Minganti, 'Documenting Jazz', in *All that Jazz: from New Orleans to Hollywood and Beyond*, op. cit., p. 200.
14. The programme is included in the DVD 'John Coltrane, *Impressions*', coll. Salt Peanuts, Modern Jazz on DVD.
15. *Le Jazz est-il encore possible?*, Marseille, Parenthèses, 1986, p. 82.
16. This virtual banishment from the shot is an involuntary mise-en-scène showing McCoy Tyner's reservations at that time in relation to the way Coltrane's music was evolving and his difficulty in finding his own place within the quartet.
17. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 155.
18. *Le Jazz est-il encore possible?*, op.cit., p. 91.
19. A few months later, following a concert at the Village (on 10 November), Ravi Shankar gave his personal take on this disquiet: 'The music was fantastic. I was much impressed, but one thing distressed me. There was a turbulence in the music that gave me a negative feeling at times, but I could not quite put my finger on the trouble [...]. Here was a creative person who had become a vegetarian, who was studying yoga and reading the *Bhagavad-Gita*, yet in whose music I still heard much turmoil. I could not understand it.' (1990 interview by Robert Palmer, reprinted in Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: his life and music*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1998, p. 274).
20. Johan van der Keuken, *Aventures d'un regard*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1998, p. 11.
21. 'Quatre jours à Ocoee; interview with Pascale Ferran by the author', *Jazz Magazine*, no. 513, March 2001, reprinted in Gilles Mouëllic, *Jazz et Cinéma. Paroles de cinéastes*, Paris, Séguier-Archimbaud, 2006, p. 112.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
25. In *Winter Garden*, the CD that was released a few months later, five out of thirteen numbers were entirely improvised. Their titles simply referred to the order in which they were recorded: *Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve*. The titles confirm that the eight improvisations recorded over the first few days came to nothing.
26. A few notable exceptions do exist, however: on his double album *Bitches Brew* (1969), Miles Davis recorded several hours of improvisation with his musicians and then reinvented the numbers alone during the montage. This process is very similar

to the relationship between performance and montage in the cinema, as analysed in the previous pages.

27. 'Quatre jours à Ocoee', interview with Pascale Ferran by the author, op. cit., p. 115.
28. Ibid., p. 113.
29. Ibid., p. 119.
30. 'Note d'intention. En forme de lettre au future coscénariste du film', in *Carnet d'un cinéaste*, supplement to *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 621, March 2007, pp. 4-5.

## Conclusion

1. *Le Jazz et l'Occident*, Paris, Klincksieck, coll. D'Esthétique, 2008, p. 212.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Fragments posthumes*, 1884-1885, fragment 37, 'Morale et physiologie', June-July 1885, in *Œuvres complètes*, G. Colli and M. Montinari edition. The present quotation was translated from the French.
3. Interview with Vincent Nordon, *Ça cinéma*, no. 14, 1978, p. 47.
4. Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Harun Farocki ou la dialectique des Lumières', in *Les Cahiers du musée national d'art moderne*, nos. 112-113, special issue 'Le cinéma surpris par les arts', summer-fall 2010, p. 174.
5. *On Contemporaneity*, video lecture, The European Graduate School, [www.egs.edu](http://www.egs.edu), 2007 [emphasis added].

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This bibliography collates the key references used in writing this study. It should be noted, however, that a considerable number of other articles and interviews also made valuable contributions to my research and analysis.

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