

Shadows

By Ray Carney

The film we refer to as “Shadows” exists in two significantly different versions. John Cassavetes filmed the first version, which thus counts as his actual “first film,” between March and May 1957 and, after eighteen months of editing that involved extensive dubbing to correct problems with the sound recording, screened the finished 78-minute print at a series of late-night screenings in New York’s Paris Theater in early December 1958. The screenings were well-attended, though the film was extremely poorly received. New York’s hippest and coolest were not delighted with Cassavetes’ depiction of them and their lives. Rather than flattering them with a vision of their iconoclasm and creativity the way “Pull My Daisy” would a year or two later, Cassavetes called attention to his characters’ emotional and imaginative problems. Every single character was flawed, foolish, or both. And even as the semi-comedy of the presentation took the sting out of the critique, it denied the characters the degree of self-importance with which the audience viewed themselves. Viewers laughed inappropriately, walked out before the screening was over, or made jokes about the “artsy-fartsy” photography.

Cassavetes decided to reshoot and re-edit large chunks of the film. With the help of screenwriter-friend Robert Alan Aurthur, he created a series of new scenes, and in early 1959 reassembled key members of the cast and crew to film 19 hours of new footage. The new scenes radically cut back on the interactions between Ben, Tom, and Dennis, greatly enlarged Lelia’s role, clarified the narrative by adding transitional material, and replaced some (but not all) of the unlicensed music. The “second version” of “Shadows” was created. It became the only “Shadows” people knew after the only copy of the “first version” was lost and presumed destroyed until the present author located it in an attic in 2003. (More



Rupert Crosse, Hugh Hurd and Lelia Goldoni. Courtesy The Criterion Collection.

information about the rediscovery is available at: <http://people.bu.edu/rcarney/discoveries/shadowsquest.shtml>.)

One of the most innovative aspects of both versions is the “distributed” nature of the narratives. The various characters live different lives and act out independent destinies, presented in separate scenes and sets of relationships. This was even more obvious in the first version, where Hugh’s, Ben’s, and Lelia’s stories were kept so separate for the first 45 minutes that most viewers were unaware they were siblings. Not only did Cassavetes jump from one storyline to another, he created a universe that allowed for genuinely different points of view and different emotional and moral relationships to experience. One of the most radical aspects of Cassavetes’ method is the way he kept changing the tone and mood to allow the viewer to have more than one emotional relationship to experiences even within a single scene.

Another innovative aspect of the presentation is that characters’ identities are *relational*. The process of collaborating with others to create your own identity is, in fact, what it is to be a character for Cassavetes. Personal identity is not inherent, essential, or predetermined, but brought into existence in performance. Characters don’t have “characters;” they are works-in-progress; they shape and re-shape their identities in their interactions with others. Rather than being a fixity, identity is a capacity—something that is gradual-

ly, provisionally, revisionarily composed and decomposed. That is the deep meaning of “Shadows” racial conceit, which Cassavetes told me that no one who wrote about the film seemed to understand. He said critics got hung up on the idea of a character being black or white, when the very point of the film was the fluidity of identity. “Shadows” is about the irresolution of its characters’ identities, an ontological sketchiness that can never be gotten beyond—not about replacing it with the false clarity of a racial typology. It is about identity as a temporal, provisional, forever-unfinished *process*—not as a completable *product*. As its title suggests, the characters in “Shadows” are only “shadows” of themselves until they bring themselves into existence in more substantial and meaningful ways.

The masterplot of “Shadows” is that in the course of the film the main characters have to recognize and leave behind the false, fictional roles in which they have cast themselves in order to discover their true needs and desires. It is one thing to fool others, but Lelia, Ben, Hugh, Rupert, and Tony, in different ways, are doing something much worse—fooling themselves about who they are, about what they need and want. They are trapped in states of confusion so deep they don’t even know they are confused until the damage has been done to others—and to themselves. In the final fifteen minutes, Cassavetes forces each of them into a state of breakdown to reveal the fallacy of their imaginative stances, in order to experience a possible breakthrough about who they *really* are as opposed to who they *think* they are or who they

want to be. Hugh and Rupert realize that their friendship is more important than their jobs and professional identities; Ben realizes that his coolness and cruising are not emotionally satisfying; Tony realizes that the wall between himself and Lelia is of his own creation; and Lelia realizes that her attempt to appear sophisticated and knowing betrays her real feelings. “Shadows” defines the territory all of Cassavetes’ subsequent work will explore and forces its characters to ask the same questions Cassavetes asked himself throughout his life: In a world where our identities are defined by our relations with others and relentlessly pressured by cultural forces outside ourselves: Who are we *really*? How do we find it out? And at what emotional and psychic cost?

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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