

## ***A Woman Under the Influence***

By Ray Carney

While most American films function in a “story-telling” mode, presenting generic, generalized, summary ideas about society and experience, John Cassavetes’ films were personal to a fault. Although “A Woman Under the Influence” became a lightning rod for second-wave feminist praise and criticism, on the assumption that Cassavetes was depicting the life of a “neglected, unappreciated housewife” or something of the sort, Mabel Longhetti was actually an artistic *self-portrait*—a portrait not of a kind of housewife Cassavetes had virtually no knowledge about or interest in, nor a portrait of his own wife Gena Rowlands, who does not resemble Mabel in any way, but of the filmmaker himself. As odd as it may sound, Mabel and her situation were Cassavetes’ representation of his own life and imaginative stance—with Gena Rowlands’s personality and attitudes being represented in the film, to the extent they are present at all, not by the character of Mabel but by her emotionally conservative and cautious husband Nick. Mabel was Cassavetes’ reflection on the pressures he felt he was subjected to not only by marriage but, more generally, by social conventions and expectations of what is and is not “normal” and “acceptable” behavior.

Cassavetes the man was at least as eccentric, idiosyncratic, and emotionally demanding, as frustrated by understandings of what was and was not regarded as “normal” behavior and expression, and as ready to deviate from and flaunt social conventions as his protagonist is at her most extreme. In the course of his life he had built an entire personal philosophy around the supreme importance of non-conformity and unfettered emotional expression. These were more than ideas to Cassavetes; they were his entire way of being. Since childhood he had functioned as an emotional, imaginative, and social outsider in most situations he found himself in—first as an attention-deficit, hyperactive, non-English-speaking, eight-year-old Greek immigrant who couldn’t sit still in school or keep his attention focused on his work; then as a middle-school



*Gena Rowlands. Courtesy the Museum of Modern Art..*

and high-school student who compensated for his academic deficiencies by functioning as a joke-telling, order-disrupting class-clown and showoff to his shocked and admiring classmates; and finally and most importantly as an adult possessed by unpredictable, uncontrollable extreme mood swings in a time before manic-depression was understood and accepted as a clinical diagnosis for his condition. In both his manic and depressive states, Cassavetes “misbehaved” performatively, emotionally, verbally, socially, and sexually, to a degree that stretches the limits of plausibility for anyone not familiar with the heights and depths of serious manic-depressive illness—astonishing and inspiring his friends with his bravado and terrifying his enemies (and his loved ones) with the rages fueled by the massive consumption of alcohol he used to self-medicate his mood swings. *That*—and not the feminist movement, sympathy with the loneliness of a stay-at-home mother, or the predicament of a wife married to a man who doesn’t understand her—is Mabel’s origin story. For anyone familiar with Cassavetes’ own views and behavior, there is not a moment’s doubt that Mabel is a gender-changed self-portrait of her creator—just as for anyone familiar with the dynamics of Cassavetes’ marriage to Gena Rowlands, it is equally clear that Nick, particularly with respect to his emotional conservatism and fear of scandal, is a gender-changed portrait of Rowlands, as seen from Cassavetes’ viewpoint.

For those reasons, it is probably not surprising that “A Woman Under the Influence” confused—and sharply divided—representatives of the burgeoning “women’s movement.” A number of the film’s advocates defended Gena Rowlands’s performance as a deeply insightful portrait of a mistreated housewife, while a larger number of detractors argued, in opposite directions, either that Cassavetes’ vision of Mabel was “unrealistic” and that she was “too extreme” or “too crazy” to identify with; or, in an opposite vein, that she was too cautious, conservative, and traditional, insofar as she didn’t assert a free and independent identity beyond the confines of marriage, family, and motherhood. In a decade when Jane Fonda, Ellen Burstyn, Faye Dunaway, Glenda Jackson, Sally Field, and Jill Clayburgh were offering entirely positive—and eminently sane, strong, and emotionally stable “role models”—Mabel’s emotional extremity, her vulnerability, her desperate quest to be loved and accepted, and her commitment to motherhood and wifeness as anchor points in her identity were frowned on. She was what we would now call “politically incorrect.” In fact, even many of the film’s most ardent admirers admitted privately that they could hardly bear to watch her. She was emotionally too exposed, too needy, in too much pain and anguish (look again at the “I have five points” scene if there is any doubt about what they are referring to) and—truth to

tell, as a few of the more intellectually honest feminist fans of the film admitted, but only in private—too close to aspects of themselves they recognized but were embarrassed by and wanted to deny. Cassavetes had done the same thing in the film he did throughout much of his life; he had said things he was not supposed to say, revealed emotional facts he should not have revealed, violated understandings about what was and was not “acceptable” to say and do. Just like Mabel. One more demonstration of his deep psychic and emotional connection with her.

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

*Ray Carney teaches at Boston University. He is the author of fifteen books translated into a dozen languages. He conducted a series of “Rosebud” conversations with Cassavetes before his death, in which the filmmaker revealed unknown information and gave him tens of thousands of pages of un-published fiction, drama, and film material. He is currently completing two books: Masterworks of Independent Film and a radical re-evaluation of the work of Robert Bresson. More information is available at: <http://people.bu.edu/rcarney/aboutrc/bio.shtml>.*