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HIST-LIT 90GM

9 May 2025

“I Want to Be Capable”: Feminist Defiance in Cassavetes’ *Opening Night*

In 1970s American cinema, few filmmakers were as resistant to commercial conventions as John Cassavetes. Though the New Hollywood movement was redefining mainstream cinema with gritty portraits of male antiheroes grappling with violence, urban decay, and psychological trauma, women on screen were often relegated to symbolic roles—as victims, muses, or moral casualties of a changing era. At the same time, the United States was embroiled in the second wave of feminism and the intensifying conservative backlash. Vocal figures like Phyllis Schlafly warned that feminism would “reengineer” the family structure and destroy traditional gender roles. Against this ideological battleground, Cassavetes’ 1977 film *Opening Night* stands out—placing a woman not just at the center of a narrative, but in the position of dismantling it.

The film follows Myrtle Gordon, an aging stage actress whose refusal to perform her assigned role becomes a mode of resistance to the cultural narratives that diminish women as they age. Through scenes of Myrtle’s mental degradation—clashes with authority, ghostly visions, and final improvisation—Cassavetes dramatizes how women are boxed into roles that strip them of complexity and autonomy. *Opening Night* critiques the societal scripts that dictate femininity, aging, and celebrity—suggesting that women on the margin of these ideals are pathologized or erased. Cassavetes offers an alternative through Myrtle’s resistance: a generative space for disruption, self-authorship, and radical presence on one’s own terms.

To fully establish the stakes of Myrtle's defiance, *Opening Night* must be situated within the broader cultural landscape of 1970s America. The film was released in the wake of two landmark victories for second-wave feminists: the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1972 and the protection of abortion via *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. However, this was also a moment marked with fierce backlash. In a pamphlet titled "What's Wrong with 'Equal Rights' for Women?," Phyllis Schlafly wrote:

Our respect for the family as the basic unity of society...is the greatest single achievement in the entire history of women's rights. It assures a woman the most precious and important right of all—the right to keep her own baby and to be supported and protected in the enjoyment of watching her baby grow and develop.

Schlafly's antifeminism exemplifies what historian Robert O. Self calls "breadwinner conservatism," an ideology that sought to cement the heterosexual, male-breadwinner nuclear family structure as the natural foundation of American life (276). In this context, feminism was blamed for destabilizing the social order and threatening domesticity, especially for the white middle class. Moreover, it was viewed as a danger to the very thread of America's moral fabric. "For many Americans in the seventies, family and the place of women in society were so sacred that questioning them produced a prodigious political backlash, on a scale nearly equivalent to the backlash against the black freedom movement" (Self 278). *Opening Night* enters this tense terrain with its own vision: Myrtle's refusal to conform is more than personal—it is a challenge to the gendered expectations that dictate the cultural status quo.

Opening Night centers around a successful fictional actress, Myrtle Gordon (Gena Rowlands), who is the lead in a new play called *The Second Woman*. From the start of the film, Myrtle's resistance is not directed at a person—but a script. She plays Virginia, a character she

utterly detests, written by the 65-year-old playwright Sarah Goode (Joan Blondell), who is a prominent presence in the stage production. In Myrtle's eyes, Sarah has reduced her middle-aged protagonist to a bitter, helpless figure defined by her age and romantic failures. Virginia's life is punctuated by arguments, abuse, and self-deprecation. *Opening Night* builds dramatic irony by aligning the audience somewhat with Sarah, letting us see what Myrtle refuses to accept: she increasingly resembles the character she so vehemently resists. At its heart, *The Second Woman* is a play about aging. In the play's first scene we meet Myrtle's costar and ex-lover Maurice Aarons (played by Cassavetes himself). Aarons' character, a photographer, declares, "I'm giving up older people. Can't photograph them without their clothes on." This line, although humorous, encapsulates the theme of the play and the cultural logic that devalues women as they age. The insecure Myrtle seeks constant reassurance from the play's director, Manny Victor (Ben Gazzara), but even the wolfish Manny can't provide her solace. "You're not a woman to me anymore," Manny says to Myrtle. "You're a professional." His words echo the trap that women face: to be competent is to be desexualized and to be independent is to be unfeminine.

The Second Woman is in previews in New Haven before its subsequent Broadway run. One night, after a performance, Myrtle is signing autographs and encounters a fanatic teenage girl named Nancy. Myrtle gets into her limousine and Nancy, running after her into the street, gets struck by another car and killed. This incident spurs Myrtle into psychological decline and she begins acting out. Over the following series of rehearsals and shows, she makes up lines, breaks the fourth wall, and even collapses mid-scene. Though Myrtle's reactions to the part are rash and erratic, her retaliation can be understood as a deliberate refusal to embody a narrative she finds demeaning. Sarah explains to Myrtle: "This woman you're playing is as helpless as you are, and as helpless as I am. She has no weapons. She wants to fall in love, but her time has

passed. It's too late. It's as simple as that." Myrtle's response is angry and desperate but also determined and hope-seeking—resisting a script that defines women by decline.

In her defiance, Myrtle aligns herself with the titular protagonist of Barbara Loden's *Wanda* (1970), another woman who resists social margins by withdrawing from the roles she is expected to play. As Anna Backman Rogers writes in *Women and New Hollywood*, "...*Wanda* does not leave the viewer with any sense of comfort or relief. The film refuses to attenuate the pain of this woman's existence" (169). Interestingly, this "radically negative feminist aesthetic"—without any resolution or uplift—actually falls more in line with Sarah's script, which paints its protagonist as hopeless. Nevertheless, we are never able to fully dissect the significance of Sarah's play as we follow Myrtle's endless tirade against it.

Myrtle's own pain, like Wanda's, is unrelieved for the majority of the film. She does not achieve any traditional sense of redemption or self-actualization. Her resistance to Virginia is also a resistance to the social structures that make such roles appear inevitable. "Wanda is a woman who refuses to stay on the past set out for her; as such, contemporary critics were right to understand that particular choice as being at the heart of Loden's burgeoning feminist politics" (Backman Rogers 178). *Opening Night* adopts a similar form of feminism: Myrtle's deterioration is something more profound than a loss of control—it is an innate protest and performance of refusal to the supposed erasure that awaits aging women. While Wanda became "a seemingly unsympathetic figure for contemporary critics," Cassavetes allows Myrtle much more visibility and dialogue, thus transforming her transgressions into defiant agency and authorship—something admired by certain characters within the film and even more so by the audience (Backman Rogers 178).

Myrtle's resentment comes to the fore in a pivotal scene when she finally speaks to Sarah one-on-one (52:33). Sarah begins by asking Myrtle how old she is—a question Myrtle repeatedly dodges. Though Sarah has a more comfortable relationship with her age, we get the sense that she has not completely let go of her pretending either: She wears heavy makeup, false eyelashes, and her hair is impeccably styled. The conversation is filmed in a classic shot-reverse-shot format, but every so often, there is a close-up of Myrtle, making visible every exasperated expression. In this scene, Myrtle attempts to rationalize her dissatisfaction. She explains that she is not yet Sarah's age and should not be playing a woman so much older than herself. Her tone is very accusatory, she points her cigarette-wielding fingers at Sarah, and her blue-eyed gaze is menacing. Here, she presents her ethos: "I'm looking for a way to play this part where age doesn't make any difference. Age isn't interesting. Age is depressing. Age is dull." However, we get the sense that age does make a difference. For Myrtle to be this distressed about the play shows her internal struggle with being an aging woman, but especially an aging actress. She thinks that she will be relegated to playing the "grandmother" if she goes through with this part. Her distress signals the very real stakes of her career and thus becomes an existential qualm. Accepting this role, to Myrtle, sends her down the road to cultural invisibility. Therefore, her resistance becomes an attempt to carve out space for a different narrative—one in which age does not equal diminishment and erasure.

This internal struggle cannot be solved through dialogue alone. Instead, in a horror-like manner, the ghost of Nancy appears several times throughout the film—an uncanny visual motif that feels almost out-of-place with Cassavetes' naturalistic style. Yet this spectral intrusion serves a crucial symbolic function: Nancy is the physical manifestation of Myrtle's internalized fear of aging and obsolescence. In a society that idolizes female beauty, but mostly in its ideal form of

youth, Nancy haunts Myrtle as a symbol of the beauty that is now impossible for Myrtle to inhabit. It helps that Nancy looks quite similar to a young Myrtle. “At some time in life, youth dies and the second woman in us takes over,” Myrtle says. “I believe that Nancy is the first woman in my own life.” This line merges Myrtle with Nancy, reinforcing the fact that the haunting is self-inflicted. Twice, Myrtle visits a “spiritualist” in attempts to exorcise the ghost, all the while aware the ghost is of her own making. In one of the film’s most climactic moments, Myrtle kills the apparition of Nancy in a surreal, cathartic rage (1:37:00). This action serves as a slaying of her internalized youth worship—and a break to the myth of beauty that has thus tormented her.

Still, Myrtle’s haunting is not hers alone. The pressure she feels is reinforced by the broader framework that judges women on domesticity, motherhood, and desirability. As Self describes in *All in the Family*, feminism was often viewed as a threat to the traditional familial order. Breaking the sanctity of family and the image of the modern woman is clearly present in *Opening Night*. Myrtle is unmarried and childless in her 40s—an outlier in the norm of nuclear domesticity. She explains that acting is all she has. When she visits Nancy’s shiva, she is bluntly told by the girl’s family: “If you had [children], you wouldn’t have come here.” The remark indicts Myrtle’s grief as unnatural since she lacks the traditional experience of womanhood, that of being a wife and mother. In this sense, Nancy’s ghost is not only a symbol of lost youth, but an apparition of a cultural fantasy that defines womanhood through youth, marriage, and reproduction—excluding women like Myrtle who fall outside its narrow borders.

The most critical and cathartic scene is the film’s titular event—the opening night of *The Second Woman* on Broadway (1:50:28). Myrtle arrives to the theater late and visibly drunk, sparking panic behind the scenes. The crowd is getting restless and the producer, David, wants to

close the show, but Manny—either out of faith or fatalism—tells Myrtle to get on stage. As she stumbles around backstage, Manny doesn't let anyone help her even as she collapses several times: "Leave her alone. She'll get up." And she does. By the end of the play, Myrtle has found a groove and she and Maurice improvise the entire final scene (2:08:44). Myrtle does not speak Virginia's lines, instead she reshapes the character into something spontaneous, funny, and offbeat. She merges herself into the character of Virginia, and in her improvised lines offers a glimpse into her mission of agency. "We're grim and we're depressed and we're 'yecch,'" Myrtle says. "We don't have to sit here and take this. We can turn on the lights." Myrtle argues that it is fine if she is not thought of as beautiful or funny anymore—she just wants to be capable, a word that only has vague connotative value. Myrtle's desire is to transcend the helpless, diminished woman that Sarah had written her to be. She yearns, perhaps selfishly, to communicate that there is hope for the aging woman—freedom from pity, invisibility, and deteriorating love.

Rather than a moment of closure, the scene ends with a silly physical gag—Myrtle and Maurice try to hold hands and grab each other's legs as they pass. This bizarre moment of slapstick improvisation sends the audience into laughter. However, beyond the absurdity of this scene lies a certain revelation. Myrtle's breakdown has become a form of authorship: an improvised act of carving out her own narrative space. Though Sarah and David are visibly distressed by the deviation, Manny seems amused by Myrtle's antics. The audience applauds rapturously. Cassavetes, in his anti-Hollywood fashion, denies a clean resolution. Myrtle may not win or recover, but she performs on her own terms and delivers her own script. Her instability becomes a protest against the system that demands women be obedient. She makes her presence her own, and that is perhaps the greatest power she has as an actress.

In all, *Opening Night* stages a strong feminist critique of the roles women are expected to play on stage and in reality. Through Myrtle's rejection of a script that confines and stereotypes her, Cassavetes offers a vision of empowerment through disruption. Myrtle's breakdown is not depicted as weakness or failure—it is a revolt against a society that demands women to be consumable and compliant. Situated against the backdrop of 1970s feminist activism and conservative traditionalism, the film exposes how women are punished for aging, rejecting domesticity, and asserting control over their own lives. Rather than condemning Myrtle's state, *Opening Night* embraces her ambiguity and fracture. Myrtle may be erratic and haunted by her imagination, but in the chaos of her opening night, she is finally performing something that is undeniably her own.

Works Cited

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