



No River: A Prosthetic Flashback

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This video essay responds to moments in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) in which the protagonist invokes memories of a river. It does so by way of the 'prosthetic flashback,' a videographic technique whereby the critic includes extratextual footage which performs a character's memory image. The work has two key goals: to critically respond to the distinctive anthropocentrism of Cassavetes' cinema by expanding on fleeting and uncharacteristic (but significant) instances of pathetic fallacy; and to model the affordances of the prosthetic flashback.





Creator's Statement

Early in my teaching career, I led many seminars about *Faces* (1968), *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, at a time when I was completing a doctoral project about environmental poetics in New Hollywood cinema. There emerged for me a curious disconnect between my ecocritical claims for films by (for example) Monte Hellman and Robert Altman and Sam Peckinpah and the fierce humanism of their contemporary John Cassavetes. More than once in class, we pondered as a group how rarely Cassavetes' characters go outside (and how futile those trips can seem, as in the bleak, ironic trip to the beach in *A Woman Under the Influence*.) We could all broadly agree with Yvette Bíró's claims that Cassavetes 'is not interested in commonly valued things' (214). But my students, and the critics we were reading, understandably focused their attention elsewhere, on what *was* in Cassavetes' films—namely his extraordinary experiments with genre, domestic space, sexual politics, bodies, rhythm, framing, performance.

The references made by Cosmo Vitelli (Ben Gazzara) in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* to rivers, specific and abstract, provided a meeting point between this sense I developed of a curious environmental absence in Cassavetes' cinema and a more familiar and critically discussed aspect of the films: their acute *presentness*. George Kourvaros writes of the 'continuous present tense' at work in the films, and says of *Faces* in particular that 'each event in the lives of the central characters seems to replace rather than follow on from other events' (49). Raymond Carney articulates this almost claustrophobic immediacy as a mode in which characters 'are everything in our process of discovering them, and nothing outside of that process' (12). Is this why they linger indoors so much?!

In dramatic narratives, environmental contexts and features (and water in particular) can often prompt us to register broad and deep time frames, of a kind that seem anathema to Cassavetes. (The river in Jean Renoir's *Partie de campagne* [1946] exemplifies this capacity and for this reason appears at the start of my video.) Cosmo's articulated longing for the East River is uncharacteristic of Cassavetes' cinema—but the decision to not emphasize or explore this longing is itself characteristic. What to make of this videographically?

It is a common feature of film analysis and interpretation to consider what a filmmaker *might* have done (at the level of form and style) but didn't. Videographic methods lend themselves well to such 'counterfactual criticism,' providing as they do the opportunity to manipulate a hypothesis into tangible evidence. In 'No River,' I stop short of mimicking or deploying a conventional flashback—dissolving from a facial close up, say—not least because the extreme inappropriateness of this in a Cassavetes film would risk distracting from and undermining the integrity of the film's human drama (which must remain intact for my video to make sense). I instead offer, for a viewer's consideration, moving images that *could* perform the role of flashback in terms of location, subject and time period. The scene I deploy, from *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948), was a fortunate discovery on my part, and even more so because of the unexpected way it fed *back* into *Chinese Bookie*. For although the boys' play was the primary subject for my experiment, the floating corpse they discover strengthens and deepens the connection to Cosmo, and it reminds us that water's evocations are not always benign. This 'twist' would simply not have happened in an equivalent written thought experiment, focusing as it would have done on the happy memory.

At the start of my project, I had not anticipated, or initially understood, two critical implications of imposing a flashback:

1. the change can be felt far beyond the memory moment, inflecting our understanding of that character in subsequent scenes and sequences, and
2. the extratextual footage can bring 'rogue' details to further enrich its dramatic contribution to the film in question.

These were learned in practice and redirected the work away from its initial focus on Cassavetes' (un)environmental mode and towards a more intimate videographic dialogue with one of his characters. I am very grateful to the reviewers for helping me refine and follow through on this development and for identifying a number of important metacritical implications of the prosthetic flashback.

References

- Bíró, Yvette. *Turbulence and Flow in Film: The Rhythmic Design*. Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Carney, Ray. *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Kouvaros, George. *Where Does it Happen?: John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Biography

Adam O'Brien is Associate Professor of Film at the University of Reading, where his research explores film aesthetics and the non-human world. He is the author of *Film and the Natural Environment: Elements and Atmospheres* (2017) and *Transactions with the World: Ecocriticism and the Environmental Sensibility of New Hollywood* (2016), and his writing has appeared in journals including *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, *Screen* and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*. In July 2023, he collaborated with Professor John Gibbs to co-convene a second annual workshop at the University of Reading, developing videographic skills for researchers beyond film and media studies.

Review by Hoi Lun Law, University of Edinburgh

It is a common practice for written film criticism to ponder alternative creative choices available to a filmmaker. 'No River' practices 'counterfactual criticism' of this kind videographically. It realizes, in the form of what Adam O'Brien calls 'prosthetic flashback,' what John Cassavetes might have done in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, not in order to make suggestions for what he should have done—in fact, the force of the flashback partly stems from its unlikeliness as a device for Cassavetes—but to shed light on the meaning and significance of what *Chinese Bookie* has achieved. Specifically, the video presents compelling evidence for the film's fugitive environmental sensibility and, as a result, complicates the critical consensus on the relative insignificance of nature in Cassavetes' cinema.

As someone who has a special interest in metacriticism, I am particularly drawn to the way 'No River' imaginatively exploits the resources of videographic methods. The strategy of 'prosthetic flashback' reminds me of Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin's 'Angst/Fear' (2013), a video which conjures an 'imaginary scene' out of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Martha* (1974) and James Foley's *Fear* (1996) (I have reflected on its metacritical merits in 'Law' [2014], where the video is also viewable). Despite their

difference in tone—if ‘Angst/Fear’ is poetic, ‘No River’ is explanatory—both videos open up a fruitful dialogue between individual films. Most importantly, they create a mode of address—a way of engaging with its audience—unique to the videographic format. In the case of ‘No River’ by ‘imagining’ Cosmo’s memory of and personal associations with the river, the ‘prosthetic flashback’ functions as a form of critical identification with the character (a form of identification which the film, in its resistance to ‘pathetic fallacy,’ denies), which, in turn, encourages a comparable identification with him from us. This kind of engagement, at once critical and affective, cannot be straightforwardly replicated in a written account or, at least, it would not be as evocative as in a video. ‘No River,’ like ‘Angst/Fear,’ exemplifies an exciting avenue to do film analysis and criticism through videographic means.

Work Cited

Law, H. L. (2014). On ANGST/FEAR. *The Audiovisual Essay*. Available at: <http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/audiovisualessay/reflections/reflections-on-av-essays/hoi-lun-law-on-angstfear-adrian-martin-cristina-alvarez-lopez-2014/>

Review by Adrian Martin, Monash University

‘No River: A Prosthetic Flashback’ has been through a fascinating process of drafting and revision by its maker, Adam O’Brien, in relation to the review comments earlier provided via the *[in]Transition* peer process. I think it is fair to O’Brien for me to say that the project has moved from a more strictly academic one centred on matters of critical methodology to a freer, more poetic and creative working-through. If I’m correct about that—and even if I’m not—I enthusiastically salute the final result!

‘No River’, as a project, springs from a classroom insight that O’Brien experienced: in teaching about issues of ecology and the natural environment in film, he reached for the *counter-intuitive* move of including a masterwork by a filmmaker who would seem, at first glance or thought, a 100% city-bound artist—namely, John Cassavetes. In *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), however, O’Brien and his students turned up an unusual detail: the rapturous eulogy, by the character Cosmo (Ben Gazzara), of his memories of swimming in the East River of New York. Water has never been entirely absent from Cassavetes’ oeuvre, in either its real or more metaphoric/figural forms—think of the rivers of booze, or those ‘love streams’ that gave a title to his final personal film—but this business of Cosmo’s fondly remembered joy of literally swimming in it was, indeed, a revelation to me. Even me, a Cassavetes scholar! A detail that’s easy to miss—and whose ‘principle of pertinence’ would be difficult to persuasively establish

in a conventional written text of film analysis—finds itself suggestively, hypnotically slowed-down and magnified in an audiovisual essay. It is a lesson for us all!

But there is more. Initially, my own advice to O'Brien was that he needed to 'follow his unconscious', because it was leading him along a creative path that he had not yet entirely grasped or made the most of. And this is where the beguiling category of the *prosthetic flashback* enters in full force. I was struck in his previous video draft—just as I am fully convinced by this now-published work—that the richest connection O'Brien had *intuitively* uncovered was in the clip from Jules Dassin's *The Naked City* (1948) and the way that it ends: with the sudden discovery of a corpse in the water. Because this corpse leads us right back into *Chinese Bookie* and the body of a man who is murdered by Cosmo . . . in his own swimming pool.

Did Cassavetes ever see *The Naked City*, or its close cousin in this watery New York noir regard, Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948)? Maybe; who knows? But such direct filiation (and the question of its proof), in the end, doesn't really matter. O'Brien's 'No River' weaves a more phantasmic and unconscious textual *reminiscence* (Alain Bergala's term) in the way it conjures a resonance between these films—a reminiscence it casts (in the mode of 'counterfactual criticism') as a prosthetic flashback *grafted* onto the character of Cosmo. In an age where we audiovisualists tend to way-overdo the 'remix', 'sampling', 'hybrid' and 'deformative' metaphors, I prefer this more shocking thought-image of grafting skin.

I love the colour, the sound, the rhythm of 'No River'. It enchants me. Bravo!

