

A CINEMA OF RECESSION: MICRO-BUDGETING, MICRO-DRAMA, AND THE "MUMBLECORE" MOVEMENT

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Mumblecore appears to be the first significant movement of 21st century U.S. film, our delegate to the contemporary orientation in global art cinema towards what the *New York Times*' A.O. Scott has deemed "neo-neo realism."¹ Even more significantly, mumblecore models a viable alternative to struggling forms of "specialty" (art and independent) cinema production and distribution in American media markets. In the last decade, the theatrical market has grown increasingly dependent on high-concept, low-risk projects geared at teens and families. This industrial climate has proven both boon and hindrance to specialty cinema, for which new modes of distribution, promotion, and consumption sustain demand even as theatrical exhibition encounters constraint. Producers, sellers, critics, and audiences of specialty cinema within U.S. markets have adapted substantially over the past decade, developing strategies for survival in the wake of challenges from competitive media, changing consumption behaviors, and the economic crisis. Another *New York Times* film critic who has spilled a good deal of ink waxing ecstatic about mumblecore, Dennis Lim claims that the movement "signals a paradigm shift in how movies are made and how they find an audience."² With an eye to offering both an observational document and a discursive analysis of mumblecore's aesthetic congruity, promotion and distribution tactics, and reception histories through careful consideration of its origins, ontology, and evolution, I aim more broadly to illuminate how contemporary specialty cinema is adopting impressive strategies of survival.

Mumblecore's micro-budgeted minimalist aesthetic, localized D.I.Y. generative methods, and distinctively unpolished idiom actively resist both Hollywood's model of packaging, outsourcing, and merchandising, as well as recent American independent cinema's reliance on heartwarming quirkiness featuring star power working for scale. Exploiting digital technology and electronic culture while eschewing frontloading and other high-risk financing, mumblecore signals its pared-down production mode and heightened naturalism through its branding as an economical and authentic restorative fit for an era of recession and proactive citizenship. Facing a domestic market for specialty film dominated by feel-good "indies", audience-friendly imports, and commercial auteurs' clout, mumblecore has managed to gain cinephile acclaim and hipster credibility largely by accessing alternative forms of distribution. Yet the response to mumblecore by film scholars and critics ranges radically, from Robert Sickels' venerating "I would argue that they are at the forefront of a revolutionary technological movement that will undoubtedly have profound long term effects on the industry" to Amy Taubin's dismissive "never more than a flurry of festival hype and blogosphere branding."³ As someone whose allegiances are firmly in the first camp, I freely concede this piece's intention in part as an appreciation of mumblecore. The critical contribution I wish to add to those already expressed by other enthusiasts concerns the three realms in which I consider mumblecore to have played a uniquely important role: in proving the viability of digital distribution, in rejuvenating U.S. art cinema's commercial appeal without sacrificing artistic or ethical integrity, and in offering an exceptionally honest and thoughtful consideration of contemporary American sexual mores.

Like film noir or Italian neo-realism, also terms popularized by critics, mumblecore's naming signals a reflective moment of self-recognition by its creators and consumers. The origins of the term are now lore: sound mixer Eric Masunaga jokingly devised the moniker to describe films he had worked on that were screening at 2005's South by Southwest (SxSW) Festival; it went viral when filmmaker Andrew Bujalski dropped it in an Indiewire.com interview soon after. While Bujalski and the other youthful directors lumped together renounce both the grouping and the term, calling it "reductive", "obnoxious", and "alienating"⁴, the commercial advantage of having a searchable brand in today's Google-verse is indisputable. It is also useful for distinguishing a group of filmmakers from those to which they are invariably compared. As Lim notes, alongside "Richard Linklater's earnest philosophers or Noah Baumbach's poised wiseacres, Mr. Bujalski's sheepish drifters are mortifyingly tongue-tied."⁵ While Bujalski is certainly the undisputed master of the awkward exchange, as any viewers of his debut *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) and follow-up features can attest, his fellow mumblecore-designated filmmakers also defy the frequent comparisons made to these and other dialogue-driven realist auteurs, namely Eric Rohmer's ardent self-examiners, Mike Leigh's plainspoken pragmatists, or John Cassavetes' emotive trainwrecks. Even Jim Jarmusch's aloof hipsters are too self-admiring to be analogous; though largely by, for, and about hipsters, mumblecore is critical of hipsterdom's cooler-than-thou posturing. Mumblecore is, as Geoff Pevere notes,

about people who hide their feelings behind a mask of carefully cultivated whatever-dude diffidence, but who haven't noticed the mask isn't fitting quite so well anymore...[It is] about people who are hard to like but impossible not to sympathize with. This is because all of the manifest bad behaviour on display is clearly the function of fear: fear of losing the past, fear of facing the future and fear of getting too close.⁶

As Pevere's characterization suggests, although improvised and unstylized, *mumblecore* does not ring precise as a descriptor; "searching", "fumbling", and "venturing" are more explicative of the characters and their relationship-wary, therapy-trained, irony-strapped generation's mode of social interaction. Or, as David Denby puts it, "It's the emotions that mumble."⁷

Akin to Ruby Rich's reformulation of New Queer Cinema as a film *moment* rather than *movement*, mumblecore mobilized and was motivated less by concerted effort or collective ideology than by increased access both industrial and political.⁸ Though with stakes far lower than the AIDS pandemic and Reagan-era discrimination that fuelled New Queer Cinema's eruption at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival, mumblecore similarly is inspired by a generation's disillusionment and poses an anarchistic alternative to the dominant system (homophobic Hollywood then, the blockbuster mentality now). Mumblecore's D.I.Y. collectives of artist-hyphenates bucking the system are also equal parts French New Wave (rebelling against the mid-century European "tradition of quality") and No Wave (the late 1970s and early 1980s downtown New York City alternative arts scene). Just as the newfound availability of faster film stock and portable sound equipment made it possible for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics to strike for the streets, the mumblecorps has laptop editing technology along with access to digital cameras such as the Panasonic AG DVX 100 to thank; "It was a \$3,000 video camera that shot at the film frame rate, with warm colours that made it feel like film," [mumblecore auteur] Mark [Duplass] said. "Suddenly you could make a great-looking movie for \$1,000."⁹

Of course the availability of affordable, user-friendly equipment is never itself wholly a

determinant. “It was a convergence of new technology and people feeling like movies didn't show how their lives were actually being lived,” explains actress and mumblecore muse Greta Gerwig.¹⁰ Borne of necessity *and* inspiration, these films share unmistakable qualities of narrative and stylistic naturalism that, Bujalski recounted to *The Washington Post*, “grew out of his frustration with the failure of mainstream movies to speak to the circumstances of his life, even those films that purport to be about his peer group.”¹¹ Calling most of those movies a “pack of lies,” Bujalski has the postmodern savvy to know that while cinematography might be the “truthful documentation of something that is there,” the process of editing is “completely manipulative and false.”¹² As Bujalski's statement indicates, mumblecore filmmakers are informed by film history and post-structuralist theory learned in university film programs rather than the Hollywood trenches (Bujalski studied with Chantal Akerman and documentary filmmaker Robb Moss at Harvard, Swanberg attended Southern Illinois-Carbondale, Aaron Katz went to the North Carolina School of the Arts, and Lena Dunham is a graduate of Oberlin). In another departure, mumblecore's foremost exhibition space has been Austin's annual SxSW Festival, whose producer Matt Dentler is the chief patron of what Lim singles out as “the sole significant American indie film wave of the last 20 years to have emerged outside the ecosystem of the Sundance Film Festival.”¹³ These filmmakers are also singular in their prolificacy; Joe Swanberg makes films at the alarmingly Woody Allen-esque rate of one (or more) per year, in addition to co-writing and directing the web series *Young American Bodies*, “a candid, no-holds-barred look at the intersecting love lives of six 20-somethings in Chicago,” that ran for four seasons (2006-2009) and remains viewable on IFC.com. Although the rest of the mumblecorps produces at a somewhat slower pace, their output is still impressive for self-financed films.

Mumblecore productions are characterized by handheld cinematography, natural lighting, real locations, simple set-ups, an emphasis on facial close-ups, and few takes. “Probably 30 per cent of what shows up onscreen is a first take,” says [Mark's brother and creative collaborator Jay] Duplass.¹⁴ This improvisatory approach tends to produce a self-selecting cast flexible and willing enough to work for little (or no) money and to provide the bulk of their characters' dialogue. Bujalski, who compares the role of a screenplay in his films to that of sheet music for a rock band, shoots in sequence and only shows actors the scenes in which they appear (a technique he learned from Woody Allen) to enhance the lifelike feeling of being privy only to those instances when we are present. Given these gestures towards sustenance and simplicity, perhaps the less pejorative neologism “slow film” gets closest to the mode and mood of what we've been calling mumblecore. As Susan Morrison describes it,

[Slow film] refers to a type of art film that while seemingly minimalist, in fact requires intense audience concentration and effort to produce meaning. By this neologism, I mean to draw an analogy between the recent phenomenon in cooking (and eating) habits termed the “Slow Food” Movement wherein time functions as an arbiter and guarantor of good taste, with those films that work off similar emphases of duration, films that reject the flashier aspects of Hollywood filmmaking...short takes, rapid editing, continuously moving camera and action, etc.... substituting instead a much slower approach to crafting a film.¹⁵

The localism promoted by the Slow Food Movement intrinsically characterizes mumblecore productions, which rarely stray far from their filmmakers' backyards and the twentysomething ghettos of Austin, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, and Seattle. I take up below how temporality's crucial importance to narrative is perhaps mumblecore's most defining characteristic, for the way it enhances understandings of character and story essential to

rendering narrative realism. Even if, as a descriptor of contemporary U.S. art cinema, “slow film” also would encompass the less dialogue-driven, more stylized films of Sofia Coppola, Kelly Reichardt, and Gus Van Sant.

This confluence of sensibilities among disparate filmmakers whose works screened at SxSW in 2005 was followed by a 2007 series at New York’s IFC Film Center called “The New Talkies: Generation D.I.Y.,” grouping the films in a box office-friendly way that also, Chuck Tryon notices, “characterized the filmmakers as virtual revolutionaries, not unlike those who produced the ‘talkies’ that radically changed cinema in the 1920s.”¹⁶ Mumblecore’s revolution, such as it is, forges a counter-cinema to circumvent the Hollywood hierarchy and all it represents: rampant commercialism, juvenile product, and (given multinational conglomerate ownership) human and environmental exploitation. That D.I.Y. culture has been resuscitated in this wintry economic climate is no coincidence, and mumblecore is merely one of its manifestations in the movement against excess waste, outsourced manufacturing, and deficit financing. Sizing up American society in the decade following 9/11, A.O. Scott observes that “magical thinking has been elevated from a diversion to an ideological principle,” and suggests that neo-realism’s “engagement with the world as it is might reassert itself as an aesthetic strategy.”¹⁷ Tracing the neo-realist impulse’s global movement since its origins in post-World War II Italy, Scott ventures that neo-realism “might be thought of less as a style or genre than as an ethic....” With Hollywood hooked on spinning \$100+ million yarns of escapist denial or (occasionally) self-aggrandizing heroism, refusing either to hawk or to swallow these wish-fulfillment fantasies becomes an ethical imperative.

It may seem rich to offer plaudits to self-involved, only minimally exploited underachievers who are more disillusioned than disenfranchised, and whose films would hardly seem to cure the ills of our world. In my (and the mumblecorps’) defense, however, I submit that these filmmakers collectively demonstrate a degree of humility that is refreshing in U.S. cinema – in speaking only for oneself, in making do with minimal resources, and in portraying life as awkward, messy, and morally complex, in which, to quote Jean Renoir, “everyone has his reasons.”¹⁸ Mumblecore plots emerge from characters, focus on everyday details and ordinary speech, and stay rooted in real life even when there are extraordinary circumstances. That one of the leads in Bujalski’s *Beeswax* (2009) is paraplegic, for example, goes unremarked upon for the film’s entirety. Where it would be the protagonist’s defining characteristic in a Hollywood film, here it is represented simply as the ordinary state of being that it realistically would be. Endings, or what passes for them, are frequently inconclusive and rarely reassuring in mumblecore: the couple breaks up, the dilemma remains unresolved, the protagonist is left unfulfilled, or – as in the case of *Funny Ha Ha*, the final scene cuts to black in mid-sentence. “There wasn’t anything specific that was trying to be achieved with those films, as much as just finding what seemed interesting and alive – those moments,” remarks Gerwig.¹⁹ Yet this rhizomatic accumulation of (mostly missed) moments yields far more than mere fragments.

To those who fault mumblecore for ignoring such glaring 21st century conflicts as the wars in the Middle East, writer-director Swanberg responds, “The story of my life and my friends’ lives are the ones I can tell most completely.”²⁰ These educated, medicated, liberal, mostly white male heterosexuals (though not as white or male as they overwhelmingly have been painted) appear on screen not so much solipsistically as observationally and even self-critically, as Lim notes. “The filmmakers view their characters with empathy but don’t let them off the hook; Mr. Swanberg and Mr. Bujalski often assign themselves the least

flattering roles available.”²¹ Mumblecore characters are not disaffected and sexually detached in the way of Whit Stillman, Wes Anderson, and so much contemporary hipster literature (“hip lit”); rather, they are emotionally yearning yet painfully aware of the danger in revealing oneself. As Taubin notes, “non-actors are perfect choices for these films because [of] their insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their characters’ ideas, desires, and feelings.”²² Some of mumblecore’s subtlest pleasures come from registering the minute contrapuntal play between verbal and physical language, whose inconsistencies of meaning announce loudly our shared tendency to suppress our true emotions. Witness what happens when *Funny Ha Ha*’s lead Marnie (Kate Dollenmayer) is goaded into speaking openly: she loses first her livelihood (having replied honestly when her boss asks whether she likes her job), then her dignity (having confessed to being unrequitedly in love with a male friend).

That Bujalski, an exception among the mumblecore directors for sticking to the staggeringly more expensive medium of film, is a film purist is evident from his choice to shoot second feature *Mutual Appreciation* (2005) in artsy black and white (another nod to Allen), and from the collectible 16mm film strip enclosed in every DVD copy of *Beeswax*. Yet mumblecore’s intimate, dialogue-driven aesthetic is well-suited to the digital video format as well as home viewing and mobile media. Though less austere than the Vow of Chastity mandates, mumblecore certainly displays Dogme’s imprint, as well as that of observational documentary and its bastard child, reality television. One might even say that mumblecore exhibits a symptomatic anxiety of influence that drives it to improve upon the deficiencies sully those antecedents. As Swanberg observes, “We grew up in the age of the home video. We’re used to having our lives documented at every stage. Reality TV shows are an extension of that, and this is the next stage. Like the home movie you actually want to watch.”²³ Mumblecore’s “life as a movie” gonzo exhibitionism, Lim claims, “bespeaks a true 21st-century sensibility, reflective of MySpace-like social networks and the voyeurism and intimacy of YouTube.”²⁴ Yet web-based modes of communication and those who rely too heavily on them is subject to critique in mumblecore – especially Swanberg’s *LOL* (2006) – in which the tendency is to pine nostalgically for the lost art of personal interaction. It is this yearning to connect, non-virtually and in real time, that drives characters in mumblecore films – and their fans, very much children of 9/11, who despite irony’s ostensible death must seek out the sincerity and hopefulness missing from so much postmodern media.

Anointed godfather of mumblecore, Bujalski shepherded his first feature *Funny Ha Ha* through largely viral distribution channels, “always aware that the films he was making were the kind that were meant to be stumbled over and discovered.”²⁵ Three years after the film’s completion and still not 30 years old, Bujalski was selling homemade bootlegs of the film off his website while working part-time as a substitute teacher when a “Someone to Watch” prize at the 2004 Independent Spirit Awards and inclusion on A.O. Scott’s “10 best films of 2005” list attracted a private investor to finance a wider DVD distribution. The earliest mumblecore feature to earn a Sundance premiere, the Duplass brothers’ *The Puffy Chair* (2005) received an Independent Spirit Award nomination and was acquired by Netflix and Roadside Attractions, who aggressively promoted the film to Netflix subscribers. That model of festival debut followed by digital distribution, foregoing theatres entirely, largely characterizes mumblecore’s release pattern and clearly signals how outmoded the theatrical-nontheatrical distinction has become (no matter the Academy Awards’ unflagging idolization of theatrical films). As Swanberg says, he’s “come to realize that my festival run is my theatrical run.”²⁶ His 2009 film *Alexander the Last* debuted simultaneously at SxSW and on IFC’s video-on-demand (VOD) service, prompting him to proclaim, “I feel like this is a watershed moment. The promise of the digital revolution, this democratization of movies, is

now really happening.”²⁷

Having come a long way since the initial “day and date” fizzle of Steven Soderbergh’s *Bubble* release in 2005, digital distribution offers specialty cinema a new lease on life by way of circulating marginal product among a diffuse viewing community, through specialized channels that serve to maintain brand integrity while managing financial risk. The noticeable result, Tryon suggests, is “to create more dispersed film audiences based less on geographic proximity than on shared cinematic tastes.”²⁸ Theatrical distributor IFC Films and its sister cable network the Independent Film Channel deserve particular credit for “sustain[ing] cinephile content” through a multi-platform mode of digital delivery that puts specialty films in a small number of theaters while often simultaneously adding them to its VOD service, notes Lucas Hilderbrand, “yet the survival of such so-called independent cinema seems to depend upon multimedia ownership.”²⁹ IFC is supported by a deep-pocketed, non-intrusive parent company (Rainbow Media Group, a division of behemoth U.S. cable service operator Cablevision), and fueled by the occasional indie hit such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002). Filling the role left vacant by faltering studio specialty divisions, shuttered screening venues, and defunct distributors, IFC and its ilk embody a newfangled style of vertical integration that paradoxically allows for the emergence of young artists and riskier content.

Where specialty cinema is concerned, “risky content” can equal what’s quaintly termed “adult material” but can also refer to the opposite of high concept: films that are hard to promote because they lack name actors, provocative premises, or even an easily encapsulated plot. That the former often serves to mollify the latter has long made otherwise abstruse material palatable to audiences attracted by scintillating content. Among mumblecore directors, Swanberg broaches sex with the most candor: *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005) opens with a close-up of a condom being rolled onto an erect penis, and a subsequent scene shows Swanberg’s character masturbating and ejaculating in the shower. Clearly meant to attract as well as to provoke, nonetheless Swanberg’s emphasis is always on naturalism. In the first scene of his film *Nights and Weekends* (2008), a newly reunited long-distance couple makes love with the pent-up desire of two people utterly familiar with each other yet emotionally disconnected. As other critics have noted, mumblecore uses nudity less to titillate than to reveal private moments and to express intimacy between characters,³⁰ whether in mundane scenarios such as getting dressed, or in moments of whimsy such as the bathtub duet on trumpet of the *1812 Overture* performed by a fully nude man and woman that closes out Swanberg’s *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007).

With a premise that resembles, if only superficially, a Judd Apatow bromance – two straight guys propose to have sex on camera for a pornographic “art project” – Lynn Shelton’s *Humpday* (2005) found limited theatrical distribution by, she confesses, playing up its “sexy hook” shamelessly. It went on to gross nearly \$500,000 at the box office, by far the best performance by a mumblecore film up until that time though still not sufficient to stay on screen long.³¹ *Humpday* takes the bromantic theme of dude-on-dude love and soberly sizes it up to consider what gets lost when heteronormativity (rather than women) divides friendships between men. Ben (Mark Duplass) and Andrew (Joshua Leonard) are college buddies who went their separate ways, but are brought back together when adventurous Andrew suddenly reappears seeking respite from his nomadic existence amidst Ben’s buttoned-down life and comfortable marriage. The guys get inebriated at a bohemian artists’ party and challenge each other to collaborate on a surefire competition winner for a local amateur porn festival; as the day of the shoot approaches, they act increasingly anxious yet

resolutely determined not to back down. The impetus for *Humpday* was “simply a curiosity about why so many straight men fear gay sex,” explains Shelton, who is married to a man but describes herself as having “definite bisexual leanings.” “Even if they think of themselves as really progressive and open-minded, and they don't care if the rest of the world is gay,” she says, “it's very important that everybody knows that they are straight and that they themselves can be assured that they are straight.”³² As sex advice columnist Dan Savage remarked of Shelton, “she's really calling the bluff of the Apatows of the world. How far can you go with the ‘I love you, man’ stuff and still be straight guys? And Lynn is saying you can go all the way.”³³

Humpday's sexual politics inspired vigorous debate among critics, some of who praised the film as “widen[ing] the definition of straightness”³⁴ while still “challeng[ing] homophobic fears that somehow people can be converted into becoming gay.”³⁵ Others felt it avoided any genuine exploration of homosexuality by depicting Ben and Andrew “as blobs of flesh with hairy parts but without the tiniest suggestion of latent heat,”³⁶ and by being “less about the blurring boundaries of male friendship than an examination of a classic alpha-male power struggle.”³⁷ In the two scenes from *Humpday* that rattle heteronormativity's cage most vigorously, Andrew's broad-minded pose is shaken during a threesome with a lesbian couple who insist on using a dildo, followed by Ben's admission of having had a crush on a male video store employee. That neither scene is played for laughs constitutes *Humpday's* clearest departure from the bromance. Even what happens when Ben and Andrew finally face one another, camera running, can be regarded as among the most serious treatment given to “straight” men exploring their sexuality that I can recall seeing in American film (1996's *The Daytrippers* and 2000's *Chuck and Buck* are others).

What occasionally gets lost in the debate over *Humpday's* same-sex grappling is the importance of the heterosexuality on display as well, namely in its honest depiction of longtime couples' struggle to maintain an active, passionate sex life in balance with everyday obligations. Perhaps not so surprising given that it was written and directed by a woman, the generous treatment given the role of Ben's wife Anna (Alycia Delmore) soundly departs from the bromance's handling of the womenfolk, who exist near-exclusively as hindrances to males' bonding and fun. Anna is hardly supportive of the guys' scheme to shoot a porno, but she is neither pushover nor shrew. As the most grounded and self-knowing of the trio, she is realistically perturbed but at the same time committed to (understanding, supporting, and loving) Ben as well as respectful and encouraging of his and Andrew's friendship. The female leads of Aaron Katz's *Dance Party USA* (2006) and *Quiet City* (2007) are preternaturally mature and whimsically girlish, respectively, but they share with *Humpday's* Anna and each other a steadiness and patience that keeps them oriented while offering ballast to the men who enter their lives (without being their saviors or safe havens). These women's own growth is privileged as well as predicated on enabling the men to own up to themselves: in *Dance Party USA*, Katz's first feature, a callous lothario admits to having date-raped a drunk underage girl and attempts to make amends; in *Quiet City*, a heartbroken young man's emotional isolation is finally punctured by the persistence and trust extended by the next woman he meets.

An indisputable truth of film movements is that they have nearly always been boys' clubs, from the *Cahiers* comrades to British lads' Kitchen Sink films to the easy riders and raging queens of New Hollywood and New Queer Cinema. The only exception, women's counter-cinema of the 1970s, was by its very definition female-driven. Mumblecore has been served its share of sexism complaints, yet counts several women in its ranks, including Ry Russo-

Young (*Orphans*, 2007) and So Yong Kim (*Treeless Mountain*, 2008). Shelton, who balances directing with acting and photography, admits in a *New York Times* interview that her path to independent filmmaking was determined by her gender. "I just did not have the confidence to do it," she said. "And then I had to find a backdoor way in. I couldn't even go to film school, I had to start making my little movies and learning about editing."³⁸ Whereas Shelton's "distinctly feminist sensibility comes to bear in the subtle, almost anthropological scrutiny of the male of the species," as her interviewer comments,³⁹ Lena Dunham's unabashed display of her decidedly realistic physique in her directorial debut feature *Tiny Furniture* (2010) garnered acclaim for its defiance of oppressive beauty norms even as it was alleged to encourage voyeurism and the evaluation of women according to physical criteria.

Perhaps to challenge the allegations of sexual immaturity and misogyny dogging Swanberg's earlier features, on the unscripted *Nights and Weekends* he shares writing credit with co-star Gerwig, and the greater sensitivity her character receives as a result is largely responsible for making it Swanberg's most affecting work yet. The film's melancholy, level look at a couple trying to save their disintegrating relationship is under-dramatized yet poignant and heartbreaking, and rings completely true. The question of how, and how well, monogamy functions over time is also taken up by *The Freebie* (2010), the directorial debut of mumblecore actor (and wife of Mark Duplass) Katie Aselton. Yet my response to *The Freebie*, in which a married couple, honestly acknowledging their desire to have other sexual experiences, agree to spend one night with other people, is emphatically mixed. While its premise and initial exposition are in keeping with mumblecore's commitment to representing authentic-feeling (and thereby not always terribly dramatic) personal interactions, its denouement departs from the logic of character and verisimilitude established up to that point.

In *Funny Ha Ha*'s end credits, the ratio of people thanked to cast and crew members is roughly 10:1. But moonlighting as an actor can prove a much more difficult gig in one's thirties than in one's twenties. "As I get older and my friends get older," Bujalski said, "it's harder to say to people, 'Take a month off from your life and work for me for free.'"⁴⁰ It is reported that next Bujalski will write and direct an adaptation of Benjamin Kunkel's best-selling novel *Indecision* for the producer Scott Rudin; as he pragmatically admits, "if I have kids that need to go to college, maybe I'll say yes to a studio movie. It would be good to turn naturalism into a crowd pleaser."⁴¹ Aaron Katz, recently honored with a Harvard Film Archive retrospective of his diminutive *oeuvre* (just three films), adapted mumblecore to the gumshoe genre with his latest feature, *Cold Weather* (2010). Presumably an attempt to break out of the mumblecore mold, the film's genre machinations clumsily if comically shoehorn Katz's lyrical charm into a somewhat restrictive casing, as did the Duplass Brothers' lackluster attempt to incite real horror while riffing on the slasher movie in *Baghead* (2008). Their \$7 million *Cyrus* (2010), starring John C. Reilly, Marisa Tomei, and Jonah Hill and released by Fox Searchlight, was a more successful melding of what might be called "studio mumblecore". The only filmmakers in the mumblecorps to relocate to L.A., the brothers so far have managed well under studio oversight. "Sometimes there was an effort made on our part to stabilize the camera a little bit, to zoom just a little bit less," said Claudia Lewis, Fox Searchlight's president for production, speaking about the *Cyrus* shoot. "But it's very important to them that they stay true to their style, and that was important to us too."⁴² Lately they have branched into television (FX ensemble comedy *The League*) and are soon to release *Jeff Who Lives at Home*, starring Jason Segal and Susan Sarandon. Lynn Shelton cast two name (indie) actresses, Rosemarie DeWitt and Emily Blunt, alongside Mark

Duplass in her upcoming feature *Your Sister's Sister*, though selecting to shoot once more in her native Seattle. Lena Dunham is at work on a Judd Apatow-produced (natch) television comedy series about the lives of a group of twentysomething girls. And mumblecore's It girl no more, Greta Gerwig has appeared in increasingly prominent roles in increasingly mainstream films from *Greenberg* (2010) to *No Strings Attached* (2011) to *Arthur* (2011), with the latter's romantic sweetheart role a 180 degree departure from the capricious sylphs of her mumblecore days.

Writing in 2010, Hilderbrand places us in a "post-mumblecore moment."⁴³ Whether moment, movement, wave, or some other formulation, are we really to imagine mumblecore is past, or just sufficiently dispersed so as to escape its categorical confines? Films fitting the bill continue to be released – *Momma's Man* (Azazel Jacobs, 2008), *Daddy Longlegs* (Ben and Joshua Safdie, 2009), the German feature *Everyone Else* (Maren Ade, 2009) – though mostly shorn of the mumblecore label. The 2010 Sundance festival initiated a section devoted to low/no-budget films shot on DV by filmmakers under 32. While hardly going cold turkey from their CGI extravaganzas, studios are also taking notes from mumblecore filmmakers. Paramount's Insurge is a new micro-budget arm created to fund 10 projects at \$100,000 each per year (a true mumblecore budget would make it impossible to conform to union regulations). But perhaps the most glaring sign yet that the movement is verging on going mainstream was the November 2010 *New York* magazine spread promoting clever and hip holiday gifts, including a \$500 fire-engine red turntable for your "mumblecore boyfriend."⁴⁴

NOTES

1 A.O. Scott, "Neo-Neo Realism," *The New York Times* (March 22, 2009). Accessed January 29, 2011: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html?scp=1&sq=a.o.%20scott%20neo-neo%20relaism&st=cse>.

2 Dennis Lim, "The (Mumbled) Halting Voice of a Generation," *The New York Times* (January 8, 2006): p 26.

3 Robert Sickels, "'The future, Mr. Gittes. The future.': Next Wave Filmmaking and Beyond," *FLOW TV*, vol. 12, issue 6 (August 13, 2010). Accessed September 12, 2010: <http://flowtv.org/2010/08/the-future-mr-gittes-the-future/>. Amy Taubin, "All Talk?," *Film Comment* (November/December 2007). Accessed August 27, 2010: <http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/nd07/mumblecore.htm>.

4 Bujalski and Swanberg quoted in Dennis Lim, "A Generation Finds Its Mumble," *The New York Times* (August 19, 2007): AR1; Mark Duplass quoted in Anon., "Doing what comes naturally; Just don't mention mumblecore to these filmmaking siblings," *The Toronto Star* (June 25, 2010): E3. That the term provokes resentment for those it includes *and* those it does not is signaled by the title of recent indie *How I Killed Mumblecore* (Brandon Hutchinson, 2009).

5 Lim (2006).

6 Geoff Pevere, "Have La-Z-Boy, will travel," *The Toronto Star* (December 8, 2006): E07.

7 David Denby, "Youthquake," *The New Yorker*, vol. 85, no. 5 (March 16, 2009): p.114.

8 B. Ruby Rich, "Queer and Present Danger," *Sight & Sound* (March 2000). Accessed May 11, 2011: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/80>.

9 Duplass quoted in Johanna Schneller, "Psst, we're doing something real edgy over here," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada) (June 19, 2010): R3.

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14 Quoted in Anon.

15 Email from Susan Morrison, December 8, 2010.

16 Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), p. 117.

17 Scott, 2009.

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