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Mumbling Your Way Through America: A History of Mumblecore at its Best and Most Annoying

Mumblecore may not even be a “real” genre of film. In some circles, it is a pejorative, in some an “albatross,” as mumblecore director Joe Swanberg now puts it. But in 2005, it was hardly the eye-rolling classification it is today. In 2005, “mumblecore” was a revolutionary movement, a DIY style of independent filmmaking that existed outside the Hollywood monarch. Today, it has been commodified into the Hollywood system, with larger budgets and bigger stars stripping the way mumblecore films can hover around their emotionally tragic characters and stripping mumblecore of its observational truths revolving how the pursuit of the American Dream can cripple so many.

John Cassavetes’ *Faces* (1968), Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2005), and Alex Ross Perry’s *Listen Up Philip* (2014) encompass the best and worst of mumblecore. Sure, the characters in these films drearily mumble along in such an apathetic existence, but at its best the genre grapples with portraying the politics of a failed American Dream, and a specific need for characters to hide behind detached masks out of fear of being perceived as complete failures. Seeing such a coping mechanism projected on a large screen can be damn affecting.

So what is so special about watching everyday characters stumbling about their everyday lives? John Cassavetes and Andrew Bujalski were two filmmakers who can take the mundane and turn it fantastical. They could capture a married couple fighting, or an awkward date with

such delicacy that the audience would leave the theater with a better understanding around how to cope with some of the more alienating factor in modern America, such as the pursuit of status, capital and power. The way Cassavetes and Bujalski were able to intimately capture such an emotionally affecting portrait of disturbed characters is a work of genius, and those filmmakers visually portray those real-life moments with such a detached formal method of filmmaking.

Their cameras were mere flies on the wall, or they appeared to be. But they had such an attention to detail in terms of cinematography, dialogue and blocking their actors. They used all the formal techniques at their disposal for the end goal of showing isolated souls in loneliness. Cassavetes had numerous script reads with his actors before shooting *Faces* so they could completely understand their characters as real people. Bujalski, who also acts in *Funny Ha Ha*, consciously chose to cast non-professional actors and shoot on the more difficult 16mm instead of video.

“The inherent painterly quality of film lends a credibility,” he told *Indiewire* in 2005.

Writer/director Alex Ross Perry tries to pastiche those formal methods of 16mm observational camera work, but his characters are just as disengaged with reality as their words, so there really is nothing interesting to observe and nothing for the audience to be drawn into. Speaking only in flowery prose, his characters never utter the occasional “um” or “like,” as if literally ripped from the pages of a novel. And while this novelty may be the theme of the film as homage to author Philip Roth, the emotional heft and stakes of the movie are limited to such a degree that the film becomes unwatchable.

No matter how you look at it, there is a need to classify the type of American independent filmmaking that focuses on character driven slice of life stories. Mumblecore puts less emphasis on technology and special effects and more on a realist, micro-budget aesthetic to shed light on

human relationships, the trauma of undergoing identity crises and a struggle to realize what the American Dream should expect of somebody.

In 2007, Ted Barron said the mumblecore “connection to Cassavetes is not so much in the content of the films but rather their means of production and distribution” (Filmmaker Magazine). While Mr. Barron may be the Harvard Films Archive Curator, he downplays the connection in themes between Cassavetes and mumblecore. Both Bujalski and Cassavetes are game changers in a business sense, producing and distributing their films on their own terms. They both share a love for sending up all those ‘WASPY’ values that only great art can knock down. The thematic content as well as the anarchistic DIY spirit of Cassavetes is carried on into Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha*.

The cinematic trail blazed by Cassavetes would be marched down by the mumble-brigade in the mid-2000s, saying “hey, you don’t need a million dollar budget, a star-studded cast and the Hollywood studio system, you just need a camera, some lights, and a vision!” Cassavetes was the maverick that foreshadowed a problematization with daily human communication long before the internet and technology altered the way humans communicate. Cassavetes’ characters had no problem being absolutely lousy at conveying their feelings to one another long before iPhones made lousy communication even easier.

In 1967, John Cassavetes shot *Faces* entirely in black and white with a 16mm handheld camera to deconstruct Los Angeles’ wealth and power and to reveal the dark underbelly of alcoholism and adultery. A few 1,000-watt quartz lights are the entirety of the lighting design, and a broken second-hand Perfectone recorder makes the dialogue almost impossible to hear, just as the characters in the film find it impossible to hear one another. Really, it is not as frustrating

as it sounds; it is exhilarating. As a viewer, you will have to pay a bit more attention, but the reward is doubled when the film ends and you want to reassess your own relationships. “People are afraid to be themselves, until they become other people, and they can never become themselves again,” said Cassavetes (Cassavetes on Cassavetes). The inspiring part of the film is its possibility in leading viewers towards more self-honesty. Even collaborator Al Rubin remarks on the Criterion Collection behind-the-scenes feature, *Faces* was “about a segment of American life I had not paid much attention to because I was living it.”

In regard to *Faces*, the plot is hardly as important as the blocking, cinematography and in your face close-ups of characters who are rarely seen in the same frame as others, and mostly shot extremely close up to highlight their emotional isolation. The film opens with a successful businessman named Richard Forst (John Marley) waiting for a meeting and being waited on by his secretaries. We know this is a man disengaged and apathetic to the American Dream when one of his first lines is “I need coffee, I don’t want to yawn in her face.” Forst later reveals he feels like a “mild success in a dull profession.” He is dreary, un-invigorated and realizing the promise of social status bringing joy has only brought him weariness and complacency. His disenfranchisement with success and money lead him to drink with an escort named Jeannie, after which he abruptly returns home and asks his wife Maria for a divorce.

As with many men in *Faces*, money can buy sex and transitory pleasures, but nobody in the film is fully whole; their faces shot in fragments, one eye in focus, an ear off center of the frame with an inanimate object taking up most the center of the screen. Cassavetes, like Bujalski, was not fearful of allowing the beats in conversation to linger upon awkward pauses or under confident glances from actors as they nervously sip cocktails. His cinéma vérité style filmmaking

was not only employed as a revolutionary aesthetic, but as an anecdote to the charm and happy romances of classic Hollywood romantic comedies, which simply reaffirmed American capitalist ideals of masculinity, success and love. The bubblegum sweetness of Hollywood romance wears off quickly, and when you want to see how real romance may function among the rich, *Faces* is the quintessential anti-romantic melodrama.

In *Faces*, every character is broken and reaching for their kicks. Forst is a disengaged aging man looking for youth and pleasure in Jeannie (Gena Rowlands,) an escort with more intelligence and grace than her profession may insinuate. Maria (Lynn Carlin) is Frost's suicidal wife who cannot even get her husband to take her to the movies, so she spends the night with Chet (Seymour Cassel,) the uninhibited charming blonde who is so fearful of honesty and contemplation that he hides behind his gallivanting exterior. Chet is one character that does take a few seconds for self-reflection when he says, "nobody has the time to be vulnerable to each other... our armor comes out like a shield and goes around us." With the same sentiment, Cassavetes was the filmmaker who introduced that it was okay to take your time in a film, to show the vulnerable moments and let them seep into the imagination of the audience.

The themes of aging, disenfranchisement and fear introduced in *Faces* are also on display in what some call the first mumblecore film, Andrew Bujalski's unassuming masterpiece *Funny Ha Ha*. It was Eric Masunaga, the sound mixer for the film, who came up with the "mumblecore" phrase, and it seemed to stick. Makes sense, considering he is the man in charge of attempting to make the mumbling sounds of the characters somewhat audible. Whereas characters' insecurities in *Faces* reveal themselves in emotional outbursts and destructive

behavior, characters in *Funny Ha Ha* reveal their insecurities linguistically (as well as through recurring drinking.)

Marnie (Kate Dollenmayer) ‘stars’ as a recent college graduate who is aimlessly floating from boring desk job to boring research job. When asked about her “plan” she tells her friend, “I’m just wandering around the earth.” It is a refreshingly brutal line. So many people may be quick to answer such a question with fluff, but Bujalski’s leading lady keeps it real.

Marnie’s professional and romantic life are in complete flux as she has to take a dull office job and the man she desires gets married to his ex-girlfriend. This is a simple story, but a common one in America of disenfranchisement and lost souls. If the plot sounds similar, that is probably because Lena Dunham has spoken extensively about how she was influenced by *Funny Ha Ha*. So much so that she decided to glitz it up with some Woody Allen coolness and turn the same plot into *Tiny Furniture*. What makes *Funny Ha Ha* the superior story of post-graduate life is its reluctance toward being artsy for the sake of being artsy. Marnie and her group of misfit friends are just trying to navigate a dreary bureaucratic world, and their lifestyle matches it; plain clothes, plain haircuts, plain speech, and “negative two dollars” in their bank accounts.

It seems every other word of dialogue is a combination of ‘like’ ‘um’ ‘I don’t know’ or ‘you know what I mean.’ A more passive aggressive approach on the part of Marnie, but also an astute observation by Bujalski of a certain symptom of a generation being unable to effectively communicate, their anxieties about jobs and expectations compromise their voice. Similarly characters in *Faces* try to run away from the tragedy of their own lives through humor and warn others not “to get serious.” Just as the sound design makes it difficult to hear what characters are saying to each other in *Faces* (Jeanie even tells Forst she “can’t understand what the heck [he] is

saying”) the same sort of sound mix is used in *Funny Ha Ha*, and just as self-reflexively (Marnie tells a date that she is bored, and doesn’t want to talk about herself).

However, there is a philosophy behind the poor sound. When people mumble in everyday life, it is an act of defiance. Society and those that ‘know better’ will tell you to speak up and be clear, but the act of mumbling goes against what is expected of your speech. That is the genius of Bujalski hidden behind the mask of the mundane and the mumble, that he can even use the sound design and characters’ speech patterns to make a defiant gesture.

“I’ve wagered ten years of my own work on a hunch that it does not violate the tenets of good drama to tell stories that take place on lower frequencies, because to me the most beguiling aspects of human behavior... emerge not when the stakes are at their highest, when an atomic bomb is in the room needing to be defused, but when the stakes are unclear. Most of our lives are lived in this zone... and there is a wealth of untold stories in those little choices,” said Bujalski in 2010 (Cinemaguild). The ambition of Bujalski to blow up the paradigm of how Americans digest dramatic stories was absolutely a revolutionary turn, even if at first glance *Funny Ha Ha* is an unambitious film with no plot and no conclusive conflicts. It is, however, enchanting to watch the way Bujalski directs the “little choices” of his characters with very few cuts and camera movement as if the audience is invited in to observe their every-day choices.

Even Marnie’s “to-do list” is a brilliant observation of the mundane being subversive and another example of defiance against expectations of the American dream. The list, in form alone, is representative of the good ‘American,’ setting goals in an empirical straightforward fashion. But her goals are not quite lofty, including “learn to play chess,” “spend more time outdoors” and “stop drinking for a month.” While Marnie’s parents and peers may want her to think in

terms of career-goals, she understands the little things in her life will lead to larger successes. She won't outwardly express those ideas, it is an inference left to the audience, which makes watching the film all that more engaging and one of the ways *Funny Ha Ha* is an unassuming classic in American cinema.

On the other side of the same mumble-coin, *Listen Up Philip* dilutes the original strain of mumblecore's defiance and simplicity. Philip (Jason Schwartzman) plays a successful novelist who leaves his girlfriend Ashley (Elisabeth Moss) in their Brooklyn loft to spend the summer at his mentor's home upstate. He also has no trouble expressing his asshole tendencies, being quippy, or making cute allusions to French films and classic literature.

Whereas *Faces* and *Funny Ha Ha* are self-reflexive and aware of how they are using sound design, handheld camera and 16mm film, *Listen Up Philip* tags those tropes onto a recognizable cast and onto a movie with no real point. Characters in *Faces* have money, are in a socially acceptable place in their economic life, but are absolutely depressed and wrought with tragedy and personal demons, trying to be themselves but having no idea how. Characters in *Funny Ha Ha* are at a precarious post-graduate crossroads in life, have to take horrible jobs to pay the rent, are not fashionable and do not speak with overt sophistication. In *Listen Up Philip*, sure, characters are emotionally stunted and hardly happy, but unlike the previous mumblecore films, these new characters are fashionable, suave, funny, and intelligent; they are a part of some sort of idealized, fictitious, neo- New York intelligentsia. *Listen Up Philip* has no authentic semblance to reality like the great works from Bujalski and Cassavetes. Case in point, the Hollywood, star-studded cast.

In *Faces*, Lynn Carlin who plays Maria was a secretary that Cassavetes stumbled upon when he needed an actress and she was available to read. In *Funny Ha Ha*, Kate Dollenmayer is the lead actress but was originally an animator, most notably on 2001's *Waking Life*. A lot of non-actors were initially cast in mumblecore films to lend an extra sense of authenticity and realism. They could honestly depict characters that have challenges articulating and clearly communicating because they are having the same real difficulties in front of the camera. Andrew Bujalski speaks to this conscious choice of casting non-actors when he says; "It seemed that part of an actor's training was to be constantly pushing the story forward with clear objectives, clear actions, clear reactions; but I wanted to short circuit that clarity and get palpable uncertainty up there. I wanted to see people struggling to understand their lives in real time. I wanted to use film to do things I couldn't get at in any other medium-certainly not on paper" (Cinemaguild). The idea to "short-circuit" the entire philosophy behind acting is part of what makes the mumblecore movement such un-pretentious works of genius. By casting non-actors Bujalski is able to make bold statements about the filmmaking process and human relationships by dialing back his scope, if you want to convey truthful anxiety, cast people to act in your film who are actually anxious to be in front of the camera. The audience reaps the rewards when they are able to see the honesty that so many directors attempt to portray, but fail to because they are wrapped up in trying to market the film or have Hollywood's approval.

With Alex Ross Perry's *Listen Up Philip*, the cinéma vérité style of fly-on-the-wall cameras and mumblecore emphasis on depicting realistic conversations and characters is tossed aside in favor of a star studded cast including Jason Schwartzman, Elisabeth Moss and Jonathan Pryce. That alone would not be enough to write off the film, but the 16mm film stock paired with

aimless depressed New York socialites situate the film in a post-mumblecore mode; where the lack of realism in the character's endless stream of witty banter go to place the story outside of everyday life. Which would all be well and good in a movie that was not trying to depict real people, but that is not the case with *Listen Up Philip*. The slice of life stories were so much more impactful with largely non-actors and when they felt so real they could almost pass as documentary, or its "bastard child reality television" as Maria San Filippo calls it (Cineaction).

Now, we have the "bastard child" of mumblecore in *Listen Up Philip*. Jason Schwartzman opens the film bragging to his ex-girlfriend about his success, speaking a mile a minute and telling her how much it hurts him she is not thrilled with his novel. He storms out of the 'bohemian' café in business casual attire and a voice-over narrator attempts to introduce Philip's headspace as an egotistical asshole. A lot of words are spoken by the narrator in obtuse observations, such as, "Philip wished Ashley had not reminded him how great it felt to be proud of her. His own relationship with success had forced him to grow out of feeling resentful toward her accomplishments. He was not prepared to lose that constant stream of enthusiasm." Bujalski and Cassavetes never needed a narrator to fill up space. They took the time to let their characters breath and their cinematography and (lack of) lighting served to characterize the people we were watching as isolated and lonely. There is no room to breathe or actively observe when the narrator chimes in with quotes that really do not make a lot of sense. Part of the subversive fun of *Faces* and *Funny Ha Ha* is their ambiguity and need for audience participation; the thing *Listen Up Philip* is asking of its audience is to keep pace with the amount of words you may hear at any given moment.

In an interview, Schwartzman reveals Perry told him “don’t think of [Philip] Friedman as a writer. Think of him as an asshole” (Salon). That really is all the evidence one should need to see how far Perry took the formal techniques and tropes of mumblecore and used them to make a film full of his own words and pseudo-intellectual ramblings, and not a film about real life people in real situations. Real people have more than one personality trait, and if they are assholes in real life, that certainly is stemming from psychological factors or social context. None of that is provided or inferred in *Listen Up Philip*. As it turns out, real life was a lot more interesting to watch than fantastical twee New York intellectuals.

In this particular moment in US history, with political protests breaking out in almost every major city, it may be easy to look back at mumblecore films and critique their lack of overt political messages. But seeing how the best mumblecore films are critiquing modern American society and the institutions put in place to fail so many people, they are just as astutely critical of American capitalism as the protestors flooding the streets over institutionalized racism. When Forst sits at opposite ends of the stairs with his wife in the final scene of *Faces*, smoking a cigarette in black and white, the viewer can intensely feel the emotional vacuum left in the wake of an endless pursuit of trying to climb a corporate ladder. Forst and Maria are emotionally exhausted by the end, with their energy bound up and wasted on alcohol, tobacco and sex. *Funny Ha Ha* shares a similar emotional heft wherein the characters can barely make ends meet and spend their evening away from their desk jobs at parties they really do not care about, unable to even make eye contact with one another. That emotional exhaustion is lost on *Listen Up Philip*, characters may say they are unhappy but their assortments of privilege and the trademark twee cutesiness paints a far less grim portrait of American than *Faces* and *Funny Ha Ha*. Sure, Philip

does tells old girlfriend that the happiness he expected success to bring is not working out for him, but the line is so on the nose without any of the sorrow such a line should bring, rendering it a disingenuous attempt at an earnest emotion.

Listen Up Philip should be classified as ramblecore, because the movie never shuts up but never has much to say, whereas *Faces* and *Funny Ha Ha* are quieter films that present a portrait of a world where the American dream did not lead to a beautifully decorated loft in Brooklyn, but instead leads to failed relationships, boring jobs and suppressed anxiety. Not only is that a more radically political statement, but also it is a more rewarding and cathartic emotional experience.

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