

DIY Indies

- The selling points of a DIY film are its unprofessional look and its lack of budget.
- Draw on classic genres but their cheap look put them outside of off-Hollywood tradition.



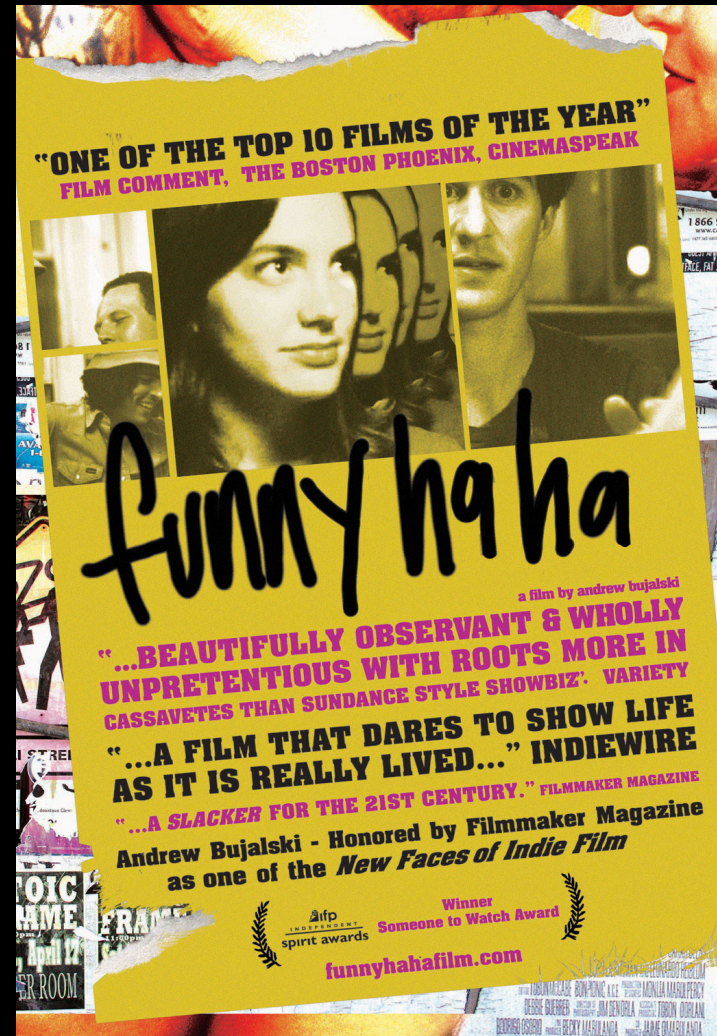
THE MOVEMENT

What is “Mumblecore”?

- “Mumblecore” is a film sub-genre of diy indie films
- The term, “Mumblecore” is in reference to the fact that much of the dialogue sounds like mumbling, due to the dialogue being improvised and the low sound quality of the films.

Origins

- “Mumblecore” technically began in the early 2000’s, but the basic principles were inspired by several film movements.
- The film, *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) is usually credited as the first film of the genre.



Production Circumstances

Equipment

- Digital Cameras
- Editing with simple tools
- Home video quality



Production Circumstances

Distribution

- Largely ignored by Sundance but huge at SXSW
- Because virtually no distributors would touch their films, they pioneered direct online marketing
- Distributed on YouTube, Vimeo, Netflix, blogs, mail-order DVDs
- “I want more people to see our movies, but I didn’t want to dilute what it is that we’re doing to get it to more people.” - Mark Duplass

Content & Genre

- Most mumblecore films are dramatic comedies, otherwise known as “dramedies”.
- Most characters are in their twenties or thirties, and struggle with relatable or common issues, through uncommon scenarios.
- Example: *The Puffy Chair* (2006) is about a couple whose relationship falls apart (common issue) while on a road trip to pick up a puffy chair purchased on eBay as a Father’s Day gift (uncommon situation).

Narrative

Conventional

“Mumblecore narratives hinge less on plot points than on the tipping points in interpersonal relationships.” - Dennis Lim

- No change in knowledge throughout narrative.

Narrative

Apolitical

- Focused on a set of relationships, not a serious social issue
- Broken relationships
- “Unavoidable” fights



Acting

Dialogue

- Inappropriateness
- “Demurral”
- “Hesitation”
- “Noncommitment”
- Improvised

Acting

Performance

- Nonprofessional actors uncomfortable speaking on camera.
- “Insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their characters’ ideas, desires, and feelings is not merely symptomatic of their lack of technique, it dovetails with a defining characteristic of the particular cohort (white, middle-class, twenty-something) to which the filmmakers and their quasi-fictional characters belong.” - Taubin
- This is what mumblecore is trying to capture

Cinematography

Realistic images are created with:

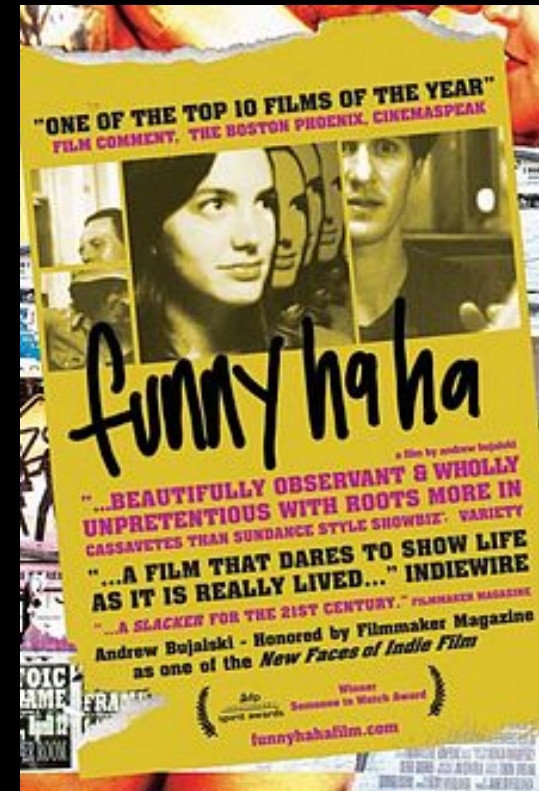
LOOSER COMPOSITION, ABRUPT rather than
fluid CAMERA MOVEMENTS

INCOMPLETE LIGHTING OF OBJECTS

AWKWARD CUTS (LACK OF REVERSE SHOT)

Aesthetics

- Low-budget; location shooting; digital video; notoriously bad sound
- Unscripted dialogue and minimal 'action'
- Long, fumbling conversations about love, sex, work, and everyday incidents
- Focus on educated, arty, urban 20-somethings (often deeply uncertain about themselves/the future).



Andrew Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha*

“The films feel more like dialogues between filmmakers and their audiences and less like calling cards to the studios.” - Dennis Lim

The Formal Evolution of Mumblecore



THE MUMBLECORE GROUP

Andrew Bujalski

- Sometimes referred to as the “Godfather of Mumblecore” due to his film, *Funny Ha Ha* starring the sub-genre.
- Graduated from Harvard
- Directs, writes, and edits his films.
- Is an actor as well, appearing in not only his own films, but films of other mumblecore filmmakers as well.
- Has won awards at multiple film festivals, including Sundance.

Filmography

Computer Chess - 2013

Beeswax - 2008

Mutual Appreciation - 2005

Funny Ha Ha – 2002



Funny Ha Ha (dir. Andrew Bujalski, 2002)



Joe Swanberg

- Known to be very prolific, having made 14 feature films in the last 8 years.
- On almost all of these films, he is the director, producer, writer, editor, cinematographer, and an actor.
- Frequently works with other mumblecore filmmakers, most notably Greta Gerwig.



Filmography

Drinking Buddies - 2013
Marriage Material - 2012
Caitlin Plays Herself - 2011
Autoerotic - 2011
The Zone - 2011
Art History - 2011
Silver Bullets - 2011
Uncle Kent - 2011
Alexander the Last - 2009
Nights and Weekends - 2008
Hannah Takes the Stairs - 2007
LOL - 2006
Kissing on the Mouth - 2005

Hissy Fits (dir. Joe Swanberg, 2005)



Mark and Jay Duplass

- Mark and Jay Duplass are brothers who co-direct and co-write films together
- Mark and Jay may be the most well-known of the mumblecore filmmakers.
- Several of their films, most notably *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* have made significant money in comparison with their small budgets and releases.
- In addition to the common mumblecore traits of ad-libbing, they are known to shoot a very large number of takes.
- Mark also acts in many of the films, and in other mumblecore films.



Filmography (selective)

The Do-Deca-Pentathlon - 2012
Jeff, Who Lives at Home - 2011
Cyrus - 2010
Baghead - 2008
The Puffy Chair - 2005

This is John (dir. Jay Duplass, 2003)



Greta Gerwig



Notable Filmography (acting)

Frances Ha - 2012
Lola Versus - 2012
To Rome With Love - 2012
Arthur - 2011
Damsels in Distress - 2011
No Strings Attached - 2011
*Northern Comfort** - 2010
Greenberg - 2010
The House of the Devil - 2009
*Nights and Weekends*** - 2008
Baghead - 2008
*Hannah Takes the Stairs** - 2007
LOL - 2006

- An actress and filmmaker, very popular in the movement. She has also taken roles outside the genre, recently co-starring in Woody Allen's latest film, *To Rome With Love*.
- Unlike the previous two filmmakers mentioned, her acting is what makes her significant to mumblecore. She is known for her improvisational style, which contributes heavily to this genre.

CINEMATIC INFLUENCES

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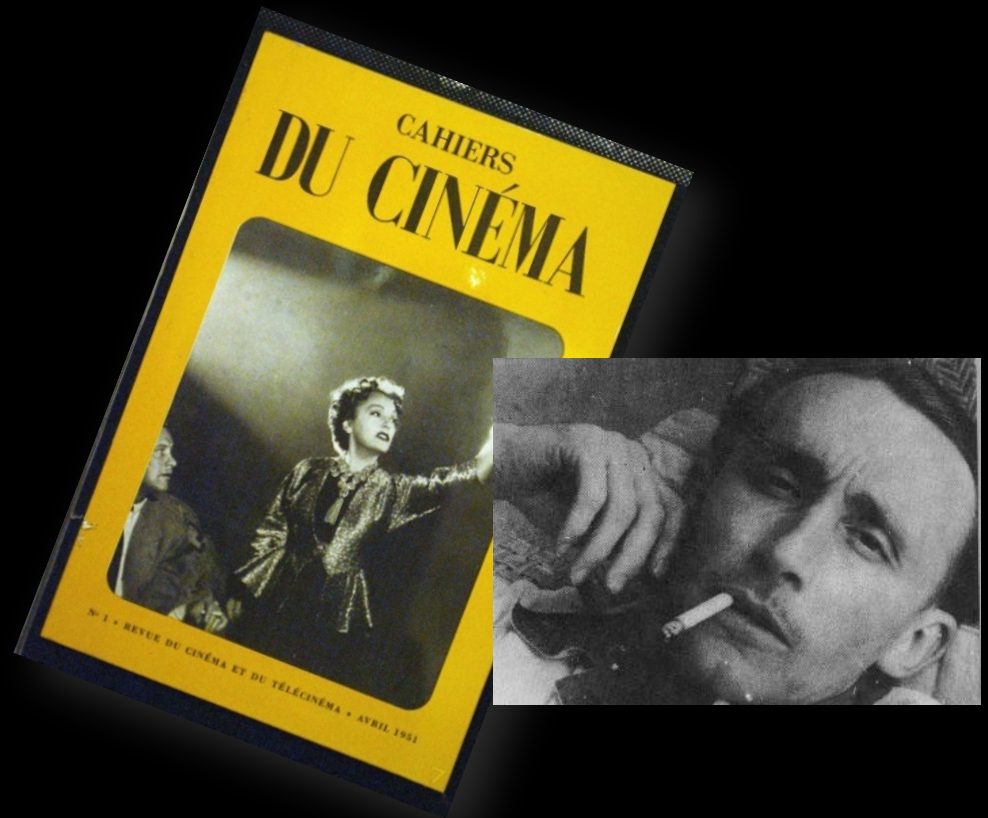
- FRENCH NEW WAVE
- JOHN CASSEVETES
- RICHARD LINKLATER
- DOGME 95

Mumblecore as Film Tradition

- Though scripted *Mumblecore* films counted on actors to improvise.
- Like *French New Wave* of the 1950/60s and the *New American Cinema* of the 1950s, the low-tech aesthetic of *Mumblecore* tried to appear more faithful to reality than studio gloss.
- Some critics saw *Mumblecore* as sustaining these cinematic traditions and returning to the roots of American independent cinema.

French New Wave: Origins

- A very coherent group, many wrote for the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in their 20's
 - *Cahiers* co-founded and edited by Andre Bazin (1918-1958)
 - The Main Players:
 - François Truffaut
 - Jean-Luc Godard
 - Alain Resnais
 - Claude Chabrol
 - Eric Rohmer
 - Jacques Rivette



French New Wave: Origins (cont' d)

- The FNW group all loved genre and auteur films, and Hollywood films
- All put their ideas about filmmaking into practice around 1960 due to “prime de la qualite” (subsidy for quality)

Substance

- “Film of the camera, not of the pen”
- A wide variety of genres and approaches, almost always treated in a “revisionist” way—e.g., film noir, gangster cinema turned on its side for a film like Godard’s *Breathless*, Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player*, or Melville’s *Le Samourai*
- Urban scenes “captured with the immediacy of Direct Cinema”

French New Wave: Form

- Totally eclectic – *whatever* (that almost becomes the style); some call it “eccentric”
- Emphasis on the *mise-en-scène*
- Low budget, fast and light-weight (e.g., handheld camera); benefitted from technical advances in documentary shooting; style a lot like “indie” style today

Impacts on Films to Follow

- Film School Generation (e.g., Spielberg, Scorsese)
- American indie movement; *So many influences*

The 400 Blows (dir. Francois Truffaut, 1959)

- French Title: *Les quatre cents coups*
- Premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, May 4, 1959
- Semi-autobiographical story
- Antoine, a neglected adolescent boy, finds himself trapped in a life of petty crime and harsh punishments where all of his attempts to escape only make things even worse.
- The French idiom “faire les quatre cents coups” also means “to raise hell.”
- Note the famous ending—long tracking shot followed by freeze frame.



The 400 Blows (dir. Francois Truffaut, 1959)



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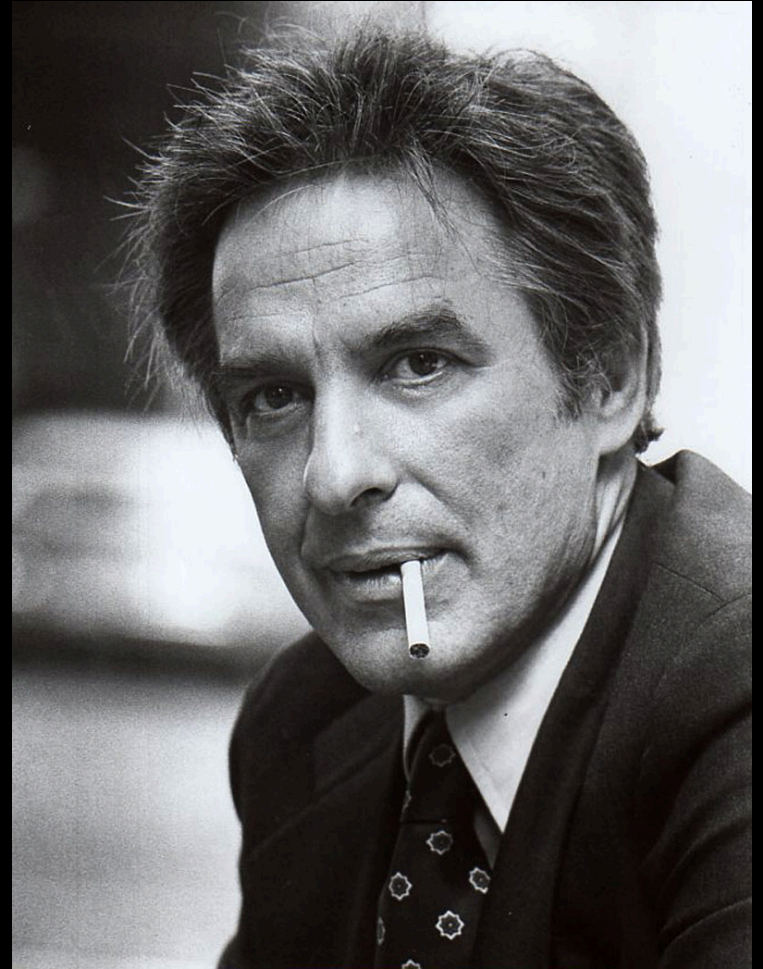
Breathless (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1959)

- French Title: *À bout de souffle*
- Premiered in France March 16, 1960
- Romanticized gangster-hero takes up with an American girl and goes on the lam.
- Starring Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg
- Note the overall violation of “classic” editing techniques—jump cuts, violation of 180-degree rule, sudden time jumps (elliptical cutting in the extreme), actor looks at camera; also, handheld



John Cassavetes: Indie Godfather

- John Cassavetes (1929-89) had a disproportionate influence on indie filmmaking compared to his commercial success.
- His work is the foundation stone of the First Wave of American independent filmmaking and the ultimate declaration of independence.
- “Patron Saint of independent filmmaking”



Shadows (1959)

- Cassavetes' directorial debut revolves around an interracial romance between Lelia (Lelia Goldoni), a light-skinned black woman living in NYC with her two brothers, and Tony (Anthony Ray), a white man.
- Shot in and around Times Square and evolved from Cassavetes' acting workshops.
- The raw spontaneity and emotional volatility
- The dialogue: erratic rhythms of real speech.

- Shot on location with a cast and crew made up primarily of amateurs.
- Film broke every rule of how a film should be made
- Cassavetes raised the \$40,000 budget himself
- Appeared on a radio show(“Jean Shepard’ s Night People”) and urged listeners to send \$2 for an “advance ticket” .
- \$2,500 raised in a week according to Ray Carney.
- Guerilla production techniques made possible by more portable camera equipment.
- He lacked permits to shoot in NYC and small crews had to stay one step ahead of the NYPD
- He gave inspiration to a new generation of filmmakers that you could make a movie on your own
- The film is a visionary work that is widely considered the *forerunner* of the independent film movement.

Shadows (dir. John Cassavetes, 1959)



Richard Linklater

- Linklater has built an eclectic filmography: indie films ("Slacker") and crowd-pleasing studio fare ("School of Rock"), ambitious decade-long projects ("Boyhood," "The Before" trilogy) and quick-and-easy digital video work ("Tape"), teen comedy-drama ("Dazed and Confused") and philosophical arty films ("Waking Life").
- Slackavetes



Slacker (1991)

- Produced for \$23,000
- Although it showed as a work in progress at that year's Independent Feature Film Market and secured a \$35,000 German television sale, it was too soon for overnight success.
- When the national release via Orion Classics followed another full year later, in the summer of 1991, the audience was ready
- A portrait of Austin's lower and middle classes.
- The film follows various characters and scenes, never staying with one character or conversation for more than a few minutes before picking up someone else in the scene and following them.
- *Slacker* defined a generation — highly educated guys who work in coffee shops
- "Slacker" already was in Merriam-Webster, defined as "a person who shirks work or obligation"; it later took on a second meaning as a young person who is "disaffected, apathetic, cynical or lacking ambition."

Slacker (dir. Richard Linklater, 1991)



Slacker opening scene (dir. Richard Linklater, 1991)



The “Manifesto” and the “Vow” of Dogme 95

- What is a manifesto?
 - “A public declaration, usually of political, religious, philosophical or literary principles and beliefs”
 - Typical of modernist, avant-garde art movements
- Aims of the manifesto?
 - Seriousness
 - Provocative mode of self-aware public definition
 - Aesthetic
 - Public relations dimensions
- The Vow of Chastity
 - Limiting filmmaker’s options as a source of novelty
 - Stripping film of organizing structures
 - Hollywood narrative illusion
 - Auteur cinema intention

Dogme 95

- A collective of film directors founded in Copenhagen in spring 1995
- Publication of a slightly tongue in cheek manifesto and VOW OF CHASTITY
- A slightly parodic rescue mission - to save cinema from bourgeoisification
- Collectivism, not individualism
- Avant-garde, not conformism
- Filmmaking policy in the age of democracy

"Vow of Chastity"

- 1) Shooting must be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where this prop is to be found.)
- 2) The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot.)

- 3) The camera must hand-held. Any movement or immobility attainable in the hand is permitted. (The film must not take place where the camera is standing; shooting must take place where the film takes place.)
- 4) The film must be in colour. Special lighting is not acceptable. (If there is too little light for exposure the scene must be cut or a single lamp be attached to the camera.)

- 5) Optical work and filters are forbidden.
- 6) The film must not contain superficial action. (Murders, weapons, etc. must not occur.)
- 7) Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now.)
- 8) Genre movies are not acceptable.
- 9) The film format must be Academy 35 mm.
- 10) The director must not be credited.

CULTURAL INFLUENCE

Irony vs. "New Sincerity"

- Irony, or the ironic attitude, takes nothing very seriously — especially superficial things — inverts or changes meanings and symbols, and prides itself on distance.
- It is what allows for skepticism and mental remove from the everydayness of life, and what helps safeguard against the effects of propaganda and ideology. Think: Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and South Park

"New Sincerity"

- The New Sincerity, is a return to true feeling, commitment, connection, art, seriousness and patriotism.
- Its rebirth came after 9/11 as a response to "postmodern irony," which can be shallow and flip.
- Sincerity prides itself on saying what it really means and speaking from the heart.

Hipsterism and Sincerity

- Hipster culture/style are based on both irony and sincerity working in tandem, at different times, to differing degrees.
- There is ironic performance in: nerd glasses (they are not nerds), grandpa sweaters (they are not grandpas), etc.
- But this thrift shop aesthetic also lends its wearers a late 1970s, '80s or '90s feel as well as a sense of being part of a working class or social outcast group (all of which are more authentic than the contemporary and the popular)

Sincerity in Popular Culture

- This is the well-known and now widespread irony of uncool becoming the coolest thing possible. This has been helped along by pop-culture figures like Katy Perry, Zooey Deschanel, and Jay Z.
- Sincerity and earnestness can be seen in the resurgence of folk, the figure of the sad-guy/girl comic like Marc Maron or Chelsea Peretti, and of course, mumblecore

BACKLASH

- Digital video and mumblecore inspiring scores of optimistic think pieces about the democratization of filmmaking.
- But also how this led to "meager films"
- 3-D and "the lucid dream" of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) in the new decade.



"Pointless and amateurish, [this] cheap, meandering little thing [...] is a sad example of what happens in the new renegade cinema, where anybody can turn a hobby into a pretentious movie in their own home using a Canon 7D video cam from Best Buy and a Visa card." --Rex Reed, *The Observer* on *Tiny Furniture*

Film Fellas interview with Joe Swanberg

