TEACHING ‘Frances Ha’ (Baumbach 2012) and the US Indie Auteur Aesthetic

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US Contemporary Independent Film

A film which deals with non-mainstream subjects, having the stylistic features associated with lower budgets
The Aesthetics

The role of cinematography, mise-en-scene, editing, sound and performance

The relation of a film’s aesthetics to the auteur critical approach: Baumbach, but also Gerwig as co-writer

The relationship between film aesthetics and ideology: the dominant ideology of capitalism and the American Dream, homosocial relationships vs the heterosexual norm as the dominant relationship in film
Baumbach as an Auteur

Character driven narratives as indicated by many of the titles

Featuring characters in a state of personal confusion or crisis

Depicting a bitter or cynical outlook - black comedy

Long takes with a static camera - realism

Very few establishing shots - spectator is placed within the scene
The Opening
Cinematography

The decision to use monochrome cinematography:

According to Baumbach this was ‘intuitive’ and a way to return to the setting of New York and see it with new eyes as both familiar and unfamiliar.

Framing - Begins with two shots and then Frances is often in the frame alone highlighting the key theme of loneliness/lack of support
Editing and Sound:

The use of montage to establish the character driven narrative and the significance of place (home)

The music of Georges Delerue a composer associated with the French New Wave, particularly Truffaut - two key pieces from French films:

‘A Gorgeous Girl Like Me’ (Truffaut 1972) and ‘King of Hearts’ (de Broca 1966)

The lack of typical continuity features such as establishing shots

The use of chapters - addresses
Performance:

Gerwig sees herself as a clown in this role - a physical performer, depicting what Josh Larsen called ‘a dazed and confused woman child’ to reflect her energy and optimism - she keeps going.

‘Her face provides a monologue which needs to be read’ Sarah Polley

Many significant lines are delivered in a low key or understated way as throwaway lines - the film is very quotable.

According to Gerwig, it was very sad on the page, but through the performance you can empathise - no moments of despair in some desperate moments, she is genuine when other characters are false.
Spectatorship

The possibility of different readings and responses - according to Gerwig, European critical responses tended to focus on class and American ones on the fecklessness of the post-college generation and their sense of entitlement.

Frances is refreshing in her lack of this and in her energetic optimism and resilience. Although at 27 does she qualify as an ‘emerging adult’ - upper limit 25?

How responses are affected by social and cultural factors - Age of viewer? Aware or influences and references?
‘I’m Not A Real Person Yet’
The Character of Frances and Spectatorship

Is it necessary to like Frances?

From the imdb message board:

The audience is set up to feel superior to Frances. She makes dreadful decisions, crowned by her ridiculous trip to Paris. … "Get a real job" you might scream at the screen. Or even "save your money."

The main issue is an ideological one - is it Frances who is the problem or does the film reflect wider social and political issues? The film is a generational statement. The obvious comparison with ‘Girls’ and perhaps an issue of unrelateability?

The impact of the episodic nature of the film, the search for home and self-reliance as indicated by the inter-titles of addresses -the lack of traditional or modern support networks
Gerwig as co-writer

The focus is on femininity and female relationships, Frances continually talks about Sophie as if trying to possess her and Sophie is a double for Frances who chooses the dominant ideology that Frances rejects - the focus is two women.

Platonic love between women is a rare subject for film which is normally concerned with romance.

An element of personal reality: Gerwig shows her real family in her home town - reminiscent of Lena Dunham in ‘Tiny Furniture’

Thought to have softened the usual cynicism of Baumbach.
Narrative

There is a lack of dramatic moments and epiphanies, the story just simply moves on and Frances adapts, there are few moments of genuine sadness.

It is structured around two elements which worked in youth: being a dancer and the friendship with Sophie which need re-adjustment at the age of twenty seven

The lack of establishing shots and the episodic nature make the relationship between cause and effect ambiguous and she makes mistakes and poor decisions which make identification with her difficult at times
Contexts

Social: the idea of coming of age, the support network and the role of technology

Cultural: the influence of Woody Allen, The French New Wave and contemporary texts such as the HBO series ‘Girls’ - unavoidable with Adam Driver

Political: a crisis in the dominant ideology? - consumer capitalist success/heterosexual romance don’t seem to be the goals of these free thinking intellectual twenty somethings
Narrative Climax
BFFs and Feminist Film?

Do homosocial narratives ultimately inform the heterosexual romantic one?

Does this film reflect the idea of sisterhood crucial to the second wave of Feminism?

Is the focus the self or the relationship with Sophie?

Personal or Political?
Some Resolutions ..
Bibliography

- Cinesthesia Volume 4 Issue 1 ‘An Apartment of Ones Own’, Anna Bowles
- Filmspotting #448 Frances Ha Review, Josh Larsen and Adam Kempenaar
- Vine Podcast Interview with Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig on YouTube
- Sarah Polley interview with Greta Gerwig on YouTube