Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of medial, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

_____	_____
Andrew B. Young	Date

It Takes Two:
What the Duplass Brothers Mean for the Independent Film Industry

By

Andrew B. Young
Master of Arts

Film and Media Studies

_____

Tanine Allison, Ph.D.
Advisor

_____

Michele Schreiber, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____

James Steffen, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____

Date

It Takes Two:
What the Duplass Brothers Mean for the Independent Film Industry

By

Andrew B. Young
B.A., Samford University, 2013

Advisor:
Tanine Allison, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film and Media Studies
2015

Abstract

It Takes Two:
What the Duplass Brothers Mean for the Independent Film Industry

By Andrew B. Young

This thesis looks at the career of brothers Jay and Mark Duplass, two contemporary independent film writers, directors, and actors. I argue that their career reflects a number of recent trends within the independent film industry, including economic fluctuations, technological shifts, and aesthetic movements. By studying the production history, critical reception, and textual formation of the Duplass Brothers' films, we can come to a better understanding of the industry in the early twenty-first century. The first chapter provides an overview of the contemporary independent film industry and considers the historical conditions that determined the emergence of the Duplass Brothers. Furthermore, I argue that by contextualizing the Duplass Brothers within the contemporary independent film industry, we can better grasp the formal and narrative operations of their films. The second chapter explores authenticity in their films and contemplates the criticism that the Duplass Brothers have abandoned authenticity in lieu of commercial-oriented projects. I consider how their films utilize small-scale narratives and low-key aesthetics as a way of signifying authenticity, which has larger ramifications when it comes to distinguishing between mainstream and alternative audiences. The third chapter discusses the representation of race, class, and gender in the Duplass Brothers' films, and I argue that while the recurrence of privileged, white, male protagonists raises certain problems, these films also elicit alternative viewings in a way that audiences of independent cinema might come to expect.

It Takes Two:
What the Duplass Brothers Mean for the Independent Film Industry

By

Andrew B. Young

Advisor:
Tanine Allison, Ph.D.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film and Media Studies
2015

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my committee for your advice throughout this project, especially to Dr. Tanine Allison for your patience and guidance. This project would never have reached its potential without you.

To my friends and cohort for your constant support.

To Melanie Kowalski, Fran Pici, and Bethany Nash in the Scholarly Communications Office for your abundant encouragement throughout this process.

To my professors at Samford University and Emory University for giving me a vocabulary to articulate my appreciation for cinema.

Finally, thank you to my family. I love you. Your unwavering support has made this project even possible.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Jay and Mark Duplass occupy a special place in today's media landscape. On the one hand, their career is unique, and the films that they have released bear their distinct signature. From this perspective, it comes as no surprise that these two brothers would make films that consistently feature fraternal contestation, family conflict, and a general consideration of human relationships. Additionally, these films have a particular narrative, cinematographic, and performance style that has come to distinguish the Duplass Brothers. But on the other hand, their career reflects the broader conditions of its existence, and it therefore indicates a number of recent trends within the independent film industry. This perspective considers how fluctuations in the industry and the rise of cheaper, more sophisticated filmmaking technology spawned a new generation of independent filmmakers. Furthermore, filmmakers like the Duplass Brothers represent a reaction to established aesthetic, production, and distribution practices in both Hollywood and the independent film industry. Consequently, as an example of recent filmmaking practices, the Duplass Brothers just might portend the future of independent cinema.

This thesis project studies the career of Jay and Mark Duplass by locating them within their historical context, examining their films through close-readings, and analyzing the overarching themes of their work. Jay Duplass was born in 1973, followed by the birth of his younger brother Mark in 1976. Born and raised in New Orleans, the two brothers both attended the University of Texas at Austin to study filmmaking. In a 2006, email interview with the independent film blog *Indiewire*, however, the Duplass Brothers explain that their experience with film school was only educational to a minimum. Jay writes, "I learned a lot and that school's good for puking up all your bad

movies early and quick. But ultimately, no one can teach you to be an artist. […] Only way to do it is to afford yourself the opportunity to make movies, f'em up and then make more cuz art requires a lot of f'ing up."[1] Mark adds to this response by writing that after film school "we learned the real craft of storytelling by fucking up stories over and over again. […] It's a cliché by now, but picking up the camera and shooting is, I think, the best way to learn. Everyone has a set of bad films…might as well get them out early."[2] While they acknowledge learning the basic techniques of filmmaking in college, the Duplass Brothers ultimately identify themselves as self-taught filmmakers. Their preferred method of learning to make films is by doing so, and we can witness the formation of their filmmaking style across their body of work, especially in their earlier titles, as a result.

After graduating from film school, Jay and Mark stayed in Austin before moving to New York City, all the while working odd jobs in addition to receiving the occasional opportunity to freelance as film editors. In 2002, they shot a short called "This is John," featuring Mark in its only role, which went on to screen at the Sundance Film Festival, marking their first success and jumpstarting their career. Proceeding a series of shorts, they began writing, directing, and producing feature-length films, which started in 2005 with *The Puffy Chair*, followed by *Baghead* (2008), *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon* (shot in 2009; released in 2012), *Cyrus* (2010), and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (2011). When they are not making their own films, the Duplass Brothers act in other films and on television, though they appear alongside each other only in Fox's sitcom *The Mindy Project* (2012–), in which they play the Deslaurier Brothers. Jay is also an actor on the Amazon Prime

[1] Eugene Hernandez, "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, Creators of 'The Puffy
[2] Ibid.

series *Transparent* (2014–), playing Josh Pfefferman, the son of the main character, Maura. On FX's *The League* (2009–), Mark plays Pete, one of the show's leads, sharing the screen with his wife Katie Aselton, who also acted in the Duplass Brothers' early films. When it comes to performing for the silver screen, Jay played the brother of the main character, James, in Joe Swanberg's *Nights and Weekends* (2008), while Mark, who has the longer résumé, currently boasts sixteen feature-film credits and has starred in *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007), *Humpday* (2009), *Your Sister's Sister* (2011), *Safety Not Guaranteed* (2012), and *The One I Love* (2014), which he and Jay also produced.

This career trajectory is interesting if one considers the difficulty that the Duplass Brothers faced in trying to secure distribution for *The Puffy Chair*, which took a year to accomplish. In their interview with *Indiewire*, they explain that having unknown actors in the film dissuaded studios from distributing what was an otherwise promising product. Jay writes, "Not having stars in our movie [was our biggest challenge]. Everyone wanted to buy our movie but didn't know how to market it."[3] Ironically, the film, which stars Mark and Katie Aselton, would likely have little trouble with securing distribution today, as evidenced by the success of the Duplass Brothers on film and television screens. But, of course, there is more to the story of their career than finding a recognizable face to market their films. In Chapter One of my project, I provide an overview of the contemporary independent film industry and consider the historical conditions that determined the emergence of the Duplass Brothers. While marketing potential indeed plays a big role in deciding whether or not a studio will produce and distribute a film, there are other factors to consider when it comes to determining how people make films. My first chapter will consider industrial, technological, and aesthetic trends in

[3] Ibid.

contemporary independent cinema and situate the Duplass Brothers within this picture as a way to contextualize their films.

Chapter Two explores authenticity in the Duplass Brothers' films and contemplates the implications of the critical perception that their work has largely left authenticity behind in lieu of artificial, commercial-oriented projects. Authenticity is an issue that has particular import for the independent film industry, especially within the period in which the Duplass Brothers work. In the book *Indie 2.0*, Geoff King offers his analysis of the industry in the early 2000s, arguing that the perceived loss of authenticity within independent cinema is a hallmark of this period. He writes:

> The power of studio-owned specialty divisions continued to be seen as a threat to small-scale or more innovative indie production […]. More profoundly, perhaps, for some commentators, the very notion of an 'authentic' indie alternative to the mainstream was questioned, both generally and in the specific context of a period some two decades or more after its rise to prominence in the latter part of the 1980s.[4]

For King, the perception of authenticity in independent cinema resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about taste and distinction. He explains:

> The bottom line, for this approach, is that acts of cultural consumption and expressions of taste and preference are structured in a manner strongly related to the social position of the consumer, those with greater accumulations of cultural capital (a product of upbringing and education) generally being more equipped not just to consume but to derive pleasure from the consumption of products marked out as distinct from the mainstream […].[5]

My second chapter looks at how independent films signify authenticity through small-scale narratives and low-key aesthetics, and I consider how the Duplass Brothers' films utilize these signifiers to varying degrees. Consequently, the level of authenticity that

---

[4] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 2.
[5] Ibid, 4.

each of these films maintains positions not only the Duplass Brothers on the field of cultural production but their audience as well.

In Chapter Three, I discuss how issues of race, class, and gender play into the Duplass Brothers' films, all of which deal with white, middle-class, heterosexual males in their late twenties and early thirties who are struggling to bring themselves into adulthood. As Mark states in their interview with *Indiewire*, they view themselves as making "personal" films "that people can connect with."[6] Indeed, as I will argue, the Duplass Brothers follow a write-what-you-know approach, and the recurrence of privileged, white, male protagonists reflects their background. The consistent representation of such a narrow demographic remains problematic, especially for two filmmakers whom critics view as offering an alternative to mainstream cinema. In this chapter, I will analyze the representation of race, class, and gender in the Duplass Brothers' films, and I will contend that while these films are indeed oriented toward a traditional demographic, they still welcome subversive viewings, frustrating any effort to align them within a single ideological framework.

[6] Eugene Hernandez, "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, Creators of 'The Puffy Chair'," *Indiewire*, July 17, 2006, http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_jay_duplass_and_mark_duplass_creators_of_the_puffy_chai.

Chapter One: Heirs to Independent Cinema

As Jay and Mark Duplass remain active in writing, directing, and acting, they manifest the natural challenges involved in situating contemporary filmmakers within their historical context: At what point in time can we analyze a film from a distance? How do we distinguish the various phases of a career? What are the greater social, cultural, and economic forces that we must consider? How do we avoid portraying a career as teleologically progressing toward the present? How do we differentiate between something that seemed significant at the time from something that remains important?

With these questions in mind, this chapter will contextualize the Duplass Brothers' body of films by considering contemporaneous industrial, technological, and aesthetic trends in independent cinema. This chapter begins with an overview of the contemporary independent film industry, paying particularly close attention to the early 2000s. I plan to describe this complex period by engaging with scholarship on it, which will lead me to demonstrate how fluctuations in the industry at this time engendered a new independent film movement called "mumblecore." Following this overview of the industry, I will further delve into a description of mumblecore by drawing on contemporaneous criticism. The examination of this area of independent filmmaking will prove important because critics tend to identify the Duplass Brothers as mumblecore filmmakers. After considering the role of mumblecore within the landscape of contemporary independent cinema, I will outline the career of the Duplass Brothers by tracing its development from homemade shorts, to micro-budget features, to low-budget films that blend Hollywood stars with nonprofessional actors. Overall, my goal in this chapter is to explicate the various conditions that determined the emergence of the

Duplass Brothers, which will consequently lay the foundation for a more thorough investigation of their films in the following chapters.

"Special Names and Specialty Divisions"

The independent film industry remained in a state of flux throughout the early 2000s. Between the rise of digital technology, changes in the global economy, and shifts in the studio landscape, the industry was subject to a number of forces, both internal and external, that constantly shaped and reshaped it. In order to paint an image of this period, I will survey the literature of Yannis Tzioumakis and Geoff King, two scholars who triangulate the state of the industry from the points of the studios, the audiences, and the independent film market. Although there are points of divergence, their scholarship largely complements each other and together conveys the complexity of the independent film industry during this period. I will begin by establishing a clear vocabulary for discussing the industry and by defining the terms "independent," "indie," and "Indiewood." Although the scholars and critics that I will draw on sometimes use these terms interchangeably, distinguishing them from each other will begin to bring aspects of this complex period into focus.

In the essay "'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood'," Yannis Tzioumakis hashes out the differences between these terms in order to organize the history of the independent film industry into distinct periods. He argues that these terms "refer to different articulations of independent filmmaking" as well as to "distinct trends within

contemporary American independent cinema."[7] But scholars and critics tend to conflate these terms "because the specialty film sector evolved in ways that made the distinction of these labels often difficult to discern."[8] Tzioumakis writes that his objective is to demonstrate the dominance of each of these articulations among three different periods after 1980. He reasons that although one can locate all three articulations in each period, they exist to varying degrees with one articulation always appearing more prominently than the others and consequently defining that particular period. I will review his descriptions of "independent," "indie," and "Indiewood," which will frame a fuller picture of the industry in the early 2000s.

Tzioumakis describes independent filmmaking not in aesthetic or cultural terms but rather in its autonomy from the Hollywood industrial apparatus. Projects like John Cassavetes' *A Woman under the Influence* (1974) and David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) were evidence of films that were able to be produced and distributed outside of Hollywood, though they lacked any aesthetic or organization to unify them under a single banner. But, by the late 1970s, the increasing amount of this kind of film "prompted a number of contemporary critics to pronounce the arrival of a new era in independent filmmaking."[9] Specifically, Tzioumakis writes, critics grouped independent films under the label of "the 'low-budget, low-key quality film'," due to their "mature themes" and "educated audiences."[10] Reflecting on earlier independent film movements like the New American Cinema, Tzioumakis writes that independent filmmaking in this period

---

[7] Yannis Tzioumakis, "'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood': Towards a periodisation of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema," *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond*, edited by Geoff King, Clair Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid, 31.
[10] Ibid, 32.

"benefitted from an emerging industrial and institutional infrastructure that helped it assert itself in the marketplace and achieve the longevity and commercial success that earlier independent film movements were not in a position to accomplish."[11] The most important piece of this infrastructure, however, was the creation of specialty divisions by major studios to distribute – and only distribute – independent films. Tzioumakis writes that although companies like Twentieth Century Fox International Classics and Universal Classics stayed in business for only a short length of time, they made independent filmmaking a commercially viable career and laid the foundation for the "symbiotic relationship between Hollywood and independent cinema."[12] This relationship, however, would not come to full fruition until the early 2000s.

According to Tzioumakis, indie filmmaking dominated the next period, an articulation that merges the sophistication of the "low-budget, low-key quality film" with Hollywood stars, distributed and sometimes produced by the specialty divisions of major studios. Tzioumakis acknowledges the difficulty in pinning down a definition for indie filmmaking, but he writes that its fluidity "started being used as a marketing tool/brand name to differentiate these films from the more expensive and formulaic studio films as well as from the low-budget genre and exploitation filmmaking that continued to operate at the margins of the industry."[13] The shift from independent to indie filmmaking occurred in 1989, when Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* changed the public's perception of the independent film industry's commercial potential. Additionally, the establishment of specialty divisions such as Fine Line Features, Sony Pictures Classics, and Miramax helped initiate this new industrial period by expanding its

[11] Ibid, 31.
[12] Ibid, 32.
[13] Ibid, 35.

distribution practices into areas of production and finance. Consequently, Tzioumakis writes, "the label 'independent' ceased to signify economic independence from the majors when it came to questions of production; instead, the label became a signifier of a particular type of film, the 'indie' film."[14] Tzioumakis argues that the paragon of indie filmmaking is Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), "a film co-financed, co-produced, and distributed by [Disney-owned] Miramax and widely perceived to be the first indie film to break the $100 million mark at the US theatrical box office."[15] Tzioumakis considers *Pulp Fiction* as such a powerful example of indie filmmaking because of its "playful use of genre and film style, its complex narrative structure, its popular cultural references, and the presence of major film stars and a celebrity filmmaker."[16] The next period of the independent film industry, consequently, witnessed an intensification of this articulation.

Indiewood, as Tzioumakis describes it, is the convergence of the independent film industry and Hollywood, a fuller articulation of indie filmmaking. He writes:

> [W]hile companies from the second wave of the studio divisions became involved in finance and production in the early/mid-1990s, these arrangements were always secondary, as film acquisitions remained firmly the main strategy that defined their *modus operandi*. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, both these companies and the newer studio divisions, like Fox Searchlight and Focus Features, turned their attention primarily to production. By concentrating on the more conservative, star-led properties, […] these studio divisions privileged further the commercial elements that characterized indie film production for most of the 1990s.[17]

The commercial and critical success of films like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Vol. 2* (2004), Alexander Payne's *Sideways* (2004), and Ang Lee's *Brokeback*

[14] Ibid, 34.
[15] Ibid, 35.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, 37.

Mountain (2005) exemplify the dominance of Indiewood during this period. Furthermore, Tzioumakis details the effects that Indiewood had on the rest of the independent film industry: films with multi-million dollar budgets still qualify for the Independent Spirit Awards, Hollywood stars have become high-cost fixtures of these films, and Indiewood filmmaking can now compete with Hollywood on an even playing field. Such an impact on the industry, however, has also led to the demise of many specialty divisions. Tzioumakis argues that when Indiewood studios resemble Hollywood so closely, in both structure and size, they are eventually deemed unnecessary and shut down. He writes that "it made little financial sense for the major entertainment conglomerates to maintain these divisions, as their main studio distributors could now handle the distribution process."[18] While the global economic recession following the 2008 credit crunch played a significant role in the shuttering of studios like Warner Independent, Picturehouse, Paramount Vantage, and Miramax, these studios also suffered from increasing dependence on Hollywood. Although Tzioumakis suggests that Indiewood remains the dominant expression of independent filmmaking, the rise and fall of these studios represents a phenomenon that defined the industry in the early 2000s, a topic that I will now turn to Geoff King to discuss further.

In the book *Indie 2.0*, Geoff King continues the examination of the independent film industry that Tzioumakis touches on at the end of his essay. Although he and Tzioumakis maintain slightly different conceptions of the industry's historical unfolding – most evidently in King's conflation of the terms "independent," "indie," and "Indiewood" – King does offer an analysis of the early 2000s that complements Tzioumakis' description of Indiewood. Like Tzioumakis' argument that Indiewood

[18] Ibid, 38.

exemplifies an intensification of practices that originate in independent and then indie filmmaking, King identifies the early 2000s as "a new iteration of the indie model that became institutionalized in a particular form in the last two decades of the previous century."[19] But, he argues, this period also maintains "a strong vein of continuity in indie practice, both industrially and in the textual qualities through which individual features mark their distinctive attributes from those usually associated with the Hollywood mainstream."[20] Overall, King contends that while this period witnessed unique moments of crisis, it is normal for the independent film industry to remain in a state of crisis. I will now outline the moments of crisis, as well as the new opportunities, that King discusses in the introduction of his book in order to complete our picture of the industry in the early 2000s.

King argues that the overarching tone of critics during this period is ambivalent. On the one hand, he writes, "There was much talk of crisis, […] either actual or impending. This was partly related to the specific economic difficulties of the late 2000s and after, following the 'credit crunch' of 2008 and the consequent global recession, but also to some more local tendencies in the indie film landscape itself."[21] This kind of discourse certainly describes the diagnosis of the industry that Tzioumakis provides in his essay. But on the other hand, some critics considered these developments "as either heralding a return of indie cinema to something closer to its roots or as offering new opportunities to the sector."[22] As it will become apparent later in the chapter, this latter perception of the industry during this period alludes to the conditions that determined the

[19] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 2.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid, 5.
[22] Ibid.

emergence of the Duplass Brothers. In the meantime, I will consider some of these crises and opportunities that have come to define this period in the industry.

Although the dominant tone of critics at this time tended toward crisis, King argues that their concerns were not necessarily new to the industry. First, critics worried over the impact of the economic recession, especially on an industry as sensitive to the market as the one of independent film. King writes, "Downturns and recessions are generally expected to make investors more risk-averse, presenting a real and immediate difficulty to the indie sector."[23] But he challenges the notion that the recession, in spite of its depth, ever actually had the potential to send the industry to its ultimate demise, arguing that it had survived economic fluctuations in the past, like the 1987 Wall Street crash. Although critics focused on the effects of the recession on the industry, King writes that financial rises and falls are a normal part of the industry, "making it far from easy always to be clear whether particular signs of crisis are related to specific factors – such as a particular economic downturn – or the broader pressures often felt by those operating in the more marginal parts of the industry."[24] The second crisis that critics dwelt on was the increasing difficulty that films trying to achieve theatrical distribution faced in the wake of a rising number of independent productions. But King deems this crisis a familiar one, writing, "Fears have been repeatedly expressed since at least the late 1990s of the impact of too many indie films competing among themselves, effectively cannibalizing each other's market."[25] The purpose in King's counterpoint to these moments of crisis is not to diminish their impact on the independent film industry but

[23] Ibid, 6.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid, 7.

rather to show how crises are in a way inherent to the industry, a point to which I will later return.

In addition to the challenges presented by the economic recession and the over-saturated independent film market, the vitality of the industry during this period was stymied by the presence of Indiewood. King explains that this articulation of independent filmmaking is particularly dangerous because it undermines the autonomy of filmmakers while pretending to support it:

> The very existence of Indiewood is perhaps viewed as a more profound threat, […] regardless of any of the specific strategies with which it became associated […]. The presence of Indiewood has often been treated as a threat to the very notion of indie as anything that can at all clearly be distinguished from the mainstream. The term Indiewood is often used in a derogatory manner in indie circles, a classic example of the negative reference point against which a discursive concept such as 'true' indie might be defined.[26]

But the threat that Indiewood posed to the independent film industry at this time was diminished as these moments of crisis generated new opportunities. For starters, King notes that critics often emphasized as an alternative to Indiewood "the potential offered by digital production and distribution."[27] Moreover, he writes, "A positive spin could also be put on the status of the studio specialty divisions, themselves seen by some as entering a period of crisis at the end of the decade."[28] As King contends, while the shuttering of Warner Independent, Picturehouse, Paramount Vantage, and Miramax do not represent Hollywood's full withdrawal from the independent film industry, the closing of these specialty divisions does signal for some critics an opportunity for the industry to return to its independent roots.

---

[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 8.
[28] Ibid.

Considering the concern over the industry's moments of crisis as well as the emphasis on its new opportunities, King writes that criticism during this period "appears to be more […] than just a series of matter-of-fact reflections on the various ups and downs of different parts of the indie landscape."[29] He argues that discourses on independent cinema tend toward interdependent viewpoints of crisis and opportunity because the independent film industry persistently teeters between its demise and its future. Although crises and opportunities like the economic recession, the rise of digital technology, or the shrinking of Indiewood are distinct to the early 2000s, King argues that these events play into a discursive framework that must uphold an ambivalent perception of the industry:

> One way of understanding this is to suggest that, within the prevailing discourse, the indie sector almost *needs* to be seen as existing in a permanent state of crisis; that this is, in a sense, part of its definition. To be truly indie, in this view, is not to be too stable and secure but to exist in a manner that is understood as being in some way 'on the edge', or at least embattled if located with the arms of a studio division.[30]

Overall, King's point is to describe the ways in which this new iteration of the independent film industry is both different from and similar to previous versions of itself. Consequently, his portrayal of this period reveals a complex industry that was subject to changes in technology, the economy, and relationships between studios. But these changes not only afforded the opportunity for the independent film industry to reclaim some of its autonomy, they also enabled the emergence of a new category of independent filmmaking, inviting equally new filmmakers, like the Duplass Brothers, onto the industrial landscape.

---

[29] Ibid, 10.
[30] Ibid. (King's emphasis)

"A Mumbled Articulation of Independent Filmmaking"

At the end of his essay, Yannis Tzioumakis considers a "new dawn" for the independent film industry, asking if the Duplass Brothers' *Baghead* (2008) represents a new articulation of independent filmmaking. Despite the dominance of Indiewood during this period, Tzioumakis argues that a film like *Baghead*, which the Duplass Brothers produced independently before selling the distribution rights to Sony Pictures Classics, demonstrates that the industry "is becoming increasingly financially viable outside the traditional theatrical exhibition sector."[31] Citing social media and digital technology, Tzioumakis contends that low-budget, independent filmmaking not only remains a viable practice, but it is also easier now to be successful at it. While the exact path forward for the industry remains unclear, it is apparent that an articulation of independent filmmaking, like "mumblecore," has the potential to define the next period. The potential dominance of mumblecore is significant because critics tend to identify the Duplass Brothers as mumblecore filmmakers. The scholarship of Tzioumakis and King have thrown the independent film industry in the early 2000s into sharp relief, so now I will zoom in on this particular articulation by addressing the criticism of David Denby, Maria San Filippo, Amy Taubin, and Alicia Van Couvering. Through my engagement with these critics, I intend to demonstrate how the industry's crises and opportunities ultimately capacitated the emergence of the Duplass Brothers during this period.

Before dealing with the criticism on mumblecore, it is worth returning to Geoff King as a way of introducing this articulation of independent filmmaking. He writes:

---

[31] Yannis Tzioumakis, "'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood': Towards a periodisation of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema," *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond*, edited by Geoff King, Clair Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 38.

> The term 'mumblecore' was coined, initially, it seems, as a joke, to characterize a group of features on the basis of a shared minimal-budget low-key naturalism that in most cases involved the use of hand-held DV footage, along with lo-fi sound quality and the vocal hesitancies of nonprofessional performers, among them a number of the filmmakers themselves. […] A number of similarities can be identified between the works with which the term came to be associated […] along with a web of links between some of the filmmakers, several taking roles as performers or collaborators in the films of each other.[32]

The "joke" that King mentions is what David Denby recounts in his essay for *The New Yorker*, explaining that mumblecore received its name in 2005, "when the sound mixer Eric Masunaga, having a drink at a bar during the South by Southwest Film Festival (SXSW), in Austin, used the term to describe an independent film he had worked on. The sobriquet stuck, even though the filmmakers dislike it."[33] As King and Denby indicate, mumblecore is a trend in independent filmmaking that has a distinct mode of low-budget and digital production, a network of creators, and particular aesthetic conventions, whether the filmmakers associated with it want to be or not. The recent emergence of mumblecore harkens back to the crises and opportunities afforded by the industry in the early 2000s, and it merits an examination of the conditions that determined this articulation of independent filmmaking.

In her essay "A Cinema of Recession," Maria San Filippo analyzes the viable model that mumblecore offers to the independent film industry, similar to Tzioumakis' curiosity about its potential as a new dawn. San Filippo argues that mumblecore exemplifies an "impressive strateg[y] of survival" for independent filmmaking "in the wake of challenges from competitive media, changing consumption behaviors, and

---

[32] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 122.
[33] David Denby, "Mumblecore," *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 304.

economic crisis."[34] Conceptualizing mumblecore as an independent film movement, she contends that its filmmakers were "motivated less by concerted effort or collective ideology than by increased access both industrial and political."[35] Factors such as cheaper and more sophisticated filmmaking technology, a sense of disillusionment with Hollywood among young people, and the enthusiasm of the SXSW film festival consequently enabled mumblecore to establish itself within the industry. San Filippo also credits mumblecore with "proving the viability of digital distribution,"[36] an aspect upon which I will elaborate by returning to David Denby. Like King, who identifies the crisis brewing over the over-saturation of the independent film market, Denby writes that "the theatrical distribution of small movies has become commercially hazardous […] and many young filmmakers are looking to shake up distribution patterns."[37] Denby demonstrates that mumblecore filmmakers take to the digital realm to distribute their films, selling DVDs over the Internet, utilizing video-on-demand services, or making them available to download online. As an articulation of independent filmmaking that responds to the circumstances of the early 2000s with a viable model, mumblecore indeed appears to be the contemporary, defining tendency of the independent film industry.

Mumblecore, however, is not without its detractors. One of the most vocal critics against this articulation of independent filmmaking is Amy Taubin, who attacks it on the grounds that it is actually disjointed and self-absorbed. In her essay "All Talk," Taubin reduces mumblecore to an "indie movement that never was more than a flurry of festival

---

[34] Maria San Filippo, "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement," *CineAction* Winter 2011, 2, *Literature Resource Center*.
[35] Ibid, 4.
[36] Ibid, 2.
[37] David Denby, "Mumblecore," *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 306.

hype and blogosphere branding."[38] She traces the origins of mumblecore back to a cohort of bloggers, "which, as a way of grabbing attention in a dauntingly cluttered indie landscape, flogged mumblecore as the new happening thing."[39] Skeptical toward the cohesion of so-called mumblecore filmmakers, Taubin argues that this articulation is merely a construct of critics desperate to claim a role in the emergence of the next major independent film movement. She writes, "At most, one might think of mumblecore as an update of the 'New Talkie,' the strand (not quite a genre) of no-budget indies that emerged in the early Nineties."[40]

Although there are benefits to interrogating this new articulation of independent filmmaking, Taubin's accusations of disjointedness are largely inaccurate, if not rhetorically overblown. While she rightly deems Matt Dentler, blogger and former head of the SXSW film festival, as "the biggest benefactor of the mumblecore branding,"[41] there is nothing inherently dubious about critics delineating the initial contours of a film movement. Furthermore, the arrangement of these filmmakers into a cohesive movement is based on actual relationships between them. In an article on SXSW in *Filmmaker* magazine, Alicia Van Couvering traces the connections between some of mumblecore's major figures, including the Duplass Brothers:

> The cast [of *Hannah Takes the Stairs*], also credited as co-writers, includes [Mark] Duplass, [Ry] Russo-Young and [Greta] Gerwig. Russo-Young's own feature, *Orphans*, premiered at the festival this year, and it garnered a Special Jury Prize. Duplass and his brother Jay made waves at last year's festival with their co-directed feature *The Puffy Chair*. Gerwig, meanwhile, stars in the Duplass Brothers' next feature, *Baghead*. Gerwig was also in [Joe] Swanberg's previous film *LOL*, playing the girlfriend of her actual boyfriend Chris Wells, who co-wrote it. Susan Buice, co-director of *Four Eyed Monsters*, is also in *LOL*.

---

[38] Amy Taubin, "All Talk?" *Film Comment*, 2007, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host*, 45.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid, 46.
[41] Ibid, 45.

> Swanberg is in Aaron Katz's *Quiet City*, which too premiered at SXSW this year. Michael Tully, director of SXSW entry *Silver Jew*, appears as well in *Quiet City*. When they are not attending Q&A sessions for their various premieres, Tully and Swanberg are filming a movie at all the festivals they attend in which they star as two indie-rock musicians in a band. Both directors are friends of Frank V. Ross, who shot some of *LOL* and cast Swanberg in his forthcoming *Hohokam*. For many more examples of this group's interconnectedness and to learn about its other members, venture to MySpace.com and examine their cross-referenced lists of Top Friends.[42]

As the remainder of Van Couvering's article makes evident, these overlapping projects within the *Hannah Takes the Stairs* cast are simply a snapshot of the myriad connections that exist between exemplary mumblecore filmmakers like the Duplass Brothers, Joe Swanberg, Aaron Katz, Frank V. Ross, and Andrew Bujalski, consequently undercutting Taubin's accusations of disjointedness.

Taubin also criticizes mumblecore for being self-absorbed. Calling the films of Joe Swanberg "smug and blatantly lazy,"[43] she attacks him and other mumblecore filmmakers for declining to cover topics like warfare or climate change. This particular criticism derives from comments that Swanberg made in Van Couvering's *Filmmaker* article, in which he says, "I don't feel like I have anything to say right now about the Iraq war. The stories of my life and my friends' lives are the ones I can tell most completely."[44] Taubin responds to this attitude by writing, quite roughly, "That Swanberg believes that his life and those of his friends are separate from the war or the global meltdown that is upon us seems to me reason enough to bring back the draft."[45] For Taubin, another part of the problem with mumblecore is that the homogeneity of its

---

[42] Alicia Van Couvering, "What I Meant to Say," *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, Spring 2007, *Art Source*, EBSCO*host*.
[43] Amy Taubin, "All Talk?" *Film Comment*, 2007, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host*, 46.
[44] Alicia Van Couvering, "What I Meant to Say," *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, Spring 2007, *Art Source*, EBSCO*host*.
[45] Amy Taubin, "All Talk?" *Film Comment*, 2007, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host*, 46.

filmmakers is reflected in the films themselves. She writes, "The directors are all male middle-class Caucasians, and they make movies exclusively about young adults who are involved in heterosexual relationships and who have jobs (when they have them) in workplaces populated almost exclusively by SWMs and SWFs."[46] Moreover, Taubin takes issue with the sexually narcissistic characters – who are sometimes manifestations of the directors themselves – in these films because they often boil down to "attractive, seemingly intelligent women [who] drop their clothes and evince sexual interest in an array of slobby guys who suffer from severely arrested emotional development."[47]

Fortunately for Swanberg and his fellow mumblecore filmmakers, the draft was never reinstated, and they have continued making films long enough to highlight the reductive nature of Taubin's accusations of self-absorption. Maria San Filippo maintains a more charitable interpretation of Swanberg's write-what-you-know attitude, arguing that mumblecore actually exposes a gap in the industry for the kinds of films that speak to the movement's key demographic. Using filmmaker Andrew Bujalski as an example, she writes, "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.'"[48] Additionally, San Filippo acknowledges the criticism of mumblecore's misogynistic tendencies, but she ultimately disagrees with this assessment and commends these films for "offering an exceptionally honest and thoughtful consideration of contemporary American sexual

---

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Maria San Filippo, "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement," *CineAction* Winter 2011, 4, *Literature Resource Center*. (San Filippo's emphasis)

mores."[49] She cites films like *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005), *Humpday* (2005), *Dance Party, USA* (2006), *Quiet City* (2007), *Orphans* (2007), *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007), *Nights and Weekends* (2008), *Treeless Mountain* (2008), and *Tiny Furniture* (2010) for challenging conventional representations of sexuality and delivering "authentic-feeling (and thereby not always terribly dramatic) personal interactions."[50] While these portrayals of sexuality might involve awkward encounters between slobs and attractive young women – to use Taubin's vocabulary – they do so in order "to speak to the circumstances" of these directors' personal experiences. Perhaps these films are semi-personal in that way, but Taubin's accusations of self-absorption misapprehend the audience to which mumblecore addresses itself.

"A Snapshot of the Duplass Brothers' Career"

Critics tend to identify the Duplass Brothers as mumblecore filmmakers, and the dominant narrative of their career traces a path from homemade shorts, to micro-budget features, to low-budget films that represent a departure from mumblecore's minimalist mode of production. The trajectory of their career is such a fascinating story because it emerged from the opportunities that characterized the independent film industry in the early 2000s, survived the ensuing crises, and remains an example of two filmmakers that have managed to strike a balance between commercial success and a relative degree of autonomy. As a part of its "Influencers" project, the independent film blog *Indiewire* upholds such a portrayal of the Duplass Brothers: "From the micro-budgeted *The Puffy*

[49] Ibid, 2.
[50] Ibid, 7.

Chair to the studio-funded comedies *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, Mark and Jay Duplass have impressively managed to retain the same loose and freehand vibe that characterized their breakout effort. They're a rare case of going big without selling out."[51] In order to situate the Duplass Brothers within the image of the independent film industry during the early 2000s that I have painted in this chapter, I will now outline their career, which will consequently lay the foundation for a more thorough investigation of their films in the remainder of this project.

There is not much information on the short films that precede the Duplass Brothers' feature-film debut in 2005 with the release of *The Puffy Chair*. However, in a 2006, email interview for *Indiewire*, the Duplass Brothers shed some light on the origins of their career. Jay and Mark are both graduates of the film school at the University of Texas at Austin, and they worked as film editors, as well as a number of other odd jobs, before finding success as filmmakers and moving into it full-time. Eugene Hernandez, editing the interview for *Indiewire*, writes, "After a few false starts with other films over the years, the Duplass Brothers began making a name for themselves with a string of successful short films, including 'This Is John' and 'Scrapple' which each debuted at the Sundance Film Festival."[52] In an article for the *New York Times Magazine*, Gavin Edwards describes this transition from graduating film school to finally producing a successful short film: "Mark and Jay […] stayed in Austin on and off for a decade; in 2002, almost as a goof, they made a short film using their parents' video camera. The

[51] "The Duplass Bros.," *Indiewire*, http://www.indiewire.com/influencers/the-duplass-bros.
[52] Eugene, Hernandez, "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, Creators of 'The Puffy Chair'," *Indiewire*, July 17, 2006, http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_jay_duplass_and_mark_duplass_creators_of_the_puffy_chai.

total budget of 'This Is John' was $3, the cost of the tape, but Sundance accepted it."[53] Indeed, "This Is John," which is about a man, played by Mark, who attempts and re-attempts to record the perfect greeting on his answering machine, seems in many ways like it was shot for fun. But the short also contains the traces of the Duplass Brothers' distinct style and sense of humor, which explains its success at Sundance.

Following the success of "This Is John" and "Scrapple" – the 2004 short about a couple, played by Mark and his wife Katie Aselton, whose game of Scrabble descends into an outright physical scuffle – the Duplass Brothers set out to make their first feature film, premiering *The Puffy Chair* at the SXSW film festival. The film follows Josh who embarks on a road trip with his girlfriend Emily and brother Rhett to deliver a replica of the family's old recliner to his father for his birthday. In their interview with *Indiewire*, Mark explains how he and Jay were able to make the film: "Developing was easy. [W]e borrowed $15,000 from our parents and just went for it. [D]istribution was a long road. [I]t took a year to sell the film. Everyone loved it, but apparently it's a little difficult to market an indie film with no recognizable 'stars.'"[54] In January 2005, after *The Puffy Chair* had toured the festival circuit for a year, Netflix purchased the distribution rights, "even team[ing] with Roadside Attractions to fund a theatrical release."[55] The film received a number of positive reviews, winning the Audience Award at the 2005 SXSW

---

[53] Gavin Edwards, "The Duplass Brothers Have Kidnapped Hollywood," *New York Times Magazine*, May, 18, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/magazine/the-duplass-brothers-have-kidnapped-hollywood.html.

[54] Eugene Hernandez, "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, Creators of 'The Puffy Chair'," *Indiewire*, July 17, 2006, http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_jay_duplass_and_mark_duplass_creators_of_the_puffy_chai.

[55] Erin Biba, "Netflix Presents," *Wired Magazine*, September 2006, http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.09/netflix.html.

and garnering the Brothers nominations for the John Cassavetes Award and the Someone to Watch Award that year at the Independent Spirit Awards.

The Duplass Brothers followed the critical and financial success of *The Puffy Chair* with *Baghead* in 2008. The film is about a group of four friends who spend a few days in a cabin in the woods with aspirations of shooting a low-budget film that they will be able to show in festivals. But Chad's attempts to hook-up with Michelle, as well as the appearance of a stranger with a knife and a crumpled paper bag over his or her face, prove too distracting to get production rolling. *Baghead* premiered at Sundance, and the distribution rights were acquired by Sony Pictures Classics for what Eric Kohn reports in his 2008 interview with the Duplass Brothers for *Indiewire* as a six-figure deal. Sony Pictures Classics opened the film in a limited theatrical run, grossing $140,000 at the box office. Although it is unclear for how much the distribution rights were acquired as well as how much the film has earned in DVD sales, Mark appears to be pleased with how the deal turned out in his interview with Kohn: "If we could keep the budgets on these movies down, we could probably make a career out of selling them at Sundance, assuming they're decent films."[56]

It appears that the Duplass Brothers could have indeed made a career out of shooting low-budget films and selling them at festivals, but they entered a new tier of filmmaking before they ever had the chance to find out. After *Baghead*, they shot *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon* in 2009, but the film was shelved until 2012, following the release of the higher-budget features *Cyrus* (2010) and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (2011). In a

[56] Eric Kohn, "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: 'Baghead' Co-directors Jay and Mark Duplass," *Indiewire*, July 24, 2008, http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_baghead_co-directors_jay_and_mark_duplass.

2012 interview for *Indiewire*, Mark explains that the reason for temporarily shelving the film was simple:

> It was just a practical consideration because we made it ourselves. Hence there was no studio to deal with…except ourselves. And when we got greenlit for *Cyrus*, that happened right while we were in post-production for *Do-Deca*, so we just put it on the shelf, took our crew and said, "Guys we have an opportunity to make some money making a studio film. We can make something great, so let's do it." It was always the intention to go back and finish *Do-Deca* after *Cyrus*, but we got *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* greenlit after *Cyrus*, so it was just an unfortunate timing thing for *Do-Deca*.[57]

The Do-Deca-Pentathlon finally premiered at the SXSW film festival in 2012. In addition to releasing four years after its production, the film is distinct for utilizing video-on-demand on top of its theatrical run. Mark says that part of the benefit of having the film for so long before distributing it was that he and Jay were able to release it strategically. He says that the film is "a smaller movie with no big movie stars so it may not be a big huge juggernaut in movie theaters. Let's just blast this thing out to everybody on VOD and let everybody share it […]."[58] Curiously, the film, in a way, represents a return to self-produced filmmaking after making films through the specialty divisions of 20th Century Fox and Paramount Pictures.

[57] Nigel M. Smith, "The Duplass Brothers on Revisiting 'The Do-Deca Pentathlon' Four Years after Making It," *Indiewire*, July 2, 2012, http://www.indiewire.com/article/the-duplass-brothers_on_revisiting_the_do_deca_pentathlon_four_years_after_making_it.
[58] Ibid.

Chapter Two: Far from the Mainstream

In the previous chapter, I outline the career of the Duplass Brothers and trace its development from low-scale, low-budget projects to multi-million-dollar, studio-backed productions. As the budget for the Duplass Brothers has continually increased, they have of course gained access to a larger pool of resources, including Hollywood stars, professional crewmembers, high-quality film equipment, and wider distribution channels. But working with bigger budgets also comes at a cost – specifically, the concern by some critics that the Duplass Brothers have traded in their artistic integrity for a place in the mainstream market. This kind of criticism comes up regularly in discourses on independent cinema, manifesting itself mainly in film reviews, in which titles like *Cyrus* (2010) and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (2011) are seen as compromising in one way or another the authenticity that *The Puffy Chair* (2005) manages to deliver. Consequently, some critics see the Duplass Brothers as overall moving away from authentic filmmaking and toward artificial, commercial-oriented projects.

This chapter will offer a different perspective on this career transition by outlining the narrative and formal conventions of authentic cinema and then considering the larger ramifications of this film style. I argue that the notion that the Duplass Brothers have forfeited authenticity for bigger budgets ignores the relatively little way that their films have changed in terms of narrative or form over the course of their career. Critics have constructed the concept of cinematic authenticity in opposition to mainstream filmmaking, granting authenticity particular significance when it comes to the independent film industry. I contend that the critics who view the Duplass Brothers as compromising their authenticity for mainstream appeal are attempting to reinforce a

hierarchy that privileges the cultural elite over mass audiences while overlooking the way in which their films maintain an authentic style. I will refer to the scholarship of Geoff King and Michael Z. Newman to articulate my argument and to situate the Duplass Brothers' films within an analyzable framework. My argument will also draw on reviews of their films in order to show how critics have become increasingly concerned about their negotiation between mainstream filmmaking and authenticity. Overall, this chapter aims to demonstrate that this particular criticism against the Duplass Brothers is ideologically motivated rather than based on evenhanded screenings of their films. The Duplass Brothers still use certain stylistic conventions that signify authenticity, and therefore I argue that they have not abandoned it.

"Authenticity as Independence"

Critics have variously referred to the Duplass Brothers' early films as examples of cinematic authenticity while excluding their recent features from this particular category. But as film reviews and production profiles published in the *New York Times*, *Variety*, and *Film Comment* indicate, critics appear to maintain two different conceptions of authenticity: one based on financing and the other based on style. Some critics assert that *The Puffy Chair*, *Baghead* (2008), and *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon* (2009) demonstrate authenticity because they were shot independently, acquiring distribution only after production and editing had wrapped; *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, however, exemplify a more mainstream identity because they were produced and distributed by the specialty divisions at 20th Century Fox and Paramount Pictures, respectively. But the

narrative and formal elements that these critics consider authentic pervade the Duplass Brothers' filmography, highlighting a critical double standard for *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*. On the one hand, these two films are mainstream because they made it to the market through studio financing. But on the other hand, they utilize the same narrative and formal conventions as the Duplass Brothers' earlier films to signify authenticity. I argue that the conception of authenticity based on financing is ideologically motivated, and I will now refer to the scholarship of Geoff King and Michael Z. Newman to articulate this point.

As I discuss in Chapter One, Geoff King examines the contemporary independent film industry in his book *Indie 2.0*, arguing that critics in the early 2000s tended to waver between exclamations of crisis and acclamations of new opportunities for independent filmmakers. King counts the economic recession, the over-saturated independent film market, and the presence of Indiewood among the topics of discussion for those grave-minded critics. For the purpose of this chapter, that last issue is particularly important because it underscores the significant role that matters of authenticity, autonomy, and alternativeness play in distinguishing independent films from the mainstream. As I explain in the previous chapter, the danger of a sector like Indiewood is that it pretends to support the autonomy of independent filmmakers while actually undercutting it, earning Indiewood a bad reputation among certain filmmakers and critics. King writes, "The term Indiewood is often used in a derogatory manner in indie circles, a classic example of the negative reference point against which a discursive concept such as 'true' indie might be defined."[59] For critics during this period, Indiewood signals a crisis in the independent

[59] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 7.

film industry for the simple reason that authentic independent filmmaking is ontologically that which is not Indiewood.

Michael Z. Newman maintains a similar view, and his argument shows how authenticity ultimately plays a role in the distinction of taste. In the essay "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," Newman argues that various forms of indie culture situate themselves against the mainstream in order to assert their "true" indie status. Newman contends that the independent film industry is but one manifestation of this broader indie culture, which takes form in other areas of cultural expression, such as in music and fashion. He writes that indie culture "has sought to portray mainstream culture as a force of mindless conformity that contaminates its audience and causes deleterious effects."[60] Represented by wealthy media conglomerates and large cultural institutions, the mainstream presents a danger to proponents of underground, oppositional, or indie culture. Conversely, Newman writes, "The alternative practitioner sees autonomy and authenticity as markers of their purity, and this purity animates their need for creative expression through cultural production."[61] As a result, what begins to take shape is a binary between a good indie culture and a bad mainstream one, reinforced by notions of authenticity, autonomy, and alternativeness: "In independent music and movies, the ideal of separation is most often figured as autonomy, as the power artists retain to control their creative process. Autonomy, in turn, is seen as a guarantee of authenticity."[62] Therefore, in opposition to the pure indie artist is the

[60] Michael Z. Newman, "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," *Cinema Journal* 48, Spring 2009, 19, *Academic Search Complete,* EBSCO*host*.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

musician or filmmaker who "sells out," giving his or her creative control over to the mainstream in exchange for money or popularity.

Newman traces this kind of thinking back to the 1980s, explaining that it was around this time that amateur musicians and filmmakers became comparable to full-fledged indie artists. He writes, "In rejecting the dominant media, the phase of independent cinema which coalesced during the Reagan-Bush era championed novice artists and their generally limited technical and financial means."[63] Furthermore, he acknowledges that for many cases "a low budget would itself become a discursive fetish object, a means of concretizing a nebulous aesthetic quality (honesty, truth, vision)."[64] Newman cites low-budget, small-scale titles like *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *El Mariachi* (1992), and *Clerks* (1994) as prime examples of the "independent cinema's ethos that there is virtue in modesty."[65] Consequently, rather than automatically diminishing the perceived quality of independent creative projects, the financial and technical limitations that are often unavoidable actually feed into a moral framework. For indie artists, the logic behind a DIY approach to cultural production is that it immediately provides the object to the consumer, sparing no room for ulterior motives from financial backers or for concealed messages behind a polished presentation.

Moreover, this ethical code requires strict enforcement. Newman argues that having too much appeal threatens the integrity of indie artists:

> Indie cinema shares with other kinds of indie culture a basic principle that attempting to appeal to a mass audience on its own terms entails an unacceptable compromise. Better to struggle serving the audience that understands you than to

[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, 19-20.

> give up your autonomy and sell out your integrity (and your cadre of loyal fans) in exchange for popular success.[66]

But, Newman points out, "sometimes fans will turn on 'small films' […] that do too well with mainstream audiences."[67] He argues that in order to maintain a perception of purity, indie artists have to take a hard line on popularity because too much of it runs the risk of broaching the mainstream, which would be a costly circumstance: "Real popularity threatens indie artists' credibility, the status of their work as outsider art, and most of all the consumer's sense of being apart from the dominant culture. […] Belief in its own distinctness from the mainstream sustains the indie community and makes it cohere."[68] Consequently, fans vacate their support for independent films that garner too much popularity not because they are disloyal but rather because certain levels of appeal present an existential threat to the indie culture with which they identify.

However, as indie culture situates itself against the mainstream, Newman argues that it also constructs itself as a culture of taste. He calls this peculiar dimension "the contradiction at the center of indie culture."[69] Elaborating on this paradox, he writes:

> [Indie culture] is a contradictory notion insofar as it counters and implicitly criticizes hegemonic mass culture, desiring to be an authentic alternative to it, but also serves as a taste culture perpetuating the privilege of a social elite of upscale consumers. There is a tension at the heart of indie cinema and culture between competing ideals and realities; on one hand, an oppositional formation of outsiders that sees itself as the solution to an excessively homogenized, commercialized media, and on the other hand a form of expression that is itself commercial and that also serves to promote the interests of a class of sophisticated consumers. In other words, indie cinema is a cultural form opposing dominant structures at the same time that it is a source of distinction that serves the interests of a privileged group within those structures.[70]

---

[66] Ibid, 20.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, 17.
[70] Ibid.

Newman is sure to mention the existent history of alternative subcultures that have maintained those standards that affirm their elite social status, spanning "from the bohemia of 1920s Greenwich Village to the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s."[71] But what strikes Newman as particularly interesting about indie culture is its vast scope of appeal – evident, for example, in a so-called mode of independent filmmaking like Indiewood – highlighting the contradiction behind "media conglomerates [that] offer their own alternative to themselves, bringing in even those consumers who might be contemptuous of their very existence."[72]

As a self-constructed alternative to the mainstream, indie culture and its members occupy a privileged social position. Newman writes, "By seeing independent cinema as the alternative to Hollywood films, the indie audience makes authenticity and autonomy into aesthetic virtues that can be used to distinguish a common mass culture from a more refined, elite one."[73] He contends that the distinction between indie culture and the mainstream is reinforced not only in cultural production but also in cultural consumption. No matter the media format, he writes, "they are all products of the same social and cultural contexts, which influences how their audiences experience them."[74] Consequently, the "indie" label becomes "a source of cultural capital, a form of knowledge that elites use in differentiating themselves from masses and perpetuating their own privilege."[75] Newman explains that indie cinema appeals to consumers who have the financial means and cultural background to appreciate it, which tends already to consist of an elite social class. He specifically refers to consumers of traditional high art

[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid, 22.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, 23.

or 1980s college rock, examples to which I would cautiously add mumblecore viewers, who tend toward cinephilia, alternative consumption methods, and an affinity with the mostly middle-class and college-educated characters in these films. Indeed, while mumblecore filmmakers strive toward creative autonomy and follow an authentic-feeling write-what-you-know approach, their viewers consequently reap the privileges of having a refined taste in films.

"The Ideological Implications of Authenticity"

Newman's argument that authenticity ultimately plays this role in the distinction of taste illuminates the ideological motivations behind the criticism against *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*. I contend that critics who are concerned over the Duplass Brothers' negotiation between mainstream filmmaking and authenticity think in these terms because they maintain the view that independent films are superior to mainstream films, and therefore they must uphold a strict separation between them. Otherwise, the mass audiences of mainstream films threaten to dissolve the privileged social position that mumblecore viewers occupy. This concern is emblemized as early as 2008 by the headline in *Variety*: "Mumblecore movement makes mainstream moves."[76] In this article, Peter Debruge asserts that mumblecore is at a crossroads as a movement, with some filmmakers insisting on remaining independent while others, "such as the genre-minded Duplass brothers, seem poised for mainstream success […]."[77] Debruge also reports on the Duplass Brothers' successful project pitches to Fox Searchlight and Universal

[76] Peter Debruge, "Mumblecore movement makes mainstream moves," *Variety* CDX, no. 3 (March 3-9, 2008): 10.
[77] Ibid.

Pictures, "but that isn't stopping them from running down to New Orleans and shooting a movie of their own this month," implying that the films that they make with these specialty divisions compromise their authenticity or creative autonomy.[78]

In his article on the production of *Cyrus*, Debruge again expresses concern over the Duplass Brothers' negotiation between independence and the mainstream. He opens with the question, "Can mumblecore go shiny?"[79] This is a reference to Fox Searchlight Production President Claudia Lewis's comment that the studio admired the Duplass Brothers' down-to-earth sense of humor that they demonstrate in their early films: "All we had to do was provide them with the tools to make it 'shinier' so they could find a larger audience."[80] But what Debruge asks is whether or not mumblecore filmmakers can really be successful in Hollywood, implying that they would have to trade substance for style. Indeed, he sounds skeptical of the studio's impact on the Duplass Brothers' independence when he writes, "The brothers insist they've found a way to make their sensibility work within the system, despite working with budgets considerably bigger than their early five-figure features."[81] Debruge's skepticism over the film's big budget resonates with the notion "that there is virtue in modesty,"[82] and therefore *Cyrus* somewhat represents an abandonment of authenticity.

But Debruge is not the only critic that finds the production of *Cyrus* concerning for the Duplass Brothers. In his review of the film, David Zuckerman acknowledges that

---

[78] Ibid.
[79] Peter Debruge, "A big shot for small sensibility," *Variety* CDXIX, no. 3 (May 31-June 6, 2010): 4.
[80] Ibid. (Quoted in Debruge)
[81] Ibid.
[82] Michael Z. Newman, "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," *Cinema Journal* 48, Spring 2009, 19-20, *Academic Search Complete,* EBSCO*host*.

Cyrus marks a transition for the Duplass Brothers into mainstream filmmaking, and yet he seems to celebrate the fact that the film, in his assessment, is not very good. He writes:

> Considering *Cyrus* is supposed to usher Mark and Jay Duplass into the fray of mainstream studio filmmaking, there is an admirable lack of trumpet-blaring going on. Following up the brothers' previous efforts to locate the humorous within the awkward, *Cyrus* is a sweet, modest, unremarkable film, propped up by seasoned actors playing quirky and 'real.' Take John C. Reilly, for starters. Aside from the camera's little 'crash-zoom' punctuation mark […], Reilly is the most artful thing happening in this picture.[83]

Zuckerman's delight over the Duplass Brothers' so-called miss at mainstream success reveals his faith in the idea of upholding a barrier between independent films and the mainstream. Indeed, he calls the film "a search for authenticity with a capital A,"[84] but to his satisfaction, this mainstream film fails to capture that authenticity: "From the casting down to the raw shooting style, the Duplass brothers seem to want us to feel that aesthetic pedestrianism is the correlate of authenticity."[85] Here, the implication is that the film can pretend to be authentic, but by virtue of its studio status, it can never really capture authenticity. Zuckerman's criticism exemplifies the notion that only independent filmmakers can exercise creative autonomy, which "is seen as a guarantee of authenticity,"[86] and so the Duplass Brothers' attempt at studio filmmaking allegedly represents a departure from authenticity.

Interestingly, Debruge's review of *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* appears to scale back his criticism against the Duplass Brothers' mainstream projects, though traces of his concern over their negotiation between independence and the mainstream remain. He writes, "The Duplass brothers take another step toward conventional Hollywood

---

[83] David Zuckerman, "Cyrus," *Film Comment* XLVI, no. 4 (July-August 2010): 63.
[84] Ibid, 64.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Michael Z. Newman, "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," *Cinema Journal* 48, Spring 2009, 19, *Academic Search Complete,* EBSCO*host*.

storytelling without sacrificing the sincere, true-to-life quality that got studios interested in the first place with 'Jeff, Who Lives at Home.'"[87] Although Debruge writes about the film positively, calling it a "likeable Paramount release,"[88] he is still clearly of the mind that independent filmmaking is inherently more authentic than studio projects when he writes that the film "seems more tightly scripted than the siblings' earlier, semi-improvised dramedies, but lacks the wonderful squirm-inducing quality that sets them apart."[89] So even though Debruge appears to like the film, he still views it as evidence of the Duplass Brothers compromising their authenticity or creative autonomy for mainstream success. A. O. Scott shares a similar sentiment in his review of the film: "'Jeff, Who Lives at Home,' like the Duplass brothers' earlier 'Cyrus,' is a fascinating stylistic experiment, an attempt to bring the scruffy, discursive, lo-fi aesthetic of Mumblecore into some kind of harmony with the genre imperatives of commercial moviemaking."[90] Scott's response to the film is positive, but his review still relies on a vocabulary that posits the authentic, "scruffy" independent films from the first half of the Duplass Brothers' career against their attempt at making artificial, commercial films.

Overall, the significance of Debruge, Zuckerman, and Scott's responses to *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* is that they reinforce the notion that independent films are authentic simply because they operate on smaller budgets, involve nonprofessional crewmembers and performers, and grant filmmakers creative autonomy. Therefore, these critics imply that the Duplass Brothers, by working within the specialty divisions of major Hollywood studios to produce and distribute their films, have abandoned

---

[87] Peter Debruge, "Jeff, who lives at home," *Variety* CDXXIV, no. 6 (September 19-25, 2011): 77.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] A. O. Scott, "Up From the Basement, Slacker Metaphysics," *New York Times*, March 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/movies/jeff-who-lives-at-home-a-duplass-brothers-comedy.html.

authenticity. I argue that the idea that independent films are superior in taste to the mainstream, and that they maintain a distinction between culturally elite audiences and mass audiences, motivates the criticism against the Duplass Brothers' attempt at studio filmmaking. However, the view that a film's budget determines its authenticity is only one of the conceptions of authenticity that critics maintain. As I have already mentioned, there is also the notion that certain narrative and formal conventions signify authenticity. Consequently, the fact that Debruge, Zuckerman, and Scott refer to these conventions when discussing the authenticity of the Duplass Brothers' earlier films reveals the double standard to which they hold *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*. I will now outline these conventions by returning to the scholarship of Geoff King, and I will analyze the narrative and form of the Duplass Brothers' films in order to demonstrate how they maintain an authentic style throughout their filmography, including the films that they made at 20th Century Fox and Paramount Pictures.

"Authenticity as Style"

I return to the scholarship of Geoff King because he reinforces the notion that authenticity is fundamental to understanding mumblecore and that it is a concept ultimately based in particular conventions of narrative and form. He writes:

> The kind of polemic that developed around mumblecore offers an interesting variation on more familiar indie discourses relating to notions of authenticity or

> inauthenticity. Those who praise mumblecore films, either individually or collectively, often do so in terms that highlight their status as more authentic than either the productions of Hollywood or what are viewed as more confected versions of quirky indie […].[91]

Indeed, as I have argued, the Duplass Brothers' films serve as a touchstone for discussing authenticity and its role in the independent film industry. I contend that by studying the narrative and formal conventions of mumblecore, we can better understand how the Duplass Brothers use film style to signify authenticity. In order to articulate my point, I will refer to King's analysis of these conventions because he also argues that the construction of authenticity is a matter of narrative and form: "The claims to authenticity made by films associated with the mumblecore label, or those identified by some critics, are rooted in central formal qualities," which "include low-key narrative strategies and *vérité* style hand-held visuals […]."[92] I will show how the Duplass Brothers' films utilize these "low-key narrative strategies" as signifiers of authenticity.

King argues that mumblecore narratives signify authenticity by tending toward the small-scale in terms of external plot, conflict, setting, and heroic characters, leaning instead on the mundane and anticlimactic. He writes:

> One of the dimensions all films associated with mumblecore have most closely in common […] is a commitment to very small-scale narrative frameworks, the primary focus of which is on what are presented as more or less everyday experiences of life and difficulty of relationships among the particular constituency it depicts. A major plot turning point for the typical mumblecore production is something that barely exists; an event that often does not quite happen, a relationship that stutters and stalls awkwardly or a connection that does not come fully to fruition. These are films with a limited number of central protagonists around which our interest is focused, as in the dominant classical Hollywood or canonical narrative style, but the characters tend to lack much in

[91] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 163-4.
[92] Ibid, 127.

> the way of the kinds of clear-cut goals and actions more typical of the commercial mainstream.[93]

As I will demonstrate, this description of minimal, non-formulaic narratives aptly captures the characters, stories, and settings of the Duplass Brothers' films. Although each film exemplifies these elements to a varying extent, they all nicely fit within the contours of this description of narrative and consequently signify authenticity.

The Puffy Chair exemplifies many of the narrative conventions that King lists above, starting with its lean story. As I mention in Chapter One, the film basically follows Josh and his girlfriend Emily who embark on a road trip together to deliver a replica of Josh's family's old recliner to his father for his birthday. Traveling down the East Coast from Brooklyn to their destination in Atlanta, Josh and Emily make a few stops along the way, including a visit with Josh's bohemian brother Rhett who joins the couple on their trip. Other detours consist of roadside motels, a furniture dealer, and a visit to a small-town movie theater. However, neither the newly re-upholstered recliner nor Josh and Emily's long-term relationship survives the trip, and the film ends without fully resolving their fate. In his review of the film, A. O. Scott takes note of these distinct narrative traits, aptly deeming the film "a low-key road movie."[94] Calling the story "slight enough to make Raymond Carver read like Dostoyevsky," Scott writes that the Duplass Brothers "practice an aesthetic of diffidence, refusing to look beyond the small-scale experiences and immediate concerns of the characters."[95] If everyday experiences and difficult relationships are indeed narrative signifiers of authenticity, then *The Puffy Chair* upholds an accurate portrayal of the world that it purports to show.

---

[93] Ibid, 128.
[94] A. O. Scott, "The Puffy Chair," *New York Times*, August 4, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/04/movies/04puff.html?_r=0.
[95] Ibid.

Josh illustrates the kind of mumblecore protagonist who meanders through life without pursuing any clear-cut goals. King says that characters in this fold spend their time "[j]ust kinda slinking around,"[96] contributing to the everyday-ness of the film: "The sense of doing something that might involve a substantial commitment but not *really* doing it, or wanting to do it, seems to apply more widely to the activities of many of the denizens of mumblecore."[97] For Josh, a substantial commitment would mean treating his career more seriously, moving forward with Emily, or perhaps both. The film establishes Josh as this kind of protagonist from the opening scene. In the scene, the couple has a quiet dinner in Josh's kitchen, discussing his upcoming road trip to visit his parents – which is planned at the moment as a solo venture – but they carry on their conversation in "baby talk." As they trade declarations of "I'm going to miss you,"[98] piling one on top of the other, their conversation is interrupted by an important phone call. Josh answers, despite Emily's plead to ignore it. As the phone call unfolds, we get clues that Josh books bands for a living, but that business does not appear to be going well. When the conversation over the phone transitions to the caller asking Josh to hook him up with a mutual acquaintance, Emily's patience with Josh expires, and she loudly knocks their dinner onto the floor before storming out of the apartment. Later, the film implies that Emily reacts this way because she is frustrated with Josh's reluctance to settle down and commit to the idea of marriage. So while Josh's role is to "slink around," the film also uses this narrative convention as a theme that gives it an authentic feeling.

---

[96] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 128.
[97] Ibid, 129. (King's emphasis)
[98] *The Puffy Chair*, directed by Jay Duplass (2005; Roadside Attractions, 2006), DVD.

Similarly, *Baghead* rests on a small-scale narrative, focusing more on the relationships between characters than on an elaborate plot. The film follows a group of four friends who retreat to a cabin in the woods with the aspiration of shooting a low-budget horror film that they count on showing at festivals to rejuvenate their stagnant acting careers. But the complex relationships and romantic flings between these friends prove to be an obstacle to their film's production. Chad wants to hook up with Michelle, but his attempts to woo her fail because she already has her heart set on Matt. Catherine has had an on-and-off relationship with Matt for a number of years, so when she gets wind of Michelle's intentions, she retaliates by donning the eponymous paper-bag mask and frightening Michelle, though the film does not reveal that this bag-headed stalker is never a real threat until the end. At various points throughout the film, one of the friends wears the bag over his or her head as a way of exacting petty revenge on the others, and the horror film that they set out to shoot never fully materializes, though Chad and Matt do manage to salvage some footage of the bag-headed stalker scaring everyone for a potential film after all. In his review, Peter Debruge calls the film a "relationship study"[99] that de-emphasizes the importance of plot: "Though its scares are scarce, 'Baghead' provides what nine out of 10 dead-teenagers movies lack: specifically, a realistic sense of character that gives moviegoers a reason to identify with the would-be victims."[100] Indeed, the film shows authenticity by abandoning its lean horror film premise, what King calls "an event that often does not quite happen,"[101] and focusing instead on the relationships between its characters.

---

[99] Peter Debruge, "Baghead," *Variety* CDIX, no. 11 (February 4-10, 2008): 95.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 128.

Out of all the Duplass Brothers' films, *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon* might feature the leanest narrative, which critics see as a characteristic of its authenticity. The film is about estranged brothers Mark and Jeremy who engage in a 25-event competition that they failed to complete as kids, resurrected years later for Mark's birthday. At first, Mark seems like a fairly straight-laced, middle-aged suburbanite. He is married, has a soon-to-be teenage son who thinks his dad is lame, and maintains what appears to be a steady home life. But when Mark and his family visit his mother one weekend for his birthday, Jeremy, who Mark has intentionally not invited, shows up to re-challenge his brother to the eponymous contest of events, which includes competition in running, swimming, and laser tag. The narrative essentially rests on this premise, punctuated by moments in which Mark has to keep the competition as a secret from his family because, as the narrative comes to reveal, he is not as mild-mannered as he first appears; rather, the narrative gives way to another film about a character's relationship to his family. What the contest exposes is Mark's unhappiness with family responsibilities and his envy of Jeremy's bachelor lifestyle, an attitude that the film's conclusion leaves open rather than resolved.

In their responses to *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon*, critics identify authenticity in the film's spare production. In his review, Leonard Maltin writes:

> This may seem like DIY moviemaking with unknown actors – and it is – but it's also honest, observant, and funny in a way most big Hollywood comedies aren't. I like everything about *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon*, including the fact that it's small in scale. If you're looking for special effects or explosions, you'll have to look elsewhere: this is a comedy about real people.[102]

John Jarzemsky echoes Maltin's sentiment that the smallness of the film makes it seem authentic: "The small scale of the film allows the Duplass brothers to channel most of

[102] Leonard Maltin, "The-Do-Deca-Pentathlon," *Leonard Maltin's Movie Crazy*, July 5, 2012, http://blogs.indiewire.com/leonardmaltin/the-do-deca-pentathlon-movie-review.

their energy into immensely well-crafted characters. Each and every principle in *The Do-Deca Pentathlon* [sic] is at once real and likeable."[103] Additionally, Peter Debruge finds authenticity in those leaner moments of the film's plot that encourage spontaneity, writing, "what makes [the Duplass Brothers'] style so much more genuine than most scripted studio comedies is the way the duo allows the cast to improvise within the carefully mapped confines of that concept."[104] Indeed, the critical response to the film maintains the notion that a pared-down narrative and everyday-seeming characters are a sign of authenticity. Furthermore, this view resonates with one of King's points: "Narrative drift and relative shapelessness is an expression of drifting or shapeless lifestyles, in keeping with a well-established tradition in both indie cinema and various expressions of quotidian realism in film."[105] The structure of the film follows the contest, but once it becomes apparent that winning the competition is not magically going to solve Mark's unhappiness, the narrative indeed begins to drift, reflecting the fact that Mark's problems are not so tidily resolvable.

Although *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* represent the Duplass Brothers' studio films, and therefore imply the use of a tighter, more traditional narrative, they still employ some of those narrative conventions that signify authenticity, a notion that the critical response to these films reinforces. *Cyrus* follows John, a recently divorced man returning to the dating scene now that his ex-wife, with whom he is still friends, is about to get married. John meets Molly, and they hit it off, but he also meets Molly's peculiar,

---

[103] John Jarzemsky, "SXSW 2012 Review: The Do-Deca Pentathlon," *Twitch*, March 12, 2012, http://twitchfilm.com/2012/03/sxsw-2012-review-the-do-deca-pentathlon.html.
[104] Peter Debruge, "Review: 'The Do-Deca-Pentathlon'," *Variety*, March 12, 2012, http://variety.com/2012/film/reviews/the-do-deca-pentathlon-1117947228/.
[105] Geoff King, *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film*. (New York: Columbia UP, 2014), 131.

21-year-old son, Cyrus, who still lives at home. Cyrus sees John as a threat to his comfortable living arrangement, so he attempts to undermine John and Molly's relationship by manipulating his mother into taking care of him rather than spend time with John. Outmatched, John is forced to break up with Molly, who fails to see the problem with Cyrus's over-dependence. But eventually, Molly confronts the issue, and Cyrus, seeing the pain that he has caused his mother, reconciles with John. The ending of the film suggests that John and Molly become reunited, following the standard boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, boy-and-girl-get-back-together structure. Yet, the film still leaves some matters unresolved, namely that there is no indication that Cyrus has overcome his anxiety or made steps toward moving out of his mother's house. King explains, "This widespread tendency in mumblecore, towards a portrait of life just going on, in its various familiar and repetitive routines, without any transformative action or change, is another basis of any claim it might have to verisimilitude […]."[106] So even though the film follows a traditional narrative structure, it still utilizes that mumblecore convention in which the protagonist is right where he or she first began.

The Duplass Brothers employ this narrative convention again in their other film about an adult home-dweller, *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*. The film is about a lovable, 30-year-old stoner named Jeff, who, for reasons that are somewhat unclear, still lives in his mother's basement. One reason might be because Jeff believes that "Everyone and everything is interconnected in this universe. Stay pure of heart and you will see the signs. Follow the signs, and you will uncover your destiny."[107] On the day that the film takes place, this impractical wisdom sends Jeff on a journey to follow various signs of his

[106] Ibid, 137.
[107] *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2011; Paramount Vantage, 2012), DVD.

destiny hiding within the mundane. Along the way, Jeff's older brother, Pat, joins him because their mother, Sharon, is tired of her youngest son always having his head in the clouds, and she wants Pat to budge Jeff out of this aimless lifestyle. However, Pat is preoccupied by the suspicion that his wife, Linda, is cheating on him, and Jeff interprets Pat's quest to discover the truth as a sign from the universe that his purpose is to help his brother. Over the course of the film, the characters come to face various problems simmering beneath the surface of their lives: Jeff is miserable, Pat is a bad husband, and Sharon has no friends or lovers. Pat and Sharon manage to work through their respective issues, and Jeff ultimately receives confirmation that he has a destiny when, being at the right place at the right time, he saves a family from drowning in the bay. The ending of the film resolves a lot of plot threads, manifesting the traditional structure of its narrative, but it still utilizes that convention in which the protagonist remains untransformed. Indeed, there is no indication that Jeff has any plans to move out of his mother's basement, which, in spite of the spectacular events that transpire over the course of the narrative, reaffirms a sense of authenticity.

As my previous analysis of the critical response to *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* demonstrates, critics think of authenticity in these films in terms of their budgets, maintaining that the studios' role in the production and distribution of these films compromises their authenticity. But these critics have also identified the particular narrative conventions that I argue signify authenticity, consequently showing that these films actually do maintain authenticity in spite of the fact that the Duplass Brothers made them through studios. Indeed, in his review of *Cyrus*, David Zuckerman implies that the

film fails to capture authenticity because it is too mainstream, but at the same time he regards the minimalism of the narrative and performances as natural or true. He writes:

> Underneath the mainstream comic aspirations of this film is a search for authenticity with a capital A. […] This is both the brothers' strength and their weakness. On the one hand, the film feels complacent and lacking in any really great ideas. On the other hand, it's this very give-and-go with-banality ethos that leads to subtle funny moments from performers whose unadorned qualities feel modern.[108]

Peter Debruge also views these particular narrative conventions as signs of authenticity in his review of *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*: "Though full of funny moments, 'Jeff' doesn't feature jokes in the conventional sense; rather, it's loaded with moments of uneasy recognition, mostly amusing, but in many cases poignant as well."[109] Debruge even likens the authenticity of the narrative to the Duplass Brothers' earlier films, writing, "As in the Duplasses' debut, 'The Puffy Chair,' all the arguing and awkwardness masks what is essentially a tribute to the powerful bond between brothers."[110] Therefore, despite the ideological motivations for critics to consider these films inauthentic because of their ties to the mainstream, the response to these films reveals the way in which they maintain authenticity through small-scale narratives, everyday characters, and anticlimactic or open-ended plots.

---

[108] David Zuckerman, "Cyrus," *Film Comment* XLVI, no. 4 (July-August 2010): 64.
[109] Peter Debruge, "Jeff, who lives at home," *Variety* CDXXIV, no. 6 (September 19-25, 2011): 77.
[110] Ibid.

Chapter Three: How to Represent Independence

In his review of *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (2011), A. O. Scott describes a trend in contemporary cinema in which male protagonists resist the imminent responsibilities of adulthood, playing their adolescent way of life for laughs. But these characters represent more than a popular theme among recent films, Scott writes; they also illustrate a "worldview," albeit a remarkably narrow one:

> The varieties of male immaturity seem almost infinite, even if the guys on screen are almost always white, middle class and at least presumptively, if not always successfully, heterosexual. Each of these man-children offers his own special blend of innocence and id, balancing the pitiable traits of slackness and aggression with more appealing qualities of sweetness and honesty.[111]

Although Scott reviews the film favorably, calling Jason Segel's performance "special," an exception to the likes of Adam Sandler and Judd Apatow, the worldview remains decidedly white, masculine, and privileged.[112] However, this worldview is not limited to *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, rather it applies to the entire filmography of the Duplass Brothers. It stands to reason that the rigid representations of race, class, and gender in these films are a problem, especially for two filmmakers whom critics view as offering an alternative to mainstream cinema.

This chapter will examine the recurring depiction of privileged, white, male protagonists in the Duplass Brothers' films and consider the ideological implications of this limited view of the world. I will return to the criticism levied against mumblecore by Amy Taubin and refer to specific examples in the Duplass Brothers' films that actually support her argument that the homogeneity of mumblecore's key figures subsequently manifests itself in their films. This criticism resonates with the wide-held notion that

---

[111] A. O. Scott, "Up From the Basement, Slacker Metaphysics," *New York Times*, March 15, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/movies/jeff-who-lives-at-home-a-duplass-brothers-comedy.html.
[112] Ibid.

independent films are intrinsically different from Hollywood, and they should therefore represent an alternative set of ideological values. I argue that while the Duplass Brothers' films are indeed oriented toward a traditional demographic, they still welcome subversive viewings, which frustrate any efforts to align the films with a conservative ideology. Overall, this chapter will complicate the notion that the Duplass Brothers operate within a single ideological framework, whether it is progressive or conservative.

"Independent Cinema as an Ideological Alternative to Hollywood"

In Chapter One, I discuss Amy Taubin's criticism against mumblecore, which she views as a disjointed, self-absorbed independent film movement that is more of a product of over-eager film critics than of the filmmakers themselves. In the chapter, I dispute her claim that mumblecore has been constructed by self-interested critics longing to claim a role in the emergence of the next major independent film movement. As for her assertion that mumblecore filmmakers are self-absorbed, I contend that they follow a write-what-you-know approach, meaning that any appearance of egocentrism actually refers to the semi-personal nature of many mumblecore films. However, I concede her point that, because these films partially reflect the filmmakers themselves, they present a narrow view of the world in terms of race, class, and gender. Taubin notes that most of the directors are white, middle-class men whose films concentrate on young, heterosexual adults that are navigating the pitfalls of romance and of the workplace, which tends to involve other white heterosexuals.[113] Even Maria San Filippo, who argues in opposition to Taubin, acknowledges some of these tendencies in mumblecore: "An indisputable truth

[113] Amy Taubin, "All Talk?" *Film Comment*, 2007, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host*, 46.

in 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."[114] Mumblecore, San Filippo writes, is no exception to this rule.

Although Taubin and San Filippo refer to mumblecore in general, I argue that their point also applies specifically to the Duplass Brothers. I will refer here once again to the scholarship of Geoff King to articulate the problem with the Duplass Brothers' propensity for making films about privileged, white, male protagonists, a problem that is rooted in their identity as independent filmmakers. As I discuss in Chapter Two, audiences consider the independent film industry as an alternative to Hollywood, different not only in terms of its structure but also in terms of its ideological values. In *American Independent Cinema*, Geoff King contends that this ideological difference between independent and Hollywood films is a defining characteristic of the independent film industry. He writes, "An important aspect of any definition of independent cinema […] is the space it offers – potentially, at least – for the expression of alternative social, political and/or ideological perspectives."[115] While independent cinema has tended to deviate from the Hollywood narrative format, King notes, it "has also provided an arena hospitable to a number of constituencies generally subjected to neglect or stereotypical representation in the mainstream."[116] King argues that the nuanced treatment of race or sexuality in independent cinema represents a "more liberal" or "open" consideration of

[114] Maria San Filippo, "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement," *CineAction* Winter 2011, 7, *Literature Resource Center*.
[115] Geoff King, *American Independent Cinema* (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 199.
[116] Ibid.

these issues than what is possible within the confines of Hollywood.[117] Furthermore, he writes, "Independent features have in many cases been able to avoid the kind of ideologically loaded imaginary reconciliations used in Hollywood features to smooth away any awkward social or political issues that might initially be confronted."[118] Therefore, on the one hand, it seems that the Duplass Brothers have an implicit obligation to deal with the race, class, and gender issues that remain neglected or oversimplified by Hollywood.

But on the other hand, King recognizes that the independent film industry is not a monolithic system because it also affords filmmakers like the Duplass Brothers the opportunity to operate outside of Hollywood without departing from its conservative views on social or political issues. He argues that while there are indeed plenty of independent films that explicitly maintain radical ideological views, these cases might not be as prevalent within the independent film industry as one would think.[119] He adds, "Independent cinema is certainly not immune to implication in the reinforcement of dominant ideologies (including those of patriarchy, capitalism and racism), and is as far from being a single entity in this as any of the other respects considered so far."[120] For the Duplass Brothers, this means that in spite of their independent status, they are off the hook when it comes to making films that challenge the conservatism of Hollywood. Consequently, their films reinforce the primacy of white, male characters in a middle-class setting rather than exploring the dynamics of race, class, and gender ignored by

[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.

Hollywood. However, the Duplass Brothers are not so conservative that they remain uncritical toward the privileged, white, male protagonists in their films.

Indeed, their films demonstrate what King considers a negotiation by independent filmmakers to offer an alternative to Hollywood without completely disregarding some of its successful aesthetic conventions and business practices. King describes this negotiation as a kind of stalemate between the supply and the demand for alternative films:

> Independent features offering alternative social perspectives are often dependent on the existence of niche audiences, rooted in particular social groups, capable of sustaining a particular level of production. But […] there is no guarantee that audiences defined in terms of one specific attribute according to which they are denied adequate representation in the mainstream (such as race or sexual orientation) are likely to have radical or alternative tastes in other respects.[121]

Here, King's observation serves as a reminder that independent cinema is not only an art form but also an industry, which relies on a relative degree of financial success in order to continue running. He argues that the overlap between marginalized audiences and art-house patrons is too small for some independent films not to merit a compromise between the two: "To maximize the potential audience tends to entail compromise, in formal innovation and in the extent to which political or otherwise uncomfortable issues are raised in an explicit manner."[122] King essentially claims that there are financial motivations for certain independent films to hold themselves back from fully embracing radical ideological views, suggesting a tendency among independent filmmakers to straddle the line between conservatism and progressivism. Indeed, while the Duplass Brothers, like their fellow mumblecore filmmakers, follow the write-what-you-know approach, they also negotiate these ideological poles. The rest of this chapter examines

[121] Ibid, 200.
[122] Ibid.

this negotiation by considering, on the one hand, how their films are all about privileged, white, male protagonists, but on the other hand, how they situate these characters in opposition to conservative expectations.

"Race"

While the Duplass Brothers have nearly excluded non-white characters altogether from their films, the few exceptions to this fact reveal a complex attitude toward people of color. They first include non-white characters in a brief scene in *The Puffy Chair* (2005), but these characters – actually, more like caricatures – serve a stereotypical function rather than a role that represents them as people. After the furniture dealer has ripped him off, Josh seeks revenge and encounters a pair of Hondurans moving merchandise in the warehouse. He approaches them with a friendly greeting before cutting to the chase: Do you work here? When they offer a confusing response in Spanish, Josh rephrases his question. "Um, did your boss tell you to tell people when they ask you if you work here to say 'No'?"[123] The Hondurans act nervous and deny the accusation, so Josh leaves them alone. The film cuts to the next scene where, later in the day, Josh, Rhett, and Emily sit outside a food stand. Emily tells Josh that she has to know how he managed to broker a new agreement with the furniture dealer to reupholster the recliner for free. Finding the whole situation humorous, she asks, "What did you say to him that convinced him to give you $300?"[124] Josh deflects her question, but at this point, it is clear that within the span of cutting between the two scenes, Josh blackmailed the

[123] *The Puffy Chair*, directed by Jay Duplass (2005; Roadside Attractions, 2006), DVD.
[124] Ibid.

furniture dealer for employing undocumented workers. This is the only time that the film puts non-white characters on screen, but they do not enhance the racial complexion of the film. Instead, their role is to serve as an accessory to Josh, whose actions reduce their race to mere bargaining chips.

For the next three films, the Duplass Brothers maintain an all-white cast. It is not until *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* that non-white characters again play a role in their films, and these characters appear to signal a genuine effort for the Duplass Brothers to represent people of color. Kevin is one of these characters, and even though his part is relatively small, he is significant because the color of his skin does not delimit his role within the film. Instead, the film uses him to explore class dynamics, a point that I will probe later. So while race and class are ultimately indivisible factors, what is important to note for now is that Kevin represents a multidimensional character rather than serving a function that is limited to his racial identity. Carol is another non-white character whose actions ignore racial stereotypes. The actress Rae Dawn Chong plays Carol, and she has African, Cherokee, Chinese, and Caucasian heritage.[125] In the film, attention is never drawn to Carol's racial ambiguity; instead, aspects like age and sexuality come to determine her identity, but this is another point that I will explore later. Overall, there are clear problems with the under-representation of non-white characters in most of the Duplass Brothers' films. But characters like Kevin and Carol indicate a possible shift toward a better way to handle race, and they prove that the Duplass Brothers are capable of creating characters that exist beyond their racial identity.

[125] "Rae Dawn Chong Biography," *IMDB*, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001044/bio.

"Class"

In the Duplass Brothers' films, the protagonists tend to play various kinds of slackers, but these characters' propensity to shirk responsibility comes at little risk, which is a sign of their privileged, middle-class backgrounds. I argue that on the one hand, the Duplass Brothers take for granted the fact that these characters spend so much of their young lives aimlessly drifting with no consequences; but on the other hand, these characters resist conservative expectations of adulthood, offering a way to view their actions as a challenge to the status quo. In *The Puffy Chair*, Josh is a failed musician who now spends his time booking other bands, though it appears that this job is also not succeeding in the way that he wants. His brother Rhett is similarly adrift in life, busy with the fascination of the mundane. When the film introduces him, he is camping in the bushes outside his apartment, recording a video of a lizard on a twig. Inside, his apartment lacks food and furniture except for a television for him to show his video to Josh and Emily. A. O. Scott, in his review of the film, suggests that the eponymous recliner stands for a lost childhood that might not be so lost after all: "For Rhett and Josh – and to a lesser extent for Emily – adulthood is a land as remote as the jungles of New Guinea."[126] Indeed, Scott articulates the point that these characters represent a larger class of young, privileged slackers. He writes, "Perhaps [Emily] finds [Josh's] soft, childish side comforting, or maybe the other guys on North Sixth Street are even bigger losers than he is. In any case, it seems that Josh and Emily would rather talk baby talk than express their affection in more grown-up ways."[127] Although the film overall is about Josh grappling with adulthood, and even though he takes a step in this direction in the

[126] A. O. Scott, "The Puffy Chair," *New York Times*, August 4, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/04/movies/04puff.html?_r=0.
[127] Ibid.

end, the Duplass Brothers neglect to acknowledge the fact that Josh is only able to take his time learning this life lesson because his poverty is, in the words of David Denby, "semi-genteel" and "moderately hip."[128]

The protagonists of *Cyrus* and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* play similar roles as slackers, reflecting their middle-class privilege. Cyrus is 21-years-old, has never attended college, appears not to have a job, and still lives with his mother at home, where he semi-seriously works toward becoming a professional musician. John finds the living arrangement slightly baffling, but Cyrus offers an even less satisfying explanation of the situation. When John first meets him, he asks, "So you guys have always lived together? You're not, like, in from school or whatever?"[129] Cyrus explains that he took his G.E.D. at 16, and that "Molly and I are like best friends."[130] He adds that living at home allows him to foster his interest in music: "And since then, I've sort of been focusing on my music career."[131] But when Cyrus samples some of his music for John, the likelihood of this career actually materializing seems questionable, casting even further doubt on Cyrus ever moving out of the house or taking on responsibility.

In *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, the eponymous 30-year-old maintains a similar living arrangement, following not a musical goal but rather a philosophical one. However, when Jeff encounters a young man named Kevin on the bus and follows him, believing Kevin to be a sign from the universe pointing him toward his destiny, into a public housing development, the film throws Jeff's middle-class privilege into stark relief. The scene begins with Kevin and his friends playing basketball until one of them is too injured to

---

[128] David Denby, "Mumblecore," *Do the Movies Have a Future?* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 304.
[129] *Cyrus*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2010; 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.

continue playing. Rather than canceling the game, they ask Jeff, who has been watching from the sidelines, to fill in. After the game, Jeff timidly introduces himself to Kevin, who has taken notice of the fact that Jeff has been following him. When Jeff asks him if he lives in the development, Kevin replies, "Yeah, I don't live far from here. You obviously don't live here, though."[132] Indeed, Jeff stands out not because he is Caucasian but rather because he appears to lack street smarts. This lack of practical wisdom manifests itself when Kevin invites Jeff to smoke a joint with him in an abandoned building. As Jeff takes a drag, he fails to notice Kevin's friends sneaking up behind him to knock him to the ground and to steal the money out of his pockets. Leaving Jeff behind, Kevin sympathetically looks back to say, "Sorry, Jeff,"[133] implying that this happened not out of malicious intent but rather out of a low-income need to survive, which is a notion that Jeff cannot understand because he has the privilege of living at home without having to work.

"Gender"

When it comes to gender, the Duplass Brothers' films are consistently about male protagonists whose personal journey requires them in some fashion to prove their masculinity to either themselves or other characters. By examining masculinity in these films, I argue that the Duplass Brothers reaffirm a tradition in cinema in which male characters must assert their manhood; but then I will also contend that they complicate this traditional representation of masculinity through characters that ultimately resist fully

[132] *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2011; Paramount Vantage, 2012), DVD.
[133] Ibid.

embracing their manhood. In *The Puffy Chair*, masculinity is always laced in conversations and arguments between Josh and Emily about issues like commitment, responsibility, and maturity, the implication being that in order for Josh to prove his masculinity, he first has to act like an adult. This equation between masculinity and adulthood manifests itself particularly in the scene at the hotel in which Josh and Emily argue over each other's reasons for staying in a relationship that appears to be going nowhere. Emily implores Josh to commit to the idea of marriage, yanking the bed sheets off him in frustration as he tries to cover his undressed body with a pillow. Exposing him physically and emotionally, Emily tells Josh, "I deserve better than this."[134] But Josh understands Emily's sentiment to mean that she deserves to be with someone better than him, and he refuses to change: "Give me one good reason why you want to marry me. You can't do it. You can't do it, and you know why? Because you want me to be this dude that I am not. And I'm sorry, okay? I would love to be that dude, but I'm not."[135] Since Josh is not the "dude" that Emily wants him to be, her plea for him to become more like an adult is therefore an implicit criticism of his masculinity.

At the end of the film, when Josh does inch closer to adulthood, the masculine nature of this personal journey is again made apparent. Having completed the road trip to his parents' house, Josh seeks advice on his and Emily's relationship from a figure that embodies both maturity and manhood – his father. Josh wants to know what he is supposed to do in this situation, and his father explains to him that he cannot wait for Emily to act but rather must make a decision himself: "You know as much now as you're ever gonna know about Emily and your relationship. And what you're probably doing is

[134] *The Puffy Chair*, directed by Jay Duplass (2005; Roadside Attractions, 2006), DVD.
[135] Ibid.

waiting for something real good or real bad to make the decision for you, and you're not gonna get that break. It never happens."[136] The camera stays on Josh for a few seconds as he lets his father's words sink in, looking downward and downtrodden. Josh understands that he and Emily will need to break up. By going through with it in the final scene of the film, Josh takes a step closer to adulthood, consequently asserting his masculinity. The conclusion of the film reinforces the equation between masculinity and adulthood, and like the Duplass Brothers' other films, demonstrating his manhood is inherent to the male protagonist's personal journey.

In *Cyrus* (2010) and *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, masculinity again plays a crucial role in the narrative, and the films posit the protagonist's effort to assert his manhood as a struggle for independence. For the eponymous 21-year-old in *Cyrus*, living with his single mother, Molly, is too comfortable of an arrangement to move out of the house or to stay out of her and John's relationship. In order to maintain this arrangement, Cyrus constantly has to reinforce the notion that he still needs his mother to take care of him by overselling his panic attacks. Although this condition is not as debilitating as Cyrus makes it appear, it is still evident that he genuinely depends on his mother for financial and emotional support. The film expresses his struggle for independence as a matter of masculinity, which John's presence throws in stark relief. Indeed, as long as John is in the picture, then Cyrus's arrangement with his mother and his position as the "man of the house" are at risk.

For Cyrus, independence is a sign of masculinity, and the film makes this connection clear when he announces his decision to move out of the house. Cyrus comes home after having spent the day out of the house, making his mother worried in the hope

[136] Ibid.

that her feelings will consequently disturb her and John's relationship. Molly is relieved to have her son back home, so when Cyrus says that he needs to tell her and John some news, the camera lingers on her hesitant expression. Cyrus puts it bluntly: "I don't want to make this emotional. I've decided to move out. I'm an adult now, and I think it's time for us to move on."[137] Of course, moving out is actually a tactic meant to drive Molly and John to breaking up with each other, which in turn would allow Cyrus the opportunity to return home as John's replacement; but as his wording suggests, even Cyrus understands that moving out is the mature thing to do. He explains that this new arrangement will be a better one, telling his mother, "And besides, you have John now, and you guys need some space for your relationship to flourish."[138] By framing John as a male replacement within the household, Cyrus implies that he is just as masculine as John, and therefore ready to live on his own. However, Cyrus is ultimately bluffing his way through this decision, and his endeavor to prove his masculinity by achieving real independence defines him as a protagonist.

When Cyrus realizes that his mother has prospered without him, he decides to move back home as a way of reasserting himself as the center of her life; but John attempts to dissuade him by saying that such an action would be emasculating. At this point in the film, John is aware of Cyrus's efforts to undermine his relationship with Molly, and unbeknown to her, the two have staked it out for each other. In this scene, Cyrus tells his mother that living on his own has exacerbated his panic attacks and that he wants to move back home. But John is determined to beat Cyrus by outperforming him. He sits next to Cyrus on the couch, comfortingly placing his hand behind his shoulder,

---

[137] *Cyrus*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2010; 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.
[138] Ibid.

and lies about suffering from panic attacks at Cyrus's age. When Cyrus attempts to entangle his story, asking if his family supported him during this period, John alleges, in a barely convincing manner, that it did not: "It was terrifying. I didn't know what was going on. They didn't even call them anxiety attacks back then. I just thought I was going crazy. I almost left college. But I decided to tough it out, and that decision made me who I am."[139] Although John is lying about his experience with panic attacks, his point is that masculinity and independence are ultimately intertwined; by "toughing out" a difficult experience without anyone to depend on, he learned how to be a man. Indeed, he tells Cyrus, "This could be that moment in your life, where you go from being a boy to being a man."[140] Here, the implication is that independence is essential to manhood, and therefore moving back home would strip Cyrus of his masculinity.

Jeff, Who Lives at Home formulates a similar connection between independence and masculinity. In the film, Jeff obsesses over reading signs from the universe to guide him through life, but he also struggles to move out of his mother's basement, which in turn calls his manhood into question. From the beginning, the film presents Jeff as an isolated loser. The film opens with a close-up of him speaking into a tape recorder about the powerful message behind one of his favorite movies, the 2002 sci-fi thriller *Signs*. Then it cuts to a long shot of him sitting on the toilet, revealing the context in which he has been talking to himself and establishing the squalor of his lifestyle. A little later, the film shows him spending his time smoking pot, watching infomercials on television, and eating junk food. By opening with this glimpse at Jeff's directionless life, the film situates his brother, Pat, as a point of comparison when it introduces him in the next

[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.

scene. Unlike his brother, Pat is married, has a job, and rents an apartment. Even though Pat faces his own host of problems when it comes to these areas of his life, the film argues that his independence makes him more conventionally masculine. Therefore, the film offers that in order for Jeff to prove his masculinity, he must demonstrate self-reliance and negotiate the world outside of his mother's basement.

The differences between Jeff and Pat's degrees of independence are apparent throughout the film, highlighting its significance in regards to masculinity. On the day that the film takes place, Jeff and Pat encounter each other coincidentally while Pat is eating lunch at Hooters, an overt expression of his masculinity if not outright sexism. Their mother, Sharon, calls him, pleading him to help Jeff who is supposed to fix the shutter on one of the doors in the house. But Pat is frustrated by her request since it requires him to act compassionate toward his 30-year-old brother in order for him to accomplish a simple task. He says to his mother about Jeff, "When you're an adult, you take responsibility for your life."[141] This is a sentiment that Pat repeats later in the scene when he and Jeff visit their father's gravesite. When Pat tells Jeff about a recurring dream that he has been having about their father, and Jeff says that he has had the same one, Jeff takes it as a sign from the universe while Pat ignores the marvel of this shared experience, deciding that there must be an ordinary reason behind it. Jeff admonishes him for trying to rationalize their dream, but Pat rebukes him, asserting that a stoner who lives in their mother's basement is hardly an authority when it comes to explaining how the universe works: "Hey, here's some understanding for you: a job, and a car, and a wife,

[141] *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2011; Paramount Vantage, 2012), DVD.

and an apartment."[142] If Jeff is not able to leave their mother's basement for work or for romance, Pat suggests, then he will never take a position as the man of his own household.

Masculinity remains an essential component to the protagonist's personal journey in the Duplass Brothers' two other films, *Baghead* (2008) and *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon* (2009), which deal with gender more directly. In *Baghead*, Chad and his friends retreat into the woods to film a low-budget horror film, which he views as an opportunity to make a move on Michelle. He thinks that by successfully wooing her, he will affirm his viability as a sexual partner and therefore prove his masculinity. However, when it comes to engaging women, Matt demonstrates that he is much more self-confident than Chad, and he consequently threatens Chad's plan to hook up with Michelle. The film poses Chad against Matt who unintentionally becomes the object of Michelle's desire, and as this situation plays itself out, the masculine undertones of Chad's efforts to recapture Michelle's attention come to the surface. Overall, the film wagers that in order for Chad to affirm his manhood, he must demonstrate that he is as sexually worthwhile as Matt, even if this means undercutting Matt's self-confidence by frightening him as a bag-headed stalker.

Early in the film, Chad tells Michelle that he likes her, but the gesture fails to resonate with her, highlighting his emasculation. The scene begins with Chad inspecting himself in the bathroom mirror, hopelessly spreading thin tufts of hair over his receding hairline. He enters Michelle's room and sits next to her on the bed, saying, "I, um, I just

[142] Ibid.

wanted to tell you that I think you're amazing."[143] Before he can continue, Michelle returns the compliment but in an altogether different tone, patronizing him rather than sincerely reciprocating his feelings. But Chad presses forward: "No, but I really think that you are probably the most sweet and innocent and pure people that I think I've ever met."[144] Chad draws his words out slowly, pausing more often than he should, indicating his nerves, and his delivery amplifies the overall inarticulateness of his speech. But as if his tongue twister were not damaging enough to his self-confidence, Michelle eliminates any possibility for him as a sexual partner by likening him to a brother. The film cuts to a shot of Chad as he slowly drops his head in embarrassment. Michelle continues to express what Chad means to her: "I don't have brothers, but I feel like that's what they would do. That's what you do. You're everything, 'Chadworth.' You're everything to me. You're like family and friend."[145] But ignoring her signals to "just be friends," Chad leans in to kiss her. She slightly withdraws, and rather than kissing her, Chad accidentally bumps her head. Michelle laughs, trying to defuse the situation, and she playfully bumps her head against his shoulder. But Chad is humiliated by his actions, and as he avoids making eye contact with Michelle, she attaches hair clips to the strands on his head. Still trying to pacify Chad's mortification, Michelle only makes it worse by telling him that the clips in his hair make him "look like a little toddler."[146] With his pride wounded, Chad is quick to tell Michelle "good night" and to leave her room. As this scene shows, Michelle does not view Chad as masculine; rather, she sees him as a toddler, a friend, or a hypothetical brother at best.

---

[143] *Baghead*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2008; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.

When Chad confronts Matt about Michelle flirting with him, he reaffirms the notion that Matt is more masculine than himself because Michelle is more attracted to Matt. In this scene, Chad and Matt are inspecting the area around the cabin for the bag-headed stranger that came into Michelle's room and scared her. As they explore the woods, Chad stops and asks Matt if he has already slept with Michelle. Even though Matt says that nothing has happened between them, Chad slaps him across the face, a conventionally feminine attack. As the camera shows Matt looking at his friend patronizingly, Chad insists that Matt is lying, calling him "the biggest fucking cock in the whole world."[147] Matt looks incredulous at the accusation, but Chad adds, "I just can't deal with it if you sleep with her."[148] Ensuring that Matt will not get in his way, Chad makes him swear an oath on one of his testicles that he will not sleep with Michelle, which Matt obliges. For Chad, he stands no chance when compared to Matt – "You get all the fucking chicks. You've got Elvis hair. I mean, look at me, dude. I've got nothing!"[149] By making various references to Matt's genitals and sexuality, Chad calls attention to a latent anxiety over his own masculinity. Indeed, this scene accentuates the contrast between Chad and Matt's different levels of self-confidence, which is rooted in their masculinity.

The Duplass Brothers directly address masculinity again in *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon* because the fraternal rivalry that inspires the eponymous competition becomes an opportunity for each of the brothers to prove his manhood over the other's. The film establishes the competition as a contest for manhood when Jeremy rediscovers the videotape from his and Mark's first attempt at putting on the games. As Jeremy plays

[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.

the tape, footage of him and Mark as teenagers shows them dictating to the camera the rules of "The Do-Deca-Pentathlon": "I solemnly swear that I will complete all 25 of these events. And whoever wins will be declared the better brother."[150] But the tape then cuts to a home-fitness television program that someone has recorded over the rest of the footage in what appears to be an attempt to erase the evidence of the competition's existence. In the next scene, Jeremy confronts Mark about the tape, joining the family for dinner and wordlessly placing the tape on the table. Mark remains silent, but his son asks about the tape. Knowing that the answer will embarrass his brother, Jeremy says to Mark, "Feel like telling your son what 'Do-Deca' is, buddy?"[151] The film makes clear that the topic is controversial for the family as it cuts to shots of the mother, Mark, and Mark's wife darting their eyes away from Jeremy and his interrogation. Mark tells his son that the "Do-Deca" was a meaningless activity that he and Jeremy did once as teenagers, but Jeremy corrects this portrayal: "When your Dad and I were in high school, one summer, we came up with this competition called 'The Do-Deca-Pentathlon,' which is basically 25 events, and the one who won the most events was crowned 'Champion of All Time.'"[152] As Jeremy explains the competition, the camera remains on Mark as he picks at the food on his plate, avoiding eye contact with his son. The shot suggests that Mark does not care to discuss the competition because it makes him feel emasculated.

Although the competition makes it sound like the stakes are fairly low, the film frames it as an illustration of Mark and Jeremy's urge to outperform each other and therefore to express their masculinity. Jeremy explains that he won the original

---

[150] *The Do-Deca-Pentathlon*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2009; Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012), DVD.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

competition, but Mark insists that they tied because the final event – a contest to see who could hold their breath beneath the water for the longest amount of time – was interrupted by their father pulling him to the surface. Here lies the controversy because, twenty years later, being crowned "Champion of All Time" still matters to Mark. Indeed, Mark's wife suggests simply conceding victory to Jeremy as a way of settling the issue: "Maybe you should just tell him that he won so we can just move past this."[153] Mark manages to tell Jeremy that the competition is unimportant, but he cannot fully bring himself to say that Jeremy is the winner because being declared "the better brother" is actually more significant than it seems. When his wife continues to insist that he admit defeat, Mark storms away from the dinner table, affirming the notion that the competition is not merely a game between brothers. Indeed, over the course of the film, it becomes apparent that Mark feels suppressed by his family life, and by re-engaging with the competition, he has the opportunity to assert his masculinity in a way that is unavailable to him at home. By competing against his brother in physical challenges, Mark uses "The Do-Deca-Pentathlon" to express his masculinity.

This examination of the Duplass Brothers' films reveals their conservative tendency to focus on male characters and the expression of masculinity, but now I argue that there are also resistant elements to this representation of gender that afford opportunities for progressive viewings of their films. Even thought Cyrus reconciles with John at the end of that film, and he implies that he has stepped closer to emotional independence, the ending outright challenges the notion that conventional masculinity suits all men the same way. While the film formulates independence as a way for Cyrus to prove his masculinity, the fact that his status remains open-ended suggests that he is

[153] Ibid.

ultimately satisfied with not achieving convention manhood. One possible reason for Cyrus's unconventional gender identity could be related to the film's Oedipal overtones, though I contend that this characterization is part of the narrative premise rather than a meaningful personality trait. Or as David Zuckerman puts it, "Cyrus's inability to leave the nest and his 'closeness' to his mother […] are most fruitful and perverse before we have any idea how far [Jonah] Hill's creepy poker-faced regressive is capable of going. Of course, the specter of incest only serves as the catalyst for awkward humor, not as any kind of real threat."[154] Instead of seeing Cyrus as a failure of manhood, I argue that he offers a queer viewing of the film and exemplifies suppression in the face of others telling him how to act like their conception of a man.

In a similar vein, *Baghead* equates sexuality and masculinity, but the film also proposes a homosocial relationship between Chad and Matt as an alternative to Chad's frustrated efforts to attract Michelle. During the scene in which Chad makes Matt take an oath not to sleep with Michelle, Matt expresses disappointment in Chad's lack of self-confidence: "You've got shitty self-esteem, dude. You're the funniest fucking person I know. You're cute, and you're funny."[155] Indeed, while Chad views himself as sexually inferior to his friend, Matt sees the disparity between them in completely different terms, and the exchange suggests that their friendship could somewhat serve as a substitute for heterosexual romance. At the end of the film, when Matt reveals that he hired an acquaintance to act as the bag-headed stalker, which subsequently led to Chad ending up in the hospital, he apologizes to everyone. Chad and Michelle forgive him, but Catherine, his ex-girlfriend and lover, walks out cold. Matt turns to Chad, and the two embrace for

[154] David Zuckerman, "Cyrus," *Film Comment* XLVI, no. 4 (July-August 2010): 63-4.
[155] *Baghead*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2008; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

nearly a minute of screen time, Chad rubbing Matt on the back as Matt cries: "I'm such a fucking idiot."[156] But Chad consoles him, saying, "You are an idiot, but it's okay. Now go get me some ice cream,"[157] as Matt kisses his friend on the cheek. So on the one hand, the film asserts a traditional view of masculinity as a matter of heterosexual attraction. But on the other hand, the film offers this homosocial viewing of Chad and Matt's relationship. With Michelle's disinterest toward Chad and Catherine's exit from the group, the film reaffirms Chad and Matt's friendship as a solution to their unproven masculinity.

The Duplass Brothers again feature a homosocial relationship as an alternative to conventional romance in *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*. In the film, Sharon receives flirtatious messages at work from an anonymous source, and she fantasizes over the identity of the author with her middle-aged coworker and friend, Carol. But when Carol accidentally reveals that she is the one behind the messages, Sharon misinterprets the gesture and declines what she believes to be Carol coming on to her. Later, when Carol apologizes to Sharon for misleading her into believing that it was one of her male coworkers flirting with her, Sharon states her position in plain terms – "It's just that I'm not gay."[158] But Carol explains that what she seeks is not a strictly romantic relationship but rather a homosocial one. She says, "To me, it's like, at this point in my life, whether it's a man or a woman, it doesn't matter. I want someone who gets me. I feel like I deserve that, and I think you do, too."[159] Although Sharon is hesitant at first, she comes around when Carol sets off the fire sprinklers in the office and finds Sharon standing beneath the stream of

---

[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] *Jeff, Who Lives at Home*, directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass (2011; Paramount Vantage, 2012), DVD.
[159] Ibid.

one of the sprinklers to kiss her. The romantic-seeming gesture serves as a sign that Carol is indeed someone who understands Sharon, who says that it is her dream to be kissed beneath a waterfall. Rather than reinforcing a conservative view of gender, the film introduces this homosocial relationship as a way to challenge the confines of traditional gender boundaries.

Conclusion

As I have argued throughout this project, the Duplass Brothers' career reflects a number of industrial, technological, and aesthetic trends in the contemporary independent film industry. Their films offer a way to understand certain production and distribution models that characterize an entirely new movement in independent cinema. Additionally, I have argued that their films provide a platform for discussing the role of authenticity in the critical discourse on independent cinema. Indeed, their films expose a double standard in the reception of independent films – there is a tendency among critics to maintain two different conceptions of authenticity and to apply them when it most benefits their distinction of taste. Furthermore, their films reveal the role of representation in independent cinema in terms of race, class, and gender, and how these issues elicit multiple ways of viewing that both uphold and subvert audiences' ideological expectations. Overall, I contend that the Duplass Brothers' films provide a case for studying and for better understanding the business, discourse, and aesthetics of independent cinema at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In addition to exemplifying the state of the industry in this particular period, the Duplass Brothers might indicate some of the potential pathways into the future. In the wake of recent studio closings, advances in technology, and alternative distribution patterns, trying to determine where the industry is heading has taken on a new sense of urgency among scholars and critics. One possible future is that the cinema as we know it will come to an end. This is the viewpoint espoused by Wheeler Winston Dixon in the essay, "Twenty-five Reasons Why It's All Over," which, as the title suggests, enumerates the reasons why "we are faced with the inescapable fact that […] 'film' has become an

altogether different medium from that imagined and practiced by its pioneers and classicists."[160] Although some of his points have proven to be false, his overall argument – that shifts in technology "will end 'movies as we know them,' but not the cinema itself"[161] – offers a way to think about the future of the industry. Part of this future involves reckoning with this appearance of the end of cinema, which is why the Duplass Brothers represent such an attractive route out of this apocalyptic scenario.

Recently, the Duplass Brothers have released an eight-episode television series for HBO called *Togetherness*, which they wrote and directed, casting Mark in the lead role. In an article on their pivot to television, Peter Debruge reports that the Duplass Brothers maintain a "sunny outlook" in spite of growing uncertainty about the state of the independent film industry. In the article, Mark is quoted as saying, "Jay and I don't share the prevailing opinion right now that indie film is fucked. We sometimes feel like these guys in a post-apocalyptic world where there are hungry people complaining and bleeding outside, and Jay and I have set ourselves up in a nice little cave."[162] Indeed, the Duplass Brothers are survivors of what has been an unstable period for the independent film industry, and there are some observers who look to them as an example of what to do next, evidenced by the appearance of articles such as "Mark Duplass on How to Get a Movie Made in 2014," which showed up on the movie blog *ScreenCrush* for the release of *The One I Love*. Although Mark shares sound advice – like "Keep Expectations Low" and "Profitability Isn't All Box Office" – for "how to stay sustainable in today's

[160] Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Twenty-five Reasons Why It's All Over," *The End of cinema as we know it: American film in the nineties*, edited by Jon Lewis. (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 356.
[161] Ibid, 365.
[162] Peter Debruge, "Indie Directors Surprise with Sunny Outlook," *Variety* 321, no. 6 (August 22, 2013): 6.

Hollywood,"[163] perhaps we should consider his actions rather than his words in order to determine a possible future for the industry.

Just because the Duplass Brothers have undertaken television for their next project rather than another film does not mean that the independent film industry as a whole is moving to television. But *Togetherness* does represent one possible future for the industry, which is to try to find success in another medium as a way of building a larger audience for the release of their next feature film. In Debruge's article, Jay defends his and Mark's penchant for filmmaking, saying, "We are making movies because we had critical emotional experiences in movie theaters growing up. It moved us; it made us so goddamn happy as human beings. We are trying to return the favor and to be part of that feedback loop."[164] Debruge, however, also notes that the Duplass Brothers are "completely open to the idea that for the next round of audiences, theaters may not have anything to do with it."[165] Although the Duplass Brothers, by all appearances, will continue to make films, they indeed indicate that this is the end of independent cinema as we know it. Perhaps one conclusion that can be drawn from their entrance into television is that the independent film industry can exist only as long as television does. If the Duplass Brothers find success in television, it might not mean that they will leave filmmaking, but it will likely require one to have a viable television career in order to maintain a career in filmmaking, too.

---

[163] Mike Ryan, "Mark Duplass on How to Get a Movie Made in 2014," *ScreenCrush*, August 20, 2014, http://screencrush.com/mark-duplass-film-school/.
[164] Peter Debruge, "Indie Directors Surprise with Sunny Outlook," *Variety* 321, no. 6 (August 22, 2013): 7.
[165] Ibid.

Bibliography

Biba, Erin. “Netflix Presents.” *Wired Magazine*, September 2006. http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/14.09/netflix.html.

Debruge, Peter. “Baghead,” *Variety* CDIX, no. 11, February 4-10, 2008, 95.

—. “A big shot for small sensibility,” *Variety* CDXIX, no. 3, May 31-June 6, 2010, 4.

—. “Indie Directors Surprise with Sunny Outlook,” *Variety* 321, no. 6, August 22, 2013, 6-7.

—. “Jeff, who lives at home,” *Variety* CDXXIV, no. 6, September 19-25, 2011, 77.

—. “Mumblecore movement makes mainstream moves,” *Variety* CDX, no. 3, March 3-9, 2008, 10.

—. “Review: ‘The Do-Deca-Pentathlon’.” *Variety*. March 12, 2012. http://variety.com/2012/film/reviews/the-do-deca-pentathlon-1117947228/.

Denby, David. “Mumblecore,.” *Do the Movies Have a Future?* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. “Twenty-five Reasons Why It’s All Over,” *The End of cinema as we know it: American film in the nineties*, edited by Jon Lewis, 356-66. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

“The Duplass Bros.” *Indiewire*. http://www.indiewire.com/influencers/the-duplass-bros.

Edwards, Gavin. “The Duplass Brothers Have Kidnapped Hollywood.” *New York Times Magazine*. May, 18, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/20/magazine/the-duplass-brothers-have-kidnapped-hollywood.html.

Hernandez, Eugene. "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, Creators of 'The Puffy Chair'." *Indiewire*. July 17, 2006. http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_jay_duplass_and_mark_duplass_creators_of_the_puffy_chai.

Jarzemsky, John. "SXSW 2012 Review: The Do-Deca Pentathlon." *Twitch*. March 12, 2012. http://twitchfilm.com/2012/03/sxsw-2012-review-the-do-deca-pentathlon.html.

King, Geoff. *American Independent Cinema*. New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005.

King, Geoff. *Indie 2.0: Change and Continuity in Contemporary American Indie Film.* New York: Columbia UP, 2014.

Kohn, Eric. "indieWIRE INTERVIEW: 'Baghead' Co-directors Jay and Mark Duplass." *Indiewire*. July 24, 2008. http://www.indiewire.com/article/indiewire_interview_baghead_co-directors_jay_and_mark_duplass.

Maltin, Leonard. "The-Do-Deca-Pentathlon." *Leonard Maltin's Movie Crazy*. July 5, 2012. http://blogs.indiewire.com/leonardmaltin/the-do-deca-pentathlon-movie-review.

Newman, Michael Z. "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative." *Cinema Journal* 48, Spring 2009: 16-34. *Academic Search Complete,* EBSCO*host*.

"Rae Dawn Chong Biography." *IMDB*. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001044/bio.

Ryan, Mike. "Mark Duplass on How to Get a Movie Made in 2014." *ScreenCrush*. August 20, 2014. http://screencrush.com/mark-duplass-film-school/.

San Filippo, Maria. "A Cinema of Recession: Micro-Budgeting, Micro-Drama, and the 'Mumblecore' Movement." *CineAction* , Winter 2011: 2-8. *Literature Resource Center*.

Scott, A. O. "The Puffy Chair." *New York Times*. August 4, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/04/movies/04puff.html?_r=0.

Scott, A. O. "Up From the Basement, Slacker Metaphysics." *New York Times*. March 15, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/16/movies/jeff-who-lives-at-home-a-duplass-brothers-comedy.html.

Smith, Nigel M. "The Duplass Brothers on Revisiting 'The Do-Deca Pentathlon' Four Years after Making It." *Indiewire*. July 2, 2012. http://www.indiewire.com/article/the-duplass-brothers_on_revisiting_the_do_deca_pentathlon_four_years_after_making_it.

Taubin, Amy. "All Talk?" *Film Comment*, 2007: 45-7. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host*.

Tzioumakis, Yannis. "'Independent', 'Indie' and 'Indiewood': Towards a periodisation of contemporary (post-1980) American independent cinema." *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond*, edited by Geoff King, Clair Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis, 28-40. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Van Couvering, Alicia. "What I Meant to Say." *Filmmaker: The Magazine of Independent Film*, Spring 2007, *Art Source*, EBSCO*host*.

Zuckerman, David. "Cyrus," *Film Comment* XLVI, no. 4, July-August 2010, 63.

Films Cited

Baghead. Directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

Cyrus. Directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.

The Do-Deca-Pentathlon. Directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012. DVD.

Jeff, Who Lives at Home. Directed by Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass. Paramount Vantage, 2012. DVD.

The Puffy Chair. Directed by Jay Duplass. Roadside Attractions, 2006. DVD.