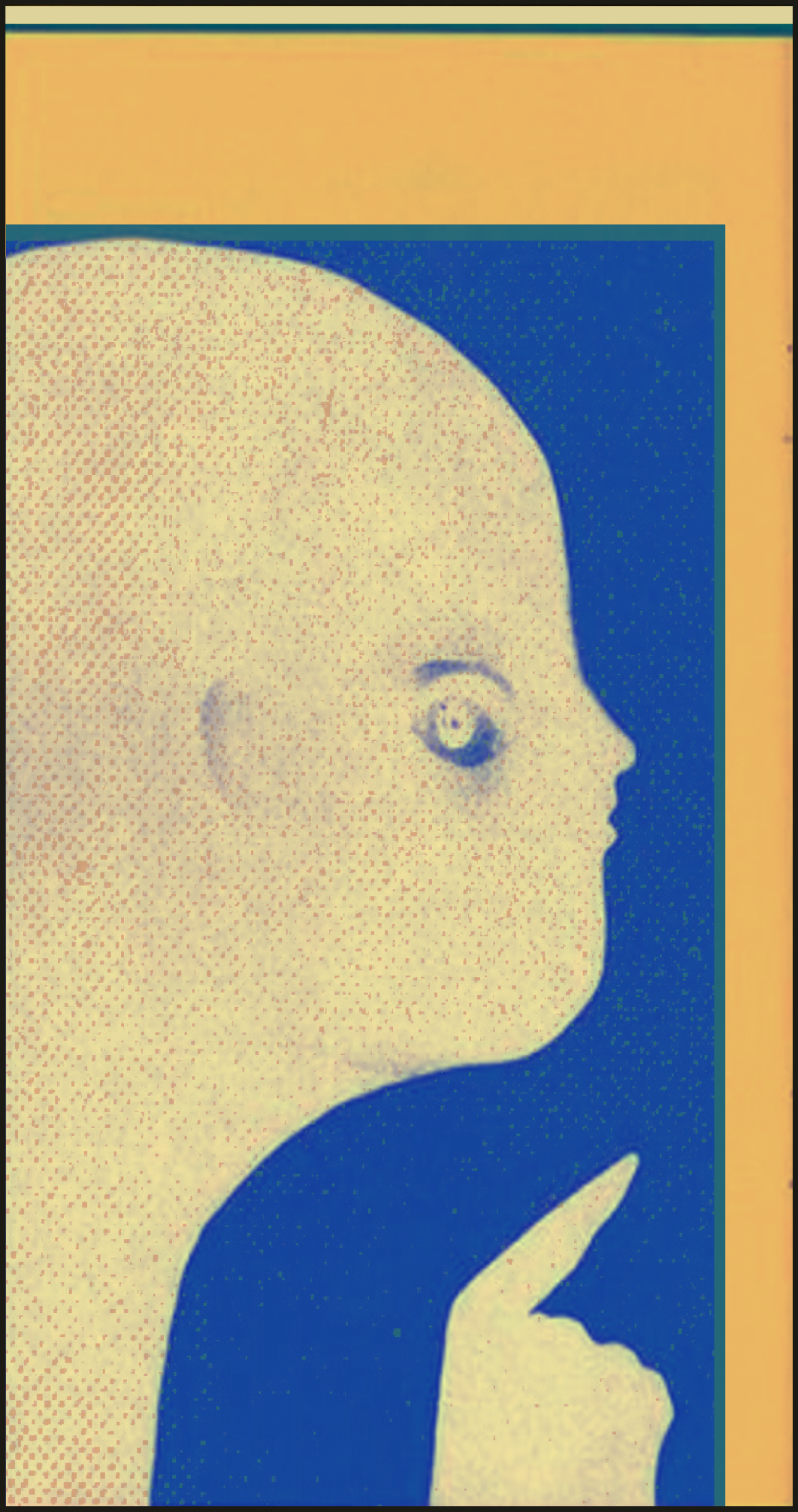
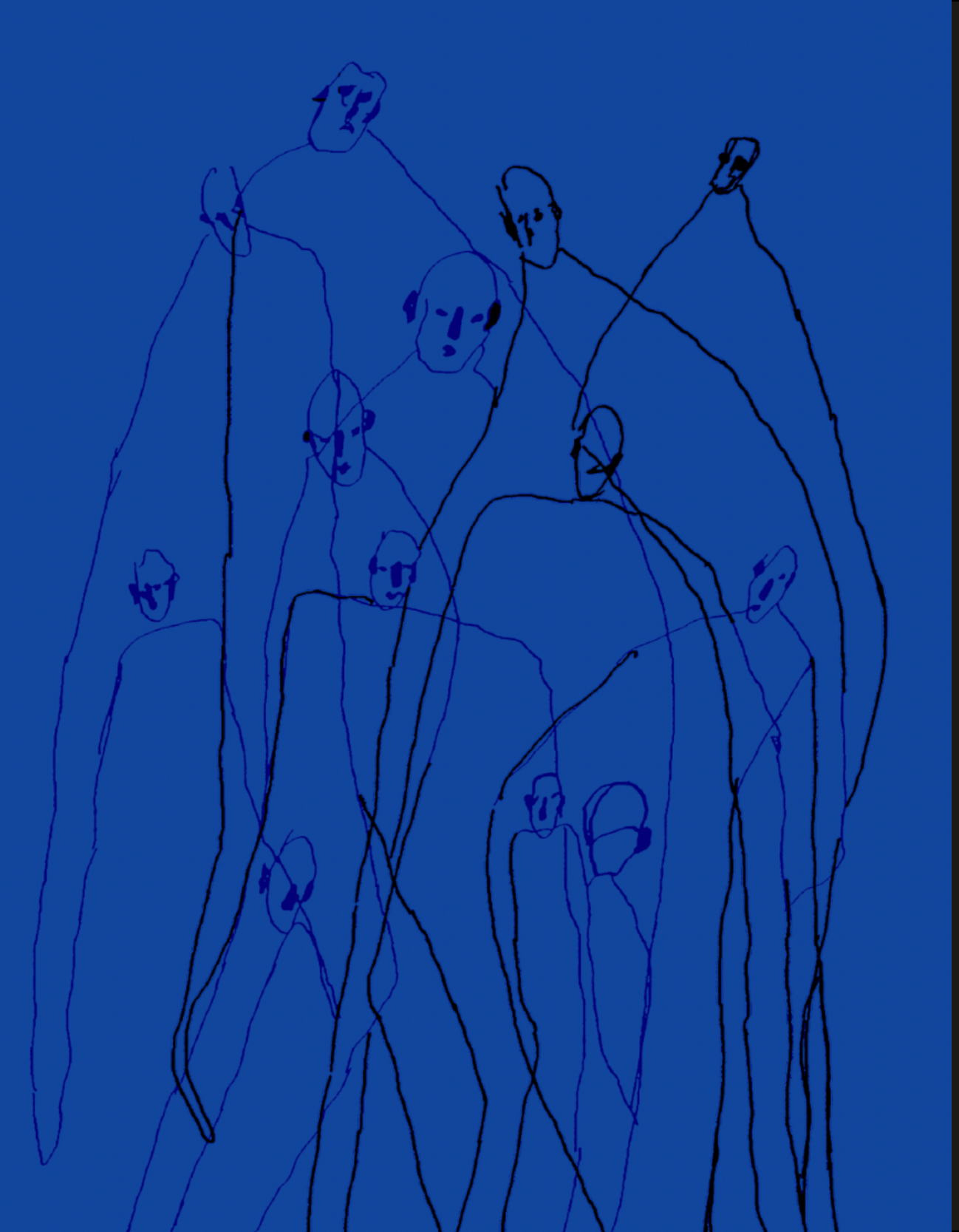
THE REEL THING



FORWARDS

ISSUE 3
HT 21

OFAS



edi-tors notes

Back in October 2020 when *The Reel Thing* released its first issue, so was Timothée Chalamet interviewed by *GQ*. We were still at a point to claim that hope was on the horizon. Wes Anderson's new film *The French Dispatch* had been officially delayed, but never mind that – cinephiles' social media feed was interspersed with trailer clips and first looks from Denis Villeneuve's *Dune*, a major sci-fi feature that not only smelt of an up-and-coming magnum opus but, more importantly, whispered a promise. A promise of big screens, 3D glasses, sold-out midnight screenings, and rows upon rows of huddled cinema-goers. The sense of belonging from sharing a story but also a space. The much-missed good old times. All coming back near the end of a dreadful year.

In that interview, the young Oscar nominee, after months of reclusive living in a cottage, playing the harmonica and preparing for his role in the announced Bob Dylan biopic, was as optimistic as the rest of us. When asked about his plans once Hollywood reopens, he could afford to be whimsical: "I want to get back to the undefined space again."

What really happened next, as we all know, was a wish come true. There indeed has been a lot of "undefined": *Dune* was moved to HBO Max, among an entire batch of Warner Bros. blockbusters; other promising candidates like the new *Bond* and *Batman* were quick to postpone release dates. And just like so many other indie productions during this difficult time, James Mangold's Dylan biopic was put on hold indefinitely. Later in the year, when theatres were filling the empty calendar slots with old classics, a second lockdown hit. Then a third.

Back we went to closed curtains and home projectors, MUBI archive and DVDs. In the past few months, a lot of us have probably watched more black-and-whites than new releases. The same anachronism is spilling into the realities on screen: there's *Mank* and *Malcolm and Marie*, retro Netflix productions in grayscale monochrome; there's the latest *Bridgerton,* a palimpsest of a series where modern social mechanisms are superimposed onto a historical setting; not to mention Marvel's *WandaVision,* where escapism eventually escalates to a literal escape into vintage sitcoms. All of us were stranded in different chapters of the past, willingly, to have a break from the now, and put off looking ahead.

Whereto is forward, when all we want is looking back?

Two films that speak to the pandemic experience to some level are last year's *Palm Springs* and the recent Valentine's teen film *The Map of Tiny Perfect Things,* both being stories of one same day replayed over and over, of going back in time as soon as the day nears its end. A bit on the nose, but they capture our status quo rather accurately: there is not a relative forward to speak of, when time and the world themselves are put on hold. Yet an alternative takeaway could be this: within the limit of one day, the storyline stays linear - characters remain dynamic, and plot goes on progressing. Even though their *forward* means *back again,* the humans trapped in time loops keep on going.

Forward is this issue's theme, but all of the mentioned films are in fact tales of perseverance, a shared theme that can perhaps be attributed more to tacit understanding than sheer coincidence. These are stories about being stuck – in fictional dystopias that feel too real, as well as realities so theatrical, even the mundane everyday starts to feel like fiction, or what Frances Ha calls "a secret world that exists right there in public, unnoticed, that no one else knows about." But they somehow all reach the same conclusion, that forward can simply mean *onward* – not trudging and traipsing, but like Noah Baumbach's free-spirited New Yorker (featured twice this week as we all can't have enough of her), hopping along busy sidewalks in unflappable insouciance.

Never mind if forward is uncharted territory. Keep on watching. Keep on learning. Keep on living. Or, as Timothée himself says in that same interview, keep on "chasing a feeling", because "when you really have no clue, that's when you're doing something on the edge, good or bad."

Maddie Day - Editor Nina Jurkovic - Director Kyran Kinlan - Designer Eleanor Zhang - Editor

Pandemic and Short Films:

When dystopia becomes reality

The dystopian genre has a long history in cinema, stretching back to the early 20th century with the 1927 release of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. Typically a device for constructing imagined futures, dystopia works to investigate future human relations - inter-species, intra-species, and beyond into the non-human realm. Some dystopias focus more on the potential for apocalypse and catastrophe, whilst others explore the future of technology and ventures beyond planet earth. Dystopias imagine the collapse of normality, a scenario that has proven prescient, what with the disruption of the usual functioning of society we have seen ever since the onset of COVID-19. Dystopian cinema then, when viewed in the midst of a pandemic, begins to take on new meanings. Outbreak-based dystopian narratives, like *Contagion (2011)* or *28 Days Later (2002)*, are more obvious in the way they have come to mirror reality, as evidenced by their renewed popularity in the last year. I, however, am more interested in how low-budget short films created specifically during COVID-19 have provided a creative outlet that blurs the lines between dystopian fiction and pandemic realities. These films play with reality and imagination, both unconsciously and consciously echoing a longer history of fictional dystopias in films.

Pandemic and Short Films:

When Dystopia Becomes Reality

The overall impact of COVID-19 on cinema has been devastating, as we are faced with the continual delay of major releases scheduled for the last year, as well as the limitations put on new productions, with only certain well-funded sets able to remain open. Yet, despite these setbacks, it is important to appreciate the new opportunities that may have arisen amongst the most unfortunate of circumstances. Whilst large-scale productions have been put on hold, a space has opened up for renewed interest in the low-budget short films. With an increasing number of short films being produced, and from a wider variety of sources, the productions are reaching new audiences as they become less overshadowed by blockbuster releases. In many ways the low-budget short film has become a more dominant artform. I for one have spent much more time in the last year exploring this category, leading me in particular to the world of COVID-19-era dystopian short films.

One key theme of COVID-19 dystopian short films is the exploration of new ways to define isolation as a result of pandemic-related restrictions, in contrast with the idea of isolation in previous feature-length dystopian narratives. One recent short film that highlights the Covid-induced isolation is *Plague Inc. (2020),* an anxiety-driven abstract piece that perfectly captures the COVID-19 experience as a confluence of being told to relax while maintaining a productive mindset, leaving us trapped in an endless cycle of feeling unable to do anything. Plague Inc. is fundamentally dystopian, not because it is deliberately constructed that way, but because it reflects our reality that has become dystopian itself.

Another example is *Last Contact (2020)* which depicts a lone man's attempt to make contact with the outside from his post-apocalyptic bunker. Before the pandemic, this short film would have been typical of the dystopian/space-travel genre, featuring themes of isolation, communication and hostility. But from our current viewpoint, this film feels simply like a depiction of reality, an extension of everyday life. Our experience of watching dystopian films is changing because the imagined realities on screen feel growingly closer to the one outside of it. What we're left with post-viewing is a paradox: dystopian ideas for the future deliberately crafted in films like *Last Contact* become more real, while the normality of realist films like *Plague Inc.* become more dystopian. What would have appeared comfortably unimaginable to us two years ago, now feels more tangible to us than the realism in the rich legacy of films attempting to depict normality.

For some, this new relatability found in dystopia has provided comfort, explaining a recent surge in the popularity of apocalypse films; but for others it is unnerving - if our reality begins to reflect something we imagined would always remain in the cinematic world, what is to stop more dramatic imagined futures from becoming true? This is where the COVID-19 short films assert their potential - they provide a small-scale lower-budget space to creatively explore these futures. Whether deliberately or not, short films produced during the pandemic fundamentally change the way we view the dystopian genre, as our everyday life comes to reflect what we used to consider as purely imaginary.

by Lucy Vickers

Noah Baumbach and the great Unknown

"A good story needs to start with a good character" is advice backed by writers from Daisy Mae Cooper to Wes Anderson. I've always felt that the way the latter's close collaborator, Noah Baumbach, uses this advice is by applying himself as this character. This is not to say Baumbach only writes about himself - I doubt he has a lot of experience with anthropomorphic foxes - but nonetheless, across his selection of films, there is little doubt that watching a Noah Baumbach film often leaves you having learned something about Baumbach himself.

Learning about the lives of its writer can often deepen one's appreciation for a film. Most recently, I found rewatching *When Harry Met Sally...* in light of learning about Rob Reiner's own divorce left me with a slightly different impression - reading about how Reiner's separation led him to a great cynicism towards romance left me feeling that the romantic story told in the movie was as much an hopeful, idealised fantasy for the filmmaker as it was to the heartbroken viewers who continue to adore it. As with any form of art, to know who has made a piece is one of the best ways to fall in love with it.

Every time I watch a Noah Baumbach film, however, it's hard not to come away with the feeling that it's the film making me learn about Baumbach instead. The way he explores very ordinary experiences - graduating, being an unemployed creative, family woes - presenting them as a loosely fictionalised trip down someone else's memory lane, means they can be empathised with in spite of their essential mundanity. When we feel our own lives more intensely than any other, using them can make fictional stories that much more convincing too. Given the voracity with which Baumbach reaps his own experiences for his stories, his ability to produce such uniquely truthful and immersive ones is no surprise. Watching *The Squid And The Whale,* I was in little doubt that I learned much more about Baumbach's own parents' divorce than I would have from any post-watch interview or Wikipedia peruse. Each film is a little loosely fictionalised bit of catharsis, and it shows. "You can tell it was somehow very personal," said my mum (the only critic that matters) after we watched *The Meyerowitz Stories* together.

"It feels like it came from a very painful place." Our own lives are the most tantalising after all, and when Noah Baumbach uses his for his own characters, the vivacity carries.

Pioneering the mumblecore movement, Baumbach has an exceptional ability to make films that actually *feel* as though they contain real people. There is no doubt that his involvement of himself strengthens his ability to form this connection. Watching his films, the conversations rarely feel like writing - there's an easy ebb, flow and uncertainty distinguishing his from the usual well-forged movie dialogue, (a fluidity apparently achieved through many, many takes). Any attempt to reduce a director down to one element will necessarily be a misguided one, but looking across Baumbach's works, I've still tried to pinpoint what it is about his films that do make them resonate with me so deeply. Perhaps it's easier to understand why I clicked with *Frances Ha* - the struggling creative, living in the big city, refusing to grow up and get a career, feels just a little prophetic. But as a 19-year-old idiot, in a healthy relationship, curled up on my sofa with my best friend on a stormy December night in 2019, the source of my connection to *Marriage Story* seems slightly less obvious.

Noticing this aspect of his films leads me into thinking about looking forwards. What links Baumbach's films isn't just the precocious writers, constant references to college, or love for New York - it's moments where people suddenly realise that they're going to have to get over something, and have absolutely no idea how to do it. Baumbach meets us at the point where you finally take the step off the edge into the great unknown, and realise you have no idea how long you're going to be in midair. What do you do? By entwining himself into his films the way he does, paralleling his own major life events in his plots, each moment of change documented is one that he has been stuck in, too. It starts with his first film, *Kicking and Screaming*, which depicts a group of recent English major college graduates who want to be writers, written by Baumbach as a recent English major college graduate. Throughout, the characters meander through their lives, now directionless, wondering how to move forwards without actually doing so. For one of them, Chet, the fear of this new reality is so acute that he has stayed in college for the last ten years. Writing fresh out of college himself, his inspiration seems reasonably straightforwardly deductible. His characters refuse to move on from college life, having pretentious philosophical conversations and haunting the university campus, and by writing them, Baumbach gets to do the very same thing. In accessing his own experience, this very human fear of the unknown, Baumbach allows us to connect with his films on a much deeper level. Of course, this won't entice everyone - maybe I am more acclimatised to the plight of students for whom career and relationships are the most important thing - but the honesty with which he presents it is enticing all the same.

The stagnation before the next step also haunts the lead, Frances, in *Frances Ha.* As her best friend Sophie falls further into a serious relationship, Frances realises that their worlds expanding also means drifting away from each other. For Sophie, the next step on her path is in her boyfriend Patch. For Frances, there's no next step. In *Marriage Story, The Meyerowitz Stories* and *The Squid and The Whale* the points of change are more obvious - the disintegration of family, usually through divorce, which Baumbach experiences both through his parents', and his own. In *France Ha,* much like the precocious grads of *Kicking and Screaming,* it's the slower, but no less disorienting change he explores, when the world as you know it suddenly becomes your past, and the people you shared it with do too. Losing her anchor in Sophie, Frances loses both her best friend, and her link to her youth in college, leaving her stranded in the vast, unknowable, real world, drifting from non-home to non-home, through a string of jobs and relationships she doesn't really care about. It's watching someone do everything not to wake up to the realisation that life keeps on moving forwards, whether you wait for it or not. And because Baumbach writes real characters, and in the real world, life falling apart can happen very, very quietly. The magnitude of these devastating feelings is presented very simply.

"It's just that if something funny happens on the way to the deli, you'll only tell one person about it and that'll be Patch and I'll never hear about it".

As you move endlessly ahead into various new and terrifying unknowns, tiny losses of intimacy between people are sometimes the most poignant. Using his own pool of pain, builds an understated ache, which in a way, can show the universal fears people have. This isn't to say that the greatest anguish a person can experience is leaving college, and is understandable why films presenting this as such can be very unaccessible. However, I do feel that the way he explores his very normal problems illustrates the aches that are more universal - leaving a stage of life, and having absolutely no idea what to do about. Whatever that means to the watcher, it is not a unique strife.

I was pretty early on in my first relationship when I watched *Marriage Story.* Despite some messy partings of ways with friends over the years that probably suit the label of break ups, romantic ones were not yet one in my bank of life experience. And yet, *Marriage Story* knocked me out cold. The starting duologue, very simply relaying the tiny things two people noticed about the people they love, pulled me in instantly. Whatever details they are, how falling in love with someone means falling in love with the tiny pieces is sometimes the best way to understand it. Closing the cupboard doors behind someone you love can be a much louder act than holding up a boombox in the rain under the stars - it resonated.

When what happens to Charlie and Nicole moved beyond what I had yet experienced as an unwed teenager, the honesty of Baumbach's telling still managed to keep me tethered. Throughout, Charlie reflects on his love story, as he grapples with its ending thundering towards him. In his persistent naivety about the next steps Nicole will take in the process of their parting, it is shown how unable he is to detach himself from their past, and see forwards into the terrible present unspooling in front of him. His grappling is that of someone realising they have been sleepwalking into disaster, and suddenly has to deal with it. Even if it's not going through a coast-to-coast divorce, slowly realising that you have to handle the worst thing you can have imagined to your relationship with someone you love, without having let yourself see it coming happens, terribly, all the time. My friend asleep, and myself harrowingly conscious, I raced with wonders about what I wasn't spotting in my life - what unspoken unkindness I was performing to someone I loved that would gradually implode - and when I would learn it was too late to fix it. It is the humanity of the characters that keeps Baumbach's connection with the viewer even in experiences which are much more specific. Sometimes, terrible things are terrible because of exactly how they are, not because they're explained with poetic clarity. Being scared of what more is yet to come when you find yourself in a future you never really saw coming is a slightly more accessible than divorcing Scarlett Johansson. And, I think it is his personal connection that allows Baumbach to translate this. By mining his own experience, Baumbach can present the truths that transcend the details of stories, and meaning even distant stories seem present.

The parallel biographies between Baumbach and his films leave a sense that making films is Baumbach's way of trying to figure out what he's going through. *Marriage Story* being made as he goes through a divorce, *Kicking and Screaming* as he leaves college, *The Squid and The Whale* as his parents also separate, his films follow next to him as he goes through his own experiences. To deal with the great unknowns in his life, Baumbach shows us people facing them head on. The problems Baumbach explores are seldom existential ones, but even so, they are relayed with a distinct bittersweetness and heartache that, for me, gives them value despite how ordinary they are. Whatever new future it is that one is trying to come to terms with, living in the fear of the unknown that comes with it is much more terribly simple to understand.

by Nina Jurkaić

FRANCES HA

Not a Person Yet

Frances Ha (Noah Baumbach, 2013) is not your usual coming-of-age tale. For starters, its protagonist (Greta Gerwig) is not a melodramatic teen experiencing the highs and lows of life for the very first time, but a broke twenty-seven-year-old struggling to conquer it. Yet as is often the case in the film, such lines of distinction can become blurred. For even though Frances Halladay's twenties are coming to a close, at times she feels more like a teenager in her energetic conversation, unbridled enthusiasm, and refusal to grow up. As one person in the film puts it to her, she looks older than her peers but 'like less grown up … it's weird'.

An apprentice dancer of mediocre talent, Frances shares a shoe-box apartment in Brooklyn with her best friend, Sophie (Mickey Sumner), whom she has known since college. Their friendship is, at least in Frances' eyes, totally unique. They play-fight in public, have inside jokes, and are, as Frances likes to remind everyone, basically the same person but with different hair. Entirely co-dependent, even their personal dreams and independent narratives are wrapped together and expressed in terms of their union. When Frances asks Sophie to tell her 'the story of us', the romantic yet fanciful answer is that together they 'are gonna take over the world'. In charge of prophesying one another's grandiose destinies as they lie next to each other in bed, Frances tells Sophie 'you'll be this awesomely bitchy publishing mogul' whilst Sophie assures Frances 'and you'll be this famous modern dancer'. They ambitiously have their futures planned out ahead of them, but in their playful finishing of one another's sentences it seems as if they are both content in the knowledge that the reality of facing them is still quite far away.

But when Sophie suddenly decides to move to Tribeca, Frances is left behind and forced to confront her future much faster than she had anticipated. And what's more, she has to do it alone. Left adrift, she attempts to navigate her new world.

Ending her curse of being perpetually broke, a surprise tax rebate seems to suggest that things are off to a good start. To symbolise her entrance into respectable adulthood, Frances invites a friend out for dinner to celebrate—her treat. But she unfortunately bears the universal mark of the non-adult—she doesn't have a credit card—and when her debit card isn't accepted by the restaurant, she has to embarrassingly run to get

cash where, staring blankly at the ATM screen, she wavers over the $3 transaction fee. By the time she gets back to the restaurant, she is bleeding from a cartoon-like fall and apologising profusely. Having failed at the first hurdle, her joke that she isn't a real person yet rings true. In some ways it would be more comforting to think of Frances as this caricature, a parody of herself, but her secret awareness of her own failings, only ever hinted at in flashes of disappointment in her expression, makes her at times a more melancholic character than expected. But moments like these are simply and heroically brushed off.

In one scene, as she skips and twirls through the streets of New York to Bowie's 'Modern Love', one can't help but hear the refrain of 'but I try' and think of Frances' unshakeable optimism as infectious. As she runs past people in the street saluted by faint cheers, it feels as though she embodies the life and potential of the city. And yet, once home, the impromptu dance sequence and its accompanying music are brought to a jarring halt with the slam of the door and, once again, Frances is left alone. Even around other people, her tendency to overshare and tell little white lies reveals her intense loneliness. But this feeling never lasts long. She is always moving, even if it's backwards.

What is most comforting about *Frances Ha* is that there is no epiphany. Frances' life does not fall into place because of any change in her behaviour but because life simply moves on. By the end of the film, she has 'grown up', whatever that means. She has a job as a secretary, is surrounded by people, and is producing her own choreography in her spare time. She isn't the famous dancer she dreamt of being, but neither is that dream entirely out of reach. And most importantly, she is still the bumbling, quirky creative we met in the beginning. Her optimism never fails. Nowhere is this more warmly stressed than in the final scene where Frances, having moved into her new apartment, clumsily tries to fit her full name into the slot above her mailbox, but finds that only 'Frances Ha' will fit. Content with this, she gets on with her life.

Frances Ha is a liminal film: it feels like it is going everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Its black-and-white cinematography feels simultaneously old and new, harkening back to an artistic freedom associated with the French New Wave - but in place of its characteristic sensuality and expressive dialogue, Baumbach offers us awkward silences and modern dance. For Frances, life is a constant fluctuation between the two. She doesn't worry about where it will lead her, and neither should we.

***by* Millie Butler Gallie**

OFAS RECOMMENDS:

WATCH:

Trailer: The Most Beautiful Boy In The World

Reflecting on the rise and fall of Björn Andresen - known as the beautiful youth in Visconti's Death in Venice, the Sundance documentary takes on an unusually yet fittingly mournful tone.

https://youtu.be/movf4weZq30

All-Electric Cadillac Scissorhands Advert

Cadillac Super Bowl 2021 advert featuring Edgar Scissorhands: reimagined 30 years later, it's a new fantasy accommodating two American sweethearts of different generations, and a more up-to-date modern touch.

https://youtu.be/0KAlqthD6Gc

LISTEN:

10-Minute Talks: Can watching films be good for us?

Professor Ian Christie on why films might not be too bad for us after all

https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/podcasts/10-minute-talks-can-watching-films-be-good-for-us/

READ:

It's time to rethink the established film canon - Lillian Crawford

An article exploring the diversification of film, and calling us to question what it is that we consider to be great films.

https://lwlies.com/articles/alternative-film-canon-diversity-in-cinema/

Matthew Rankin Introduces His Film "The Twentieth Century"

"Even our most profound and sacred yearnings must coexist, necessarily and always, with a vile, ectoplasm-spewing cactus. At least in Canada." The Canadian director (who apparently is also familiar with the art of sassy writing) revisits the making of his feature-length debut, selected for this year's Berlinale.

https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/matthew-rankin-introduces-his-film-the-twentieth-century