

Mumblecore in Obama's America

By

Stephen Lee Naish

With every US Presidential Administration a characteristic type of film genre emerges to help summarise the mood and the policies that are in effect. From Hollywood the films are typically pro-American action movies that propagandise internal and external policies. This level of jingoism reached its zenith in the 1980's with action stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Bruce Willis all starring in films that depicted positive endorsements of American foreign policy. This form of propaganda was not put to rest by the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush or Barack Obama administrations. During the Bill Clinton years the weapons and bloody violence were replaced with savvy liberal political films such as *Dave* and the John Travolta starring *Primary Colors*, which painted a picture of a likable, if flawed, liberal-minded man of the people in the presidential office both to comic and also to dramatic effect. During the George W. Bush administration, jingoism and violence returned with an added pulling of the heartstrings of the post-9/11 era. Films directly concerned with 9/11 such as *World Trade Center*, the television movie, *Flight 93*, and the high octane *United 93*, allowed audiences to feel that the War on Terror was a just cause. However, alongside these pro-American feats were the more critical voices found in documentaries such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *Sicko*, as well such geopolitical films as *Babel* and *Syriana*, which answered the "why do they hate us?" question uttered numerous times after 9/11. So far Hollywood's answer to the Barack Obama administration has been to pretend that nothing is amiss. Over the past four years Hollywood has lambasted the film market with pure spectacle that, much like the Reagan/Bush era, has painted America in unreal terms as the greatest and mightiest of nations. Much like American cinema of the late-sixties and early-seventies, in which independent and critical voices arose out of the dying embers of Hollywood's epic productions, it has been down to the young independent filmmakers to capture the era and tell the real story of what it means to be young in Barack

Obama's America. This has led to an emerging sub-genre in independent film that has been given the term Mumblecore by its main proponents.

Mumblecore's history is extremely brief. Emerging during the post 9/11 years, the first film considered Mumblecore was Andrew Bujalski's 2002 film *Funny Ha Ha*. The film's distinct low budget characteristics and naturalistic acting style from its entirely non-professional cast harked back to the days of New Hollywood filmmaking of the sixties and seventies, and especially the improvised looseness seen in the films of John Cassavetes. The genre progressed with such films as *The Puffy Chair* (2005) and *In Search of a Midnight Kiss* (2008) gaining enthusiastic reviews and film festival awards, but not much in the way of major cinematic screenings. Despite this, the genre's tiny budgets meant that often the filmmakers made an honest return profit from even the smallest of art house screenings, meaning the filmmakers could continue exploring the genre on their own terms. It was in 2008 that Mumblecore started to garner interest from the cinema going public and Hollywood's periphery. Films such as *Humpday* (2009), *Cyrus* (2010), *Tiny Furniture* (2011), *Jeff, Who Lives at Home* (2012) and *Your Sister's Sister* (2012) gained extremely positive reviews from respectable mainstream sources and found audiences beyond their cult standing. It was also during this period of time that some directors of Mumblecore went beyond the genre's amateurish ascetics and worked with bigger budgets and bigger names. *Cyrus* for example was made with a seven million dollar budget and actors such as Jonah Hill, John C. Riley and Catherine Keener. The leap was massive when compared with directors Jay and Mark Duplass's 2005 film, *The Puffy Chair*, which had been made for a measly \$15,000 and starred mainly their college friends and co-workers. Between *The Puffy Chair* and *Cyrus* the brothers Duplass became superstars of the Mumblecore genre. Mark Duplass had become a recognisable face within the field, not only co-directing and co-writing some of the key works, but also acting in films such as *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007), *Humpday* and the Hollywood meets Mumblecore production, *Greenberg* (2010).

The Mumblecore genre mainly focuses on a handful of characters and their, often messy, personal circumstances. Obvious political or social commentary tends to be left off the agenda in most of the films, with perhaps the exception of *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008), which dealt with the lack of African-Americans in San Francisco's apparently 'raceless' hipster culture. The film was timely to say the least as then Illinois Senator Barack Obama was on the campaign trail

to become America's soon to be first African-American President. Politics may not be a context, but it certainly is a subtext of Mumblecore's characters and their predicaments. Mumblecore's represented demographic of mostly white middle class kids allow for a snapshot of contemporary middle-class American life. Most of the characters are from liberal backgrounds, sons and daughters of the late baby boomers of the sixties and seventies, often fresh out of college with artistic or literately degrees and returning home to unearth the next stage of their life. A characteristic theme throughout most of these films is that of disenchantment with the world and the disillusionment of impending adulthood and grown-up responsibility, something that the characters seem ill-equipped to handle. The dire economic situation in America and the lack of post-graduate jobs, affordable accommodation and healthcare meant that many independent young people had no choice but to reluctantly return to the family nest. The films of the Mumblecore genre feature characters still living at home beyond their expected time, as is the case with *Jeff*, *Who Lives at Home* and *Cyrus*, or returning home to reflect on their life after years working or studying away from home, as is the case with the Lena Dunham film *Tiny Furniture* and director Bradley Rust Gray's *The Exploding Girl* (2009). Economic dependency on the parents is a running theme throughout the genre and the characters are in constant search for get-rich-quick or invigorating alternatives to mundane day jobs, which can be seen with the making of the homoerotic-gonzo porn film attempted by two best friends in *Humpday* and the writing of a schlock horror movie by four struggling actors in *Baghead* (2008). When the characters are not living at home they live arty bohemian lifestyles in cheap and small one bedroom apartments or shared accommodation with partners or friends.

Like the best social commentary Mumblecore refuses to directly comment of the political and cultural circumstances of its time. By focusing on universal themes of love, jobs, education, friendships, longing, and freedom, the genre subtly explores the life and times of the era. Other era defining books and films from the past have followed this tradition. Jack Kerouac's seminal book, *On The Road*, which characterized the post-war candour and the freeform jazz of the late fifties, or the film *Easy Rider*, which rounded up the sixties counterculture of civil rights and civil unrest without directly witnessing those seismic events, to Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which explored the souring of the post sixties utopia and the freefall into drugs, madness and paranoia. In retrospect these three examples subtly commented on the era's

in which they were produced, yet at the time, they were perceived as just another part of the changing cultural landscape in art and literature. Mumblecore, in its own subtle way, is defining the present era in American culture. The characters in many of the Mumblecore productions are at a crossroads in life, embracing or avoiding decisions that will have enormous impact on their future. America is also facing that same crossroad where its own indecision is widespread. The re-election of Barack Obama with the merest majority of the popular vote proves that there is much division about the direction the country should take. What is clear from the Mumblecore genre is that the young middle-class are the ones being demolished by the unaccountable capitalism that is rife in America. It is the young liberal-minded, and we should remind ourselves, the future leading citizens of America, which are facing the toughest challenges that economic downturn brings. The films of Mumblecore show a growing apathy and dislocation towards the wider world. Considering that Barack Obama's initial presidential campaign ignited young people's interest in politics for the first time in decades, the aftermath of his first four years in power has left many young people deeply discouraged and disenchanting. But with his most recent election win, there is new opportunity. So, let us anticipate the next four years will finally bring the 'hope' and 'change' Obama's campaign once promised.