

Digital Socialism: How Mumblecore Filmmaking is Defying Capitalism

By Stephen Lee Naish

*“We need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events that whose maturity has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narratives...” Susan Stewart **On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection***

“From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs...” Karl Marx

Capitalism has fast-forwarded our manufacture and consumption of popular culture. What might have taken us decades or even centuries to make and consume has evolved in the space of fifty to sixty years. Our frenzied desire to acquire shiny new technologies and become part of the latest fads in fashion and culture has meant that we have consumed vast amounts of ideas, objects and information in a very short space of time. Capitalism by its very nature is in need of constant expansion, relentlessly creating brand new and alluring markets in order to survive. We seem to have now reached a zenith in which no absolute new form or genre of music, art, fashion or film can be created in any original sense. We can only adapt and reinterpret old ideas to create something that resembles, on the surface at least, an original idea. This has led to sub-genre categories in all forms of media, and films in particular have been carved up into sub-divisions and merging of different genres. However, this does not mean that just because we look to the past for inspiration or dilute a genre that we use the same creative instruments to reinvent the past. New, cheaper and more accessible film technology has opened a crack in the capitalist system of Hollywood and its subsidiaries that is being further pried open by the auteur filmmakers of the Mumblecore movement.

Mumblecore is defined as a sub-genre of independent filmmaking that relies heavily on low budget production values, a naturalistic acting style from predominantly non-professional actors, as well as realistic, and often impromptu, dialog and loose and fluid camera work. Scripts, if used at all, are only loosely adhered to, and an environment of improvisation is greatly encouraged. The films are most often shot on digital film and rely on natural light to illuminate daytime scenes, whilst night-time scenes rely on street lamps, neon advertisement boards and for indoors light bulbs, candles and television sets. Scenes are filmed in the actors' apartments and in real city streets, parks, café's,

nightclubs and bars. The films of the Mumblecore genre are often cooperative productions with actor, videographer, sound recordist and editor all having creative and even financial input throughout the film's production. The Mumblecore films are mainly distributed via small independent film distribution companies and are features of the indie film festival circuits throughout the world. The films rarely play to mass cinema audiences, but the respectable audience for such independent screenings usually turn a handsome profit on a meagre production cost.[1] The content of Mumblecore films may not be original; the filmmakers take their cues from the New Hollywood movement of the late sixties and seventies, as well as the low budget independent productions of actor and director John Cassavetes. However, unlike the protagonists of New Hollywood who relied on big studio money and a list of film executive contacts to fund their projects, the filmmakers of the Mumblecore movement require only a small amount of money and a group of willing friends and colleagues.

Mumblecore, and the rise of digital film, is defying the capitalist ideal in two distinct ways. Firstly, with digital film evolving from expensive physical film stock to non-physical data streams, its lack of actual physical existence means its future is not baked in nostalgia, and cannot become victim to the capitalist system and sub-economy of fad film memorabilia that often consists of framed and certified film cells, as well as props and costumes from the within film's production. The genre also falls well under the radar of fan fairs and memorabilia conventions such as Comic-Con and similar mass money-making events. Although the more corporate film festivals such as Cannes have embraced the genre, the films' first screenings are more suited to small scale boutique cinemas and art spaces. Mumblecore films made by small production teams are filmed within the context of real life. So instead of props and sound-stages that populate large studio productions, auteur productions are filmed in the houses, work places and communal areas of the films cast and crew, thus dispensing with props and even costumes, as these films also tend to use the casts own rather ragged looking clothing. To paraphrase Karl Marx's infamous line from *The Communist Manifesto*: "all that is solid melts into air;" the solidity and physicality of film is evaporating into nothingness. The films themselves that emerge from the genre are the only salable product of the production; everything else within the film returns to its real life context. Digital film now has a very different future to embrace that capitalism (by way of its rush to create and sell new technology) has inadvertently lain in front of it.

Secondly, as digital technology has become widely and cheaply available to the masses, it moves further away from the capitalist ideal by undercutting tightly controlled, and previously necessary capitalist processes of distribution. In the past, cameras, film stock, sound recording

equipment, editing software and the computers to process the edits cost a small fortune. Today all this technology is readily available, easy to use and relatively inexpensive. Although the professional sound, audio and editing equipment used by the studios is vastly expensive and still out of reach to most consumers, the cheaper, yet still durable, domestic equipment available means that any potential filmmaker or documentarian can afford to purchase the technology required to make a quality piece of cinema. Moreover, the internet has opened up the distribution network of independently made films. Small scale productions can be easily uploaded to video streaming sites and viewed by thousands. Eventually, the films of Mumblecore could be completely distributed digitally, dispensing with DVD and Blue-ray, and completely undercutting the capital system of current movie distribution. Digital technology has taken the elitism of film away from the studios and placed power to the independent filmmakers and created a more egalitarian method of filmmaking. The Mumblecore movement is a by-product of this access to affordable equipment. There is evidence to suggest that the Mumblecore ethos is being adapted by other filmmakers outside of the United States. The Berlin Mumblecore Movement has produced award winning films away from the restrictions of the German film industry. The Berlin version of the genre also uses Cloud Funding to raise small financial funds for the production of the films from like-minded individuals, creating an even more communal experience than its American counterpart.

In my earlier essay *Mumblecore in Obama's America*, I made a case for how Mumblecore is fast becoming the definitive film genre of the Obama-era. The characters that populate the genre are bright, young and liberally educated, yet also on the harsh receiving-end of the current economic downturn that has meant many young people with liberal arts educations returning to the family home for parental support. This reflects the current reality in America. However, from the filmmaker's perspective, Mumblecore is a reaction to the diminishing funding institutions for small and independent films, and the shunning of new and talented filmmakers from the mainstream production houses of Hollywood. A rising trend throughout the last five years in most business sectors has been to hire interns, who remain unpaid and partake in the thankless and mundane day-to-day tasks and then are dispensed with and replaced by another troop of desperate hopefuls. This has led to a mainstream system that is in absolute lockdown. An outsider cannot penetrate without serious economic self-sacrifice. The filmmakers of the Mumblecore genre, who come from working-to-middle class backgrounds, have concluded that creating a film as part of its own support network is a cheaper and far more creatively rewarding option than a brief internship. In this sense, Mumblecore is creating its own self sustaining system alongside the mainstream.

One cannot ignore that over the last few decades the cult of the producer and director in mainstream films has created a deeply unequal and egotistical environment in filmmaking. Capitalism has allowed the creative industry to pull focus of the individual and the entitlements they deem to warrant. Mumblecore dispenses with the cult of personality that surrounds most contemporary producers and directors and allows for a collective and equal participation in all the stages of film production, something which is virtually unheard of within Hollywood circles. The genre's productions are open, innovative, improvisational and egalitarian. This collectivism of creativity is producing truthful depictions of life in America for a minuscule budget. This socialism of filmmaking, from the inexpensive equipment to the ethics of production, may be mainstream cinema's saving grace. After all it was New Hollywood's reduced budgets, gorilla-style filmmaking and savvy knowledge of youth culture that saved the studios of the sixties and seventies when they too were pouring millions into star-studded and inoffensive big screen spectacles. Hollywood today is repeating history with grossly excessive budgets being poured into endless barrage of mindless nonsense. Mumblecore is following New Hollywood's path and is telling stories about what life is really like in America and the world. If Hollywood can be brave like it once was and entrust a small budget to a talented production group, then it could be, for the film world, small-scale socialism that saves capitalism.

[1] Mark and Jay Duplass's film *The Puffy Chair* (2005) made \$192,467 domestically on a \$15,000 production budget. The brothers later, big budget, film *Cyrus* (2010) made \$9,923,855 domestically on a \$7 million budget.