

PRAIRIE MUMBLINGS

MARK WIHAK'S RIVER RUNS THROUGH REGINA

by Ryan J. Noth www.filmcan.org Issue 12



Long live the new talkies; the new talkies are dead. Essentially a re-branding of the recently buzzing “mumblecore” movement – films with people chatting, hanging about, and chatting about hanging about – an August, 2007 series at the IFC Centre in New York, dubbed “The New Talkies: Generation DIY,” seemed to acknowledge a rising appetite, among American programmers and critics, to validate an emerging genre in American independent cinema. Leading the charge among filmmakers is Andrew Bujalski. Though the films aren’t readily available in Canada, or even all that popular in most of the world, Bujalski’s *Mutual Appreciation* (2006) and *Funny Ha Ha* (2005) are legitimate cinematic achievements amidst a group of films that also includes a good share of awkward, dialogue-based clunkers. Other directors involved in this genre (which was profiled in Rolling Stone’s 2007 “Hot Issue,” so you know we’re not making it up) include Aaron Katz, Joe Swanberg, and the Duplass brothers. *Orphans* (2007, Ry Russo-Young) is the debut female-directed film from the group, and a unique example in that it’s light on the talk.

Yet just as the movement had placed a toe in the doorway of underground American cinema, critic Amy Taubin recently offered a no-nonsense reproach in Film Comment that suggested the hype was all talk. According to Taubin, most of the films eagerly categorized as mumblecore are simply the result of cagey programming by SXSW programmer Matt Dentler, in need of an alt. Sundance movement; overeager bloggers excited by alternative cinema download on demand; and an extremely effective marketing strategy to help sell unknown, low-budget films as a group or series, rather than on individual merits. Movements have a way of reappearing in cycles, of course, so it’s also easy to see mumblecore as an extension of older talkies and even the underground work of Cassavettes (though only Bujalski shoots on 16mm).



Regardless, with an American critic having decided to write a re-appraisal, it would be no surprise to see Canada, mighty land of the friendly chat, laying claim to some of the movement's nascent entries. Way back in 2001, New Pornographer keyboardist Blaine Thurier's debut feature film, *Low Self-Esteem Girl*, won SXSW, just a year prior to the Duplass brothers' *The Puffy Chair*, a mumblecore staple and the instigator of the movement's swift minor-stream ascent. It seems worth pointing out that many of the devices employed in the movement were initially borne out of the need to squeeze a ton of imagination into (or out of) a tiny production budget, and Thurier's debut is no different in that regard. Starring, like the mumblecore films after it, a collection of his non-professional actor friends in key roles, including musicians Carl Newman (The New Pornographers) and Dan Bejar (Destroyer), this romp around Vancouver has more energy than a Hollywood action film, framed though it is within a lo-fi production aesthetic. Meanwhile, the majority of above-average cinema from Canada's West over the past decade, including both Gary Burns' (*The Suburbanators; waydowntown*) and Bruce Sweeney's (*Dirty*) oeuvres, as well as Reg Harkema's debut feature *A Girl is a Girl* – none of which exactly fit the mumblecore mold – typically revolve around characters who more or less talk through their lives (if not their flaws and issues) on screen. In addition to hype, Taubin takes issue with the waspy, apolitical nature of the movement's creators and actors, and with the exclusion of films like So Yong Kim's Toronto-set *In Between Days* – a unique tale of frustrated teenage communication that could fit perfectly among the American mumblecore.

However, aside from its low-budget incentives, the benefits of Canada claiming such a movement as a foundation upon which to build a sorely needed cross-country cinematic language are questionable. For starters, since Thurier's debut (perhaps because it's so hard to find, with one noteworthy exception), no one has really consciously explored the concept, and – the few above examples aside – serious Canadian films about the present, starring chatting twenty-somethings and set in even relatively recognizable locales, let alone an urban centre, don't really exist outside of Quebec.



Which, surprisingly, leads us to Regina in 2007, and an interesting experiment by Mark Wihak, currently a professor at the University of Regina, and a debut feature filmmaker with *River*, a tale of two friends with lofty dreams of becoming artists, possibly even moving to New York. Stan (Adam Budd), a writer, and Roz (Maya Batten-Young), a tall hippie with funky fashion, fulfill many mumblecore tropes. Both are white wannabe creators/artists – Stan even dresses all in white as a “look” – who communicate in a private vacuum of personal stasis, biding time before making meaningful life decisions. The two meet at a late night coffee shop, and soon become friends and then roommates. Despite quickly sharing intimate personal dreams and histories during time trolling around the city, attending art galleries, exploring graffiti alleys and empty farm fields, even a healthy dose of experimental cinema doesn't spark the verbal or physical realization of a sexual

relationship. Which is all fine until Roz hooks up with a guy at their house party and the next day Stan is questionably outraged; the emotional fallout of his projections of Roz soon lead to the most awkward conversation of the film and, eventually, well-deserved silence.

Although these two are typical mumblecore characters, it's not to say they (and their familiars in other films) are not accurate representations of a particular age or even generation. At times, they're so true to life and the moments so ordinary that they make a viewer wonder why they're even on screen. This surely has as much to do with popular cinematic expectations as it does mumblecore films in themselves; like *River*, the talky films that work often challenge these expectations through direction and a story that helps the actors overcome their own inexperience and sometimes naïve improvisations – both tools that can be leveraged for relatively little money.



River was produced for a mere \$70,000, once again proof that the most innovative ideas in the Canadian feature film industry are consistently produced outside of its funding agency-approved Hollywood production model, the method preached through training institutes like the Canadian Film Centre. Wihak views this very production model as the most suspect of methods for creating audience-friendly cinema. “Films made that way don’t reach audiences,” he says. “I think that approach is a waste of time and talent.” Instead, after casting, he hosted a two-month screenwriting workshop with non-professional leads Maya Batten-Young (a student in one of his film classes) and Adam Budd to flesh out brief character outlines. A crew of five then shot the actors improvising dialogue over 20 days. Wihak chose his production crew carefully and with good taste, enlisting talented cinematographer Patrick McLaughlin to uniquely frame the relationship drama, and the quiet, underground music of Michelle McAdorey (*Crash Vegas*) and Eric Chenaux to emphasise and counterpoint the visual and emotional atmosphere.

Borne out of this alternative aesthetic, the film has its share of benefits and drawbacks, mostly related to two key elements of the script: dialogue and narrative development. Dialogue as exposition (or obvious metaphor) is often the most problematic, amateur element of the film, yet of course it's occasionally necessary at times to establish some basic rules of the characters' world, including how they relate to one another and why. Interestingly, in a “new talky” film, cringe-inducing dialogue often feels right, just as it inherently feels wrong; perhaps both because it's usually never heard on screen and because it seems to at least be giving a unique voice to life in a specific space (in this case Regina). At the same time, there are many scenes in which awkward dialogue doesn't work for being awkward, including a beautifully shot moment on top of a parking garage, with downtown Regina framed in the distance, as Roz and Stan shout their favourite artists' names at the skyline. This scene actually reminds me the most of mumblecore stumbles, partly for feeling too imbued with the voice of the director, but mostly for being far too precious. The most interesting aspect of *River*'s story development involves the penultimate party scene that rapidly

shifts the time of the narrative, focusing emotions and interactions on the fallout of one particular night. Throughout the film Wihak has a unique knack for advancing the time of the narrative – the growth (or lack thereof) of Roz and Stan’s relationship – through tiny cues of sudden shifts in the relationship.



As often as the characters speak, though, reflecting inadequate communication, director of photography McLaughlin consistently reminds us of the beauty of the sound of silence. Making a name for himself in the Canadian cinema scene over the past five or 10 years for his impeccable visual design, McLaughlin’s career spans most of Gary Burns’ oeuvre, including the ace car driving perspective of *The Suburbanators* (1995), the recent dock-drama *Radiant City* (2007), and the slippery *Six Figures* (David Christensen, 2006). Repeatedly infusing individual scenes with haunting, subtle movement, and entire movies with dually suspicious and curious studies of the everyday, McLaughlin gets, in *River*, free reign to capture the elements of a scene from occasionally counter-intuitive fictional narrative perspectives. As Wihak suggests in his director’s notes, the nature of the production often felt like shooting a documentary – with unprecedented access to the subjects. If a conversation or scene was working, there was no pressure to stop filming, or worry about continuity and shoot a reverse shot for coverage. Similarly, since the majority of *River* was shot chronologically, scenes could be adjusted to take advantage of local conditions (thereby capturing the undeniable joy of a Shriner’s parade), or to steer the narrative along alternative paths as the characters and story developed simultaneously.

The resulting footage, therefore, often floats between characters’ faces during dialogue scenes, eliminating the need for cutting, or motivating cuts in a documentary fashion due to a lack of coverage. In either situation the end result benefits both the non-professional actors, who don’t have to worry about fulfilling the technical requirements of a frame, and an editor (in this case Vanda Schmockel) who can play dialogue off of reactions, details, and even over a character’s silence. McLaughlin’s freedom is expressive of the importance of capturing good visuals vs. incredible coverage. Wihak was also smart to create a visual design that contrasts the openness of the surroundings – Stan and Roz riding bikes around a rural silo – with the boxy nature of buildings on the endlessly flat prairie. These square still frames also resurface within art galleries, when Stan posts his poems on storefronts, or when Roz works away in her office cleaning job. McLaughlin’s eye for detail within the moment of a scene – notably following a bug on the windowsill of the parked car as Roz and Stan tell emotional stories about their dads – combines with the awe-inspiring square frames of the surrounding space to carry the film along in a fluid, Terrence Malick-esque visual prairie dream.



Has mumblecore been silenced? Tough to say; somehow I'm sure directors from the American group, not to mention the next wave of digital practitioners, if only for the sake of a low budget, will be eager to respond (perhaps even directly) to Taubin's comments. And as I write this, Ron Mann and Gary Topp's Toronto-based alternative distribution company Films We Like has just announced the launch of Speakers We Like, an agency for the promotion/distribution of films and filmmakers, including representation of Guy Maddin as well as Joe Swanberg (*Hannah Takes The Stairs*, last year's SXSW mumblecore champ). A film like *River*, whatever its categorization, proves that the energy behind the design of its production experience – from script through to post – has a way of finding itself embedded in the freedom of the frame, and that open collaboration and trust produce the most interesting results. Given the limited resources of many first-time directors, it will be interesting to see how the genre evolves, and what visual and structural designs it explores. Because, ultimately, the attraction of pure, moving cinema is visuals that take the words out of your mouth.

