Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic

by AYMAR JEAN CHRISTIAN

Abstract: LOL (Joe Swanberg, 2006) is a product of Internet and early twenty-first-century cultures. Responding to its time, the film posits a distinct vision and artistic practice, one espousing a digital aesthetic intended to create a radical sense of intimacy.

For one minute in director Joe Swanberg's LOL (2006), the audience glimpses a vision of realism in the age of YouTube—that is, the age of networked individualism, self-expression, and mediated connections across digital technologies. During this interlude a girlfriend of one of LOL's main characters narrates a roving monologue of tender remarks to her boyfriend (Figure 1). Cell phone images of the two lovers, Chris and Greta, flash across the screen, à la Chris Marker's La jetée (1962), while a thin, lilting score plays. The images are from Chris's cell phone, the narration from his voice-mail, the music by a digital artist who also plays a lead character in the movie. Though rambling, the grainy and private objects (Benten's message left by Greta has an effortless poignancy. Their long-distance relationship lives on this phone, not in the physical world. The entire sequence is constructed; nothing is "real." Yet the sequence has an undeniable intimacy, with its assemblage of photos taken in bathrooms and subways, on kitchen counters and brownstone stoops, close-up portraits with dramatic yet humble lighting, and a nude photo of Greta taken by a computer. It is a dense experience.

The scene crystallizes core themes in the style known as mumblecore, a small movement of mostly white, male filmmakers making cheap, realist movies exploring the lives of young people at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The style has its detractors

1 Much like the term "hipster," "mumblecore" is a label with which few of its members identify. "It was a joke. It's still a joke. It's a bad word," quipped Swanberg at a master class on DIY filmmaking at the Thessaloniki International Film Festival in November 2007. Alternative terms like "bedhead cinema" failed to catch on. I will refer to it as mumblecore, but could have also used "digital realism" or "DIY cinema." See chicago606, "The 'M' Word, Dismissed by Joe Swanberg and Ry Russo-Young," November 22, 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myzSNUUMBQs.

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Figure 2. *LOL* dramatizes technology's impact on the personal search for connection. Here Tim (Joe Swanberg) talks on a cell phone as his girlfriend flirts with another man (Benten Films, 2006), and has weathered strong criticism for its perceived narcissism, blindness to social issues, listless plots, poor technical quality, poor acting quality, self-indulgence, self-importance, and white-centered narratives. Most of these criticisms are justified and will be addressed; yet this essay foregrounds mumblecore's implications for visual culture and the meanings it evokes for culture in general. Placed in historical, social, and theoretical context and seen on their own terms, the films become more than aimless explorations in cheap cinema.

Using the works of Joe Swanberg, primarily *LOL*, this essay argues for mumblecore as a distinct form of realism that privileges the kind of intimacy described in the above scene. Swanberg creates this intimacy through a "digital aesthetic," an aesthetic which was born of visual cultures on the Internet, but which also draws on film history. The "digital" here is not ones and zeros, but the visual culture created by new media technologies: the exhaustive use of the close-up, for example, and the use of direct address and subjective camera, styles based in webcams and YouTube. A close examination of *LOL* suggests that we can see mumblecore as distinct from prior attempts at realism in film, and as a phenomenon particular to the early twenty-first century.

*LOL* is Swanberg's second major feature film, and, with the exception of *Four Eyed Monsters* (Susan Buice and Arin Crumley, 2005), it deals more explicitly with the impact of new media on contemporary youth culture than other films in the movement. *LOL* is quite distinct from many of the so-called mumblecore films, including many of the most widely available and critically reviewed. It is, however, in my opinion, the film with the clearest thematic investment in youth and media, as well as being the most visually daring of the mumblecore films. *LOL* is a movie about a generation in flux, and not, as some critics have said, solely about the desire and ultimate failure to connect with others among people coming of age in the era of social networking (Figure 2). Instead,


3 Mumblecore films are decidedly inexpensive and, for this and other reasons, circulate mainly in film festivals and on the art-house circuit. Many are never shown in more than a few theaters, and grosses are in the thousands, not millions. Nearly all are available on DVD, and a number of independent DVD companies have filled a void in distribution. IFC and Sundance have been known to buy rights, and so the films can also be seen on television. *Four Eyed Monsters* is distinct in its extensive web distribution, but a number of the directors exhibit short films and web series online.

4 The first episodes of *Four Eyed Monsters* are posted on YouTube, and the channel has amassed a sizable following of over 6,400 subscribers as of December 2010 (http://www.youtube.com/user/foureyedmonsters, accessed December 30, 2010).

the desire for connection—reality, honesty—in the network becomes itself a virtue, the only truth in a deconstructed, postmodern world in which all references to “truth” are continually questioned. LOL grapples fundamentally with the paradox of being emotional in a virtual world: Can you love someone who cannot be seen? Do networks of communication make people closer? The film shows us the grand paradoxes of a digitally connected community linked by emotional entanglements among stubborn individuals, a world in which human failure and miscommunication hamper the possibility of genuine relationships.

Mumblecore. Writing a history of the style known as mumblecore is a fraught endeavor. Many of the directors grouped under its umbrella would prefer not to be. Even those who do not spurn the label seek to differentiate themselves from some of its characteristics. It is hard to describe what mumblecore is: “genre” is perhaps too expansive and easy a categorization. I will use “style” and “movement” to mark mumblecore’s existence as a particular, often coherent perspective on visual culture and communication. Some readers may balk at the use of the term “movement” because it implies a cohesive group of individuals working toward predetermined, mutually agreed on goals. While the filmmakers that epitomize the movement did not know of each other until their films started to get screened in festivals, mumblecore certainly has a relatively unified style and perspective on cinema. What is undeniable is the sudden presence of a host of movies by young directors—all under thirty-five years of age—who explore similar themes using broadly similar styles, so categorization is both inevitable and theoretically useful.

Perhaps the first prominent contribution to mumblecore was Andrew Bujalski’s Funny Ha Ha (2002), which was among the early films to be released in theaters and was widely cited as the film garnering the most critical acclaim. The film lays the groundwork for most of its successors: thematically, the film conveys the angst of youth and the inability to communicate what one is feeling; stylistically, the film sets the stage for later mumblecore films through its use of low-quality film (or, most often, digital video) and poor sound quality, which was the inspiration for the “mumblecore” label. (It was, in fact, reportedly Bujalski’s sound mixer who coined the term in a bar during the annual South by Southwest film conference.) The ensuing films, including Bujalski’s Mutual Appreciation (2005), Swanberg’s Kissing on the Mouth (2005), Mark and Jay Duplass’s The Puffy Chair (2005), and Aaron Katz’s Dance Party, USA (2006) and Quiet City (2007), all feature young people in various states of confusion, yearning for honest and lasting relationships but finding such relationships quite difficult to develop and maintain. Issues of networks and relationships are key to understanding mumblecore and are in fact their most unifying characteristics. Of these early mumblecore films, however, only Swanberg’s Kissing on the Mouth and Bujalski and Crumley’s Four Eyed Monsters deal explicitly with the implications of digital culture. Four Eyed Monsters tells the

7 Ibid.
true story of how the two directors met online, while *Kissing on the Mouth* is a pastiche of digitally captured relationships. Yet despite the absence of digital culture in the early films—though all feature small instances of technological connection and misconnection, often serving as catalysts for the stories—most of the films, whether intentionally or not, employ a digital aesthetic.

Many of the films display a complicated gender politics. To be sure, nearly all the directors are men and many of the films have male leads. But a fair number of the movies give equitable screen time to both men and women, privileging as generously as possible their individual narratives; *Four Eyed Monsters*; *Kissing on the Mouth*; *Dance Party, USA*; *Quiet City*; and *Medicine for Melancholy* (Barry Jenkins, 2008) explore couples or networks of men and women. Others, among them *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Funny Ha Ha, Orphans* (Ry Russo-Young, 2007), *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (Joe Swanberg, 2007), and *The Pleasure of Being Robbed* (Joshua Safdie, 2008), are decidedly women's narratives focused on the existential struggles or quarter-life crises of young women. Some of the films in this vein are directed by men and recall, in style and tone, serious and listless Woody Allen dramas with female protagonists, including *Interiors* (1978) and *September* (1987), and the more sober moments in *Alice* (1990). Yet male-centered narratives are equally prevalent (*The Puffy Chair* being particularly notable for its focus on a male coming-of-age story), even under the guise of an ensemble cast (*Baghead*, Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, 2008). Race is nonexistent as a theme. Even *Medicine for Melancholy* despite its all-black cast, keeps discussions of race to a powerful yet undeniable minimum.\(^8\) Poverty, gentrification, and other relevant social issues are barely broached in any of the films. The elision of social problems and concerns mirrors similar elisions in technocratic discourses, in which utopia is a world without the complications of race, gender, or any other "alternative" identity categories.\(^9\) In neglecting the social, mumblecore highlights its desire for a presumably "pure" or perhaps "real" experience, one which is clearly unattainable—the absence of the social is only the first indication of this unattainable utopia. Mumblecore films thus signal a desire to foreground the hyper-individualistic (the "personal") in their search for intimacy and authenticity, even as they deconstruct the very notions of intimacy and authenticity.

An oft-cited feature of mumblecore is its network of filmmakers and actors, who tend to appear and reappear in each other's movies. While many of the directors did not know each other until serendipitously reaching the festival circuit at the same time, the connections between them are crucial to understanding the historical significance of the orientation known as mumblecore.

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\(^8\) While *Medicine for Melancholy* is, in most ways, *about* race, it is most specifically about the silence around race in our society. The film features one extended conversation (or confrontation) about racial identity and a couple of other more casual discussions.

Where mumblecore will go is uncertain. Already it seems some of its directors are venturing into new territory, as in the genre-bending Baghead, which has been described as “mumblecore meets Grindhouse,” blending “Blair Witch”-style realism with humor and horror. New directors like Barry Jenkins follow some of mumblecore’s conventions but partially break with familiar themes of personal stories, venturing into the contested political territory of race and class in San Francisco; Gabriel Fleming’s Lost Coast (2008) also deviates from the hyperpersonal narrative to explore the repression of homosexuality. A number of the actors and directors are getting wider releases, bigger budgets, and bigger roles, and some have suggested that “mumblecore” is a “dirty word” and a relic of the previous decade. Yet even if mumblecore is merely a blip in film history, it is an important one, a post-postmodern, digital-age send-up from a generation articulating, not mumbling, its own version of realism.

LOL

So much of this has to do with the fact that the early work that I was doing, I don’t think is necessary anymore. When I was making Kissing on the Mouth and LOL, YouTube didn’t exist. This sort of intimacy that I was after in my work—I was filling a hole that I felt like the mainstream media was not operating in. And then the whole world changed in a couple of years, and now I feel like we can find this kind of intimacy anywhere. It’s better on YouTube than anything that I could do—more immediate and more narcissistic, and it’s a more accurate gauge of the culture than something that takes six months to make.

—Joe Swanberg

Mumblecore must be read as a product of a specific cultural moment; its efforts to depict the real in a digital age potentially reimagine how the cinematic experience is received. Mumblecore interprets the real as the space of intimacy, asking how a movie can make concrete a specific relationship to its viewers and within itself that reflects a generation’s constant computer use, engagement with social networking, and consumption of bodies through digitally mediated spaces. LOL holds a privileged relationship to this system of representation: it embodies both the aesthetics of this digitally produced intimacy and the relationship among audience, screen, and image these aesthetics support.

The above quotation is one of Swanberg’s clearest statements on his films’ indebtedness to Internet culture in general and online televsional culture specifically. It is somewhat misleading, though, because, in fact, when Kissing on the Mouth was released, YouTube was already on the rise. By the time LOL appeared in 2006, YouTube had solidified its dominance in online video dissemination. Its absorption into mainstream culture happened a bit later, but Swanberg did not need to cite YouTube as an inspiration: the

LOL’s “noiseheads” are emblematic of the film’s focus on individual self-expression and its use of the visual styles of video blogs, or vlogs, webcams, and more mainstream forms, such as reality television (Benten Films, 2006).

Regardless, Swanberg’s words are telling for a number of reasons. Notably, he evokes intimacy, a term that generally refers to an effort to employ visual and narrative conventions like the close-up to shorten the distance between spectator and character. That Swanberg believes he “was filling a hole that . . . the mainstream media was not operating in” indicates that these conventions of intimacy (such as the close-up), despite having long histories in film and television, manifest themselves differently in mumblecore. The reference to YouTube suggests that mumblecore’s visual strategies have a privileged relationship to Internet culture. The immediacy and narcissism of YouTube—and of Kissing on the Mouth and LOL—highlight Swanberg’s emphasis on selves, on decontextualized individualism that nonetheless incorporates a desire for connection, the intimacy of the real. He is referencing not YouTube itself—indeed, the most popular users on the site are camp performers and showpeople, not intimate and personal video bloggers, or vloggers—but the almost romantic idea of YouTube as a place for individuals to post earnest videos about their opinions. These are not flashy performance videos but, rather, are closer to vlogs that have been directly uploaded to the site without the artifice of “acting.”

LOL is emblematic of the YouTube generation. Ultimately, then, examination of the film will reveal what cinematic intimacy and connection look like in a digital age and what that says about how some young filmmakers perceive the world. LOL represents aesthetic hopes about realism, intimacy, and connection (or empathy) in an environment persistently hostile to such aspirations. LOL is arguably the clearest example of mumblecore’s relationship to digital culture and history and is a bold attempt to reconceptualize film for the twenty-first century. It is not Swanberg’s only foray into the themes and styles of digital culture, but it is his clearest statement on the topic; his shorts Thanks for ADD (2006) and Hissy Fits (2005) are other solid examples. Visually, narratively, and thematically, LOL embraces the conventions detailed earlier. What binds the viewer, the director, the actors, and the characters together is a network of direct cultural antecedent to his aesthetic can be traced back to webcam culture, reality television, and TV drama (Figure 3).

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13 Until Alexander the Last (2009), his self-proclaimed break from his past movies, Swanberg did not use professional actors. Moreover, overwrought displays of emotion online are sometimes scorned or disbelieved. On the presumed authenticity of less heavily acted and edited vlogs, see Aymar Jean Christian, “Real Vlogs: The Rules and Meanings of Online Video,” First Monday 14, no. 11 (November 2009), http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2699/2353.

14 Along with many other shorts, Thanks for the ADD (http://www.joeswanberg.com/film/thanksfortheadd.mov) and Hissy Fits (http://www.joeswanberg.com/film/hissy_fits_podcast.mov) are both available for free streaming or download at Swanberg’s website (accessed December 29, 2010).
digital images and narratives all intended to build tight, humanistic communities and to dramatize the desire to find what is personal and real in a digital world.

LOL tells the story of three men who have various problems with the women in their lives. Alex (Kevin Bewersdorf) is obsessed with a woman on an adult website. Tim, played by the director, is in an unsatisfying relationship with his girlfriend, Ada (Brigid Reagan), and Chris (C. Mason Wells) is in a long-distance relationship with Greta, played by mumblecore’s Edie Sedgwick, Greta Gerwig. The three men are all presented as dysfunctional, cowardly, insensitive, or delusional, but Swanberg leaves open to interpretation whether their inability to forge meaningful relationships is a product of personality or technology.

The Close-Up, the Screen, and the Conflict of Mediated Reality. One of the most pronounced conventions employed by Swanberg in LOL and his other films is the close-up, and the extreme close-up, typically of the face, but also of an array of body parts and objects. Swanberg has a reason for using (or perhaps overusing) these shots: “You probably noticed that I almost never use establishing shots. I don’t want you to know where people are because it’s not important. . . . I like working extremely close because it’s all about that moment. When I photograph a body part—a hand or foot—this is what I care about. The little things—tiny details separated from their circumstances.” Content and meaning, here, follow form. For Swanberg, the close-up is devoid of social, geographical, historical, and political context. Though he is proud that he films in Chicago, for Swanberg the city is merely a backdrop; the movie is about people.

Yet the close-up also concerns the screen itself. Swanberg foregrounds and frames the face much in the way webcams and personal YouTube videos do. Pushing the camera against the face forces the viewer to contemplate the character’s interiority and story expressed through the screen; it defines the film as a mediated, intimate space first, and eventually as a space where something “real” is possibly but improbably achievable. The beginning of Swanberg’s Kissing on the Mouth sets up the importance of the close-up to mumblecore directors: the first full-body shot occurs nine minutes into the film. Toward the end of Hannah Takes the Stairs, Swanberg holds the camera on his lead’s face for an uninterrupted five minutes as she breaks down and laments her tendency to ruin the lives of the men she dates: “No, this is a person—a person with problems,” she chastises herself, saying it as much to the audience as to her soon-to-be-lover, Matt. In another brief moment in LOL, Alex, after having been rejected from a planned gig with his band, decides to send an e-mail to Tessa, an online porn star, informing her, falsely, that his band will be playing near her. The camera zooms into a still photograph of her face on his computer screen and quickly cuts to a similar close-up of Alex’s face. Their faces are juxtaposed, suggesting a connection, yet it is a connection undermined by the lie he has just told her. The online promise of intimacy—of meeting the exotic other or a new lover—is sharply undermined even as it is visually suggested.

It is impossible to argue that mumblecore wholly reinvents the close-up. The trope of highlighting a character’s most emotional moment with a shot of the face is a

well-worn convention in cinema and is widely considered to be the most revelatory and intimate of cinematic conventions. Béla Balázs theorizes the close-up as doing to actors what the Greeks did to the gods, giving them a soul: “This most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up.” For Balázs, the cinematic experience itself was intimate, in comparison to the experience of other arts, and the close-up held a special position in the cinematic universe. Yet the development of the close-up as integral to classical Hollywood narrative cinema was not inevitable; it had not become standard practice until well into film’s history, taking hold in the 1910s. Roberta E. Pearson notes in her examination of early cinema that directors were urged by the press to employ close-ups: “Because the face and eyes presumably most directly reflected a character’s thoughts and emotions, the trade press considered facial expression an indispensable component of the verisimilar code’s construction of a psychologized individual.”

By the end of the twentieth century the close-up had become, in the words of Alan Nadel, “indispensable ... imagining a degree of intimacy with strangers experienced nowhere else in life, except perhaps on the subway during rush hour.”

Notwithstanding this long history, LOL’s use of the close-up is distinct, at least when understood in proper context. Traditionally in film and television, close-ups are saved for climactic moments or moments of revelation, but in LOL and other Swanberg films, most scenes are shot in close-up. In mumblecore films, even the mundane is given close-up treatment. This focus on the mundane owes much to the style of the vlog and the webcam, which broadcast the dull details of another life. The context of digital culture means LOL’s close-ups are read differently. Before the web, people generally saw only lovers so closely, but vlogs and webcams made ordinary the “close-up” connection between strangers (Figure 4). This is the intimacy to which Swanberg refers.

One cannot understand LOL’s obsession with close-ups and intimacy—real human connection—without understanding the Internet history that precedes it. Years before Joe Swanberg released his first major feature in 2005, thousands of individuals were broadcasting their lives online, live and globally distributed. This trend started in the late 1990s and grew to the roughly forty thousand websites on which people set up webcams and gave viewers live, streaming video of their homes. The trend continues today, on sites like Justin.tv, UStream.tv, and Blogtv.com. Of all the trends predating mumblecore, this is one of the most significant in developing the theoretical and stylistic concerns of the movement. The current webcam craze continues what had started years earlier: the gradual union of lived experience, often framed in a close-up,
LOL makes use of close-ups for both the climactic and the mundane, and characters mediate themselves (sending and receiving images) with close-ups (Benten Films, 2006).

What made the webcam so alluring—and lucrative—was not only the access it allowed into the private lives of others but also the tensions it evoked between the virtual and the physical body.

The promise of a real experience was, of course, a lie; the presence of web video within highly constructed websites, the poor image quality and streaming capability, and the selective camera work were all signals that the viewing experience was not real. However, the webcam operator's physical body fought the lie, promising truth. As Mark Andrejevic notes, "Despite this series of production processes, spectators often correlated the webcam to the referential or reality-producing aspects of photography and other media." This echoes Christian Metz's assertion that film, "with its 'impression of reality,' its very direct hold on perception, has the power to draw crowds." Web-cam videos, perhaps even more so than feature films, engrossed the spectator in the "present"—Metz's "there it is"—allowing him or her to forget the screen. Webcams offered the world one of the first glimpses into the "digital real." Realism in the twenty-first century, it seemed, would look something like this—close-up and live—though this kind of phenomenology was not entirely new: theories of the screen's absorptive

23 Ibid., 57.
24 Andrejevic discusses at length the relationship webcam users had to the real, and specifically their knowledge of the "reality trend" emblematic of reality television. Andrejevic, Reality TV, 76–88.
qualities date back to early studies of television, in which viewers developed corporeal relationships with characters. This hold on the viewer is further encouraged through the occasional use of direct address in films like *LOL* and *Four Eyed Monsters*: viewers accustomed to seeing others address them in vlogs and webcams see direct address as a subjective camera, folding them into the action and virtually erasing the distinction between the self and the other on the screen. Indeed, more than ever, technology is lived such that, in Vivian Sobchack’s words, it “alters our subjectivity . . . [and] invites our complicity in formulating space, time, and bodily investment as significant personal and social experience.” The screen is no longer the digital other—a “thing,” as Sobchack puts it. Rather, in mumblecore we see an effort to invite the subject in.

Webcams fostered a complex experience somewhere between voyeurism, interaction, and empathy. As Michele White deftly explains, “The webcam spectator is situated in a place where voyeurism is constantly promised and yet theoretically unattainable because there is no distanced position.” In other words, viewers were too close to the objects of their viewing to objectify them. They were subjects but were unattainable because of the screen. This is significant. When young mumblecore directors sought to construct realism for the twenty-first century, digital media had already broken the illusion of the real, but because of online video, the real remained tantalizingly close. This tension between real and virtual worlds would eventually stand in for the tension between intimacy and distance, communication and loneliness, even the community and the individual, the same tension that resides in mumblecore. For this reason, I argue, mumblecore recalls some of the webcam’s formal and technical qualities—primarily the focus on facial close-ups, but also low-grade image quality—as a way to dramatize the search for intimacy and reality in a world of voyeurism and virtuality.

As webcam sites became more popular, so did weblogs, or blogs. Though at first most did not employ video, blogs were also spaces where individuals attempted to present themselves as real, even “corporeal.” As Viviane Serfaty explains in her study of American blogs, “[O]nline embodied writing thus becomes a fully rounded, thorough representation of corporeity channeling a necessarily self-defeating quest for a unified self.” I would further argue that this impossible quest to “be known” as an individual, also an issue with webcams, would come to shape the hyperpersonal quest for truth and reality in film ventures like mumblecore. The intensely personal nature of mumblecore,


28 White, *The Body and the Screen*, 84.

29 There are various words for this. N. Katherine Hayles has used terms such as “mindbody” and “embodied virtuality” to describe the phenomenon. See Hayles, “Flesh and Metal: Reconfiguring the Mindbody in Virtual Environments,” in *Semiotic Flesh: Information and the Human Body*, ed. Phillip Thurtle and Robert Mitchell (Seattle: Walter Chopin, 2002); and Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

with its characters divorced from the social and political world, is very similar to that of blogs and webcams. Personal, diaristic details are employed to convince the reader or viewer that the person in front of him or her is real, even if this can never be proven. YouTube is the child of the webcam, and mumblecore the style of the YouTube era.\(^{31}\) The casual, somewhat incoherent style of YouTube, popularized by such vloggers as Brookers and Chris Crocker, two of the site’s earliest stars, and Lonelygirl15, one of its most intimate and constructed stars, is the hallmark of mumblecore.\(^{32}\)

The significance of digital video cannot be overstated. The notion that “anyone can make a video”—or as Swanberg has said, “the production part is simple”—has played a large role in the movement’s development. Just as webcams made it cheap to broadcast one’s life on the Internet, digital video made it cheap to broadcast one’s life on the screen. “We grew up in the age of the home video. We’re used to having our lives documented at every stage. Reality TV shows are an extension of that, and this is the next stage. Like the home movie you actually want to watch,” Swanberg told the Guardian.\(^{33}\)

Ry Russo-Young, one of the few female mumblecore directors, echoed this sentiment: “So many of us are taking advantage of the digital revolution... You can make a good movie with not that much money”\(^{34}\)

As attested to by reality television production, you can serialize personal narratives without much money as well. LOL’s indebtedness to reality television is clear early in the film, when Alex asks Tim to sit in front of his camera so that he can film his “noiseheads,” a project in which he films his friends—among them other mumblecore filmmakers like Andrew Bujalski, Susan Buice, and Arin Crumley—making nonsensical noises into the camera (Figure 5). Nowhere in LOL do the close-up, reality television production, and web video conventions converge so clearly as with the noiseheads. The noiseheads are filmed like confessional—indeed, during the production of LOL, actors were left sitting alone with the camera. (Of course the close-up has been popular in television’s style since its early days, but one cannot deny the influence of MTV’s reality series The Real World in this confessional aesthetic.)\(^{35}\) The noiseheads are

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34 Video by Ray Pride on chicago606’s YouTube Channel, http://www.youtube.com/chicago606.
in close-up, as headshots. The noises are then cut and combined to create short videos of Alex’s friends making noises that form a short jingle, almost like a mash-up. (The noiseheads are shown simultaneously, with nine cells, one cell for each head.)

Interrupting the narrative of the film seven times at apparently random intervals, the noiseheads may seem minor—they do not further the plot—but they are visually and thematically significant. Unlike the previous close-ups seeking to illuminate emotional truth, these shorts are not “personal revelations.” Instead, they highlight the artifice and opacity of digital communication: the actors are speaking gibberish. Yet they are looking directly at the camera, and in a world of personal vlogs in which people regularly address strangers through the camera, this becomes subjective camera, placing viewers in the action and positioning them like a computer user looking at a close-up vlog. In this way, Swanberg once again highlights the tension first explored in the webcam movement: we are close to the screen, and close to intimacy and the reality of the individual before us, but there is something incomprehensible, unreachable, about the person on the other side.

The convention of the close-up providing access to “reality” is emblematic of stylistic shifts occurring in online Web 2.0 environments as well, like the YouTube web series hoax Lonelygirl15. Differentiating the show from Hollywood (as Swanberg differentiates his films from Hollywood productions), Miles Beckett, one of Lonelygirl15’s creators, describes the conventions he employed to create realism: “The blogging works, as do talking to [the] camera and characters filming video—that’s all crucial. On television, you don’t care where the camera is, but for stories like this—because the idea is that the character is real—you have to explain how they can upload video and so on.” Beckett clearly states here that “talking to the camera” in a close-up, as the character Bree, the original protagonist, does consistently in the first videos, and “having the characters film the episodes themselves,” was “crucial” to creating the real, a sense of intimacy. Under these conditions, close-ups become a method for reality production, as do rough film quality and showing the work of production to the viewer, thus showing the characters as both subjects of our gaze and active producers of our gaze. Bree’s vlogging, a pivotal moment in web video history, relates directly to LOL’s “noiseheads,” and her diaristic vlogs similarly recall the opening sequence of LOL.

In sum, the use of the close-up has special significance today. And in addition to LOL, other mumblecore films deploy this convention quite successfully. For example, in Aaron Katz’s Dance Party, USA, close-ups are successfully used when the main characters, Gus and Jessica, are at their most defenseless, as Gus reveals a dark secret and, in turn, reveals the vulnerability inside his snarky exterior. Such moments exemplify the power of human connection in a networked, digital world.

Text and Image on the Screen. Screens as objects, both on computers and on cell phones, are LOL’s clearest citation of digital culture, placing the film historically and foregrounding issues of reality and identity in the digital environment. For instance,
at various points in the film, Swanberg not only shows Internet porn stars (the objects of one main character's obsession) on their websites but also displays the correspondence between Alex and one of these women, Tessa. A throwback to silent-era title cards, the e-mails are placed on the screen with embroidered edges and blue backgrounds (Figure 6). The suggestion is that correspondence between strangers is not new, but that the broadcasting of a private, digitally enabled conversation on the (cinema) screen is. The personal, once private, becomes public, voyeurism awkwardly meets intimacy on the digital screen, and the viewer is involved.

More straightforward visual markers of digital culture are also used in LOL. The use of grainy or homemade-looking photography, created by the technology used to produce the films, and the use of cell phone images within the film, recall the relatively poor quality of early online video and mobile devices. The use of natural lighting and handheld digital video give the films their do-it-yourself, or DIY, aesthetic, a style closely associated with the DIY culture of new media. This DIY sentiment runs through much of the literature on new media culture, including Henry Jenkins's Convergence Culture: “Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interaction with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information.” Jenkins discusses the power of new technologies to enable individuals to participate in media systems. The media produced by nonprofessional individuals do not have to appear as “lo-fi” as they do in LOL, especially as technology improves. Yet the first participatory acts occurred

using poor technology, so the real in digital technology has been socially constructed as “rough.” Kevin Bewersdorf, who worked in a number of production capacities on LOL in addition to playing Alex, notes on the DVD commentary track that he deliberately downgraded the quality of some of the video used for the “noiseheads” to make them look like cell phone video. The filmmakers were certainly aware of this history and wanted their film to embody this moment. Co-writer Chris Wells observes that LOL “will probably look cheap and low quality in twenty years or so, and maybe this is the quality of Internet video a few years from now. It will look so dated and cheap it will be the quality of YouTube in five years.”

Instances of the DIY aesthetic appearing outside of film abound, but one compelling example is the Washington Post’s use of a cell phone image on its front page during the London bombings of 2005, marking perhaps the first major instance of a user-generated cell phone image in hard news, the segment of journalism most invested in accurate representations. The image was recorded by a bomb victim in the pitch-black subway where the London bombs had exploded. Absent the context of the bombings, the image, grainy and abstract, would be utterly useless. But the paper’s editors deemed it the most real representation of the incident, even though, clearly, a true account of the horror was unachievable.

Space and Place on the Screen. The decreasing importance of place and space is certainly one of Swanberg’s central concerns and is written into his loose plots at various points in his work, another aspect of his films that marks them as “digital.” In LOL, Kissing on the Mouth, and Hisy Fits, voices are often disembodied, interrogating the significance of physically lived experience for the characters in the film, and implicitly, for the audience. In Kissing, Patrick, played by Swanberg, is working on a project involving audio testimonials of two individuals who talk about their relationships and families (note the focus on hyperpersonal experiences). In fact, a substantial portion of the dialogue in Kissing is narrated digitally through these testimonials; many of the characters in the film are silent or muted as these stories are told, and they listen to the narratives through headphones and in cars. We never meet the narrators, but their stories are significant. At several points in the film their testimonials relate directly to the main characters’ experiences as they deal with the desire to embrace one’s family while still becoming independent, the flaws of love, and other themes. Swanberg seems to ask the audience, who listen to the recordings as the characters do (without a referenced body), whether these testimonials can be read as relevant and human despite their digital distribution. While we begin to understand the characters through their stories, we never meet them. We are close but not close enough.

Similarly, characters in LOL are close to their loved ones physically but somewhere else digitally. An early scene shows Tim talking to a friend on his cell phone about his flirtatious girlfriend as she, in the physical world, flirts with another man a few

40 Chris Wells in the DVD commentary for LOL (Benten Films, 2006).
yards away from him. During a later scene Tim and a friend sit side by side on a couch and instant message one another, complaining about Tim’s girlfriend, while she sits at his feet watching a movie (Figure 7). Alex spends most of the movie e-mailing the adult film star he desires, and Chris can only reach his girlfriend via cell phone, but they often miss each other. Here, digital technologies divide people and interrogate the investments people place in face-to-face interaction. This is not, however, Swanberg’s last and only thought on embodiment and intimacy. In his short film Thanks for the ADD, Greta Gerwig borrows a stranger’s cell phone to make a quick call and ends up spending about five minutes chatting to her boyfriend. When she finally hangs up, the guy she borrowed the phone from—who no doubt gave it to her because she’s pretty—awkwardly asks her to be his friend on MySpace. Swanberg, it seems, is ambivalent about whether technology actually brings people together. He appears more concerned with how technology conflates our notions of what is intimate and experiential and what is virtual and inconsequential. Certainly, all of his characters want intimacy, and perhaps this is enough. The audience, too, presumably want intimacy, even though we are physically disconnected from the action of the film. What connects people, including the audience, is this personal desire.42

**Sex on the Screen.** Discussing Swanberg without mentioning sex is like discussing Woody Allen without mentioning New York. One of Swanberg’s hallmarks is his graphic portrayal of sex, which, I would argue, also has its thematic roots in digital culture. Swanberg has noted how his generation grew up in the age of the home video, but he and his peers also grew up in the age of easily accessible and free pornography. Online pornography and sexuality offer potentially dangerous possibilities for individuals, some scholars have argued. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun states that sexuality online offers a potential “shattering of the individual’s boundaries,” but that “resistance is not futile and rigorous resistance stems from contact and connectivity.” Preserving some sense of personhood and humanity online requires effort: “Rigorous resistance stems from engaging the loss of self-control endemic to all communication, since . . . high speed technologies serve as an opening by which we seek to connect to others, and by which others seek to connect to us. They are a means of communication that, like all means, are fraught with miscommunication, noise, hostility and danger.”43

Swanberg, then, portrays sex so graphically as a way to dramatize the promise of connection in a networked world, to show how people fight the “noise, hostility and

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42 Other films outside the mumblecore genre do this as well, most notably *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (Miranda July, 2005).

danger" of sex, and to seek the real in a digital world. Certainly, this is what his lead, Alex, in LOL is doing as he stares at naked women on his computer, but it is also what the audience is doing when watching the graphic Kissing—in which Swanberg himself, we are made to believe, masturbates and ejaculates on-screen, and in which one of the first shots is of a male character putting a condom on an erect penis—and in his Internet series Young American Bodies. 44 The audience, by virtue of viewing, undertakes the same quest for honesty and connection and so is sutured into the fabric of the film. The particular convention of not showing erect penises in “respectable” films is portrayed as illusory and out of touch; furthermore, this is not the same sexual frankness of contemporary films like Shortbus (John Cameron Mitchell, 2007), in which most sex is comical, or Brown Bunny (Vincent Gallo, 2003), in which the final scene is tragic. Swanberg’s scenes are not dramatized; rather, they merely “exist” and are almost cloyingly intimate and personal, as in his music video for Ola Podrida’s “Run Off the Road” (2007). 45

**Realism in Film and the Tradition of Emotional Realism.** The issue of realism is crucial if we are to place mumblecore in theoretical context. To speak of realism in film is a fraught endeavor, for in fact there is no single such thing. Film, it has been argued, is as essentially real as the arts can be, its audiovisual elements by their very nature encouraging empathy and identification in the viewer; empathy, of course, is a key component of mumblecore, securing its base in participatory and network cultures. 46 Decades of scholarship in semiotics and poststructuralism have called into serious question any claims to reality in film, yet it can be safely acknowledged that most films attempt to lay claim to some connection to the physical world, a phenomenon perhaps best described by André Bazin as a film’s “presence” in both time and space. 47 Each film and genre merely express this connection in different ways. In mumblecore we see a concerted citation of direct cinema, reality television, and Dogme95, all of which, I would argue (with some obvious exceptions in reality television), are genres attempting to show lived experience as mundane and everyday, not the world as it could be, should be, or has been. In mumblecore, “lived experience” specifically involves digital culture—participatory culture enabled by YouTube and webcams—thereby necessitating a new form of realism.

Mumblecore draws particularly on the precepts of Dogme95. Indeed, the influence of Dogme95 on films like LOL has been noted by Swanberg himself. 48 Mumblecore films are not, strictly speaking, Dogme95 films. They do not follow all of the “vows of chastity,” Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier’s bullet point list of how Dogme95 films should be made, but the films do follow some of the vows on occasion,

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48 See Grant, “More Excited.”
including the use of handheld cameras, on-location shooting, the “here and now” clause, and the “no genre” dictum, more or less. But strict adherence to the vows is irrelevant; the directors have embraced the spirit of the movement. Dogme95 was at its core an anti-Hollywood enterprise, like most realist cinema before it and consistent with a number of American independent films since the 1980s. Kristin Thompson notes in her deconstruction of the real in Bicycle Thieves (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) that, “in spite of the recent tendency in film studies to assert that Hollywood-style cinema creates classical realist films, Hollywood has usually been equated with fantasy and escapism. Claims that this or that film is realistic often involve contrasting it with the classical cinema.” Thompson situates Bicycle Thieves as a socially produced phenomenon and a partial response to the state of the film industry at the time of its production. Similarly, Dogme95 responded to what it called the “bourgeois” excesses of independent cinema and the “illusory” excesses of Hollywood. Movies had become too “cosmetic,” and Dogme95 adherents responded with bare, handheld, grainy realism. Mumblecore has followed in that tradition. Importantly, the Dogme95 movement reopened a dialogue on emotional realism tied most explicitly to the work of John Cassavetes. As Vinterberg and von Trier criticized the lack of emotional realism in cinema, so does mumblecore. Vinterberg and von Trier state, “Having the characters’ inner lives justify the plot is too complicated, and not ‘high art.’ As never before, the superficial action and the superficial movie are receiving all the praise.” This focus on the inner life of a character would become Dogme95’s most subtle but important imprint on realist cinema.

Mumblecore furthers these ideas, popularized in independent cinema by Cassavetes. In fact, mumblecore’s directors and actors have earned the derisive nickname “the Slackavetcs,” described in the Guardian as “a lazy nod to... Cassavetes, whose experimental films paved the way for these intensely personal microcosms to exist.” Cassavetes’s “intensely personal” dramas, while vastly different in style from the mute and affectless mumblecore, similarly use emotional realism as a counterpoint to Hollywood’s more contrived conventions. Other conventions of realism that depart from Hollywood, like “ambiguous or unhappy endings”—as in Bujalski’s Funny Ha Ha and the sly sadness that concludes Swanberg’s Kissing on the Mouth—and more realistic portrayals of sex, are present in mumblecore. It draws on the heritage of emotional realism in independent cinema and remixes it (often with less affect) to fit the concerns of a digital generation.

52 Vinterberg and von Trier, “Vow of Chastity.”
53 Hubert, “The Guide.”
54 Thompson, Breaking the Glass Armor, 201.
Mumblecore, Intimacy, and Fighting for the Real

For if any symptom can be "produced," and can no longer be taken as a fact of nature, then every illness can be considered as simulatable and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning. —Jean Baudrillard

Our own realist moment... is one in which the evidential claims of our visual and auditory recording instruments are increasingly called into question. The development of digital recording technologies and computer generated imagery has created a crisis in the representation of the real that a half-century of critical and theoretical work dedicated to revealing the constructed nature of the realist image has been unable to achieve. —Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment

Joe Swanberg and mumblecore's engagement with realism has more profound implications than are evident at first glance. Yes, as a style it contextualizes realism and the cinematic experience in a specific moment in history. Yet it also makes an important contribution to a theoretical dilemma in artistic production: namely, how to produce realism in an age when reality has been deconstructed.

If we interpret Jean Baudrillard as believing in the power of simulation to render meaningless something like medicine, a social response to a presumed natural dilemma, mumblecore renders virtuous the search for a cure. Young filmmakers schooled in deconstruction are well aware of the constructed nature of everything presumably natural. The idea that nothing is inherently real, even medicine itself, has failed to inspire a generation confronted daily with digital simulations of real concerns—social networking sites with digital reproductions of loved ones, YouTube videos capturing expressions of passion, and countless other examples.

The broad concerns of Baudrillard become particular when addressing the impact of digital technology on the ontology of film. Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment are just two of many scholars trying to work through the contradictions digital technology ignites in artistic practice and media production, indebted as they are to a privileged relationship to the real. The "digital" eliminates all things "tangible" in artistic production. Or, more precisely, digital technology makes explicit the always-constructed nature of film creation.

Mumblecore offers an intervention by refocusing the debate on the question of emotional tangibility. How does one grapple with an emotional response to an overproduced reality television show, a dramatic phrase written on a Facebook page, or a confessional e-mail? In sum, how do filmmakers reconcile and create new art from this aching contradiction: the tangible response (medicine) to something evidently constructed (illness)?


The answer lies in the search for the cure. Mumblecore does not dispute the simulation of most creative practice. "They're so artificial," Swanberg has said of his films, "made up of all these fake moments meant to look hyperrealist." This is not a concession, but a starting point. It is possible these realist movies embody the struggle to fill the void between the virtual, digital, and deconstructed world of new media and the visceral (natural?) desire for love and humanity, flawed concepts that feel timeless and resist—however unsuccessfully—deconstruction. This love and desire is the real in digital realism, and it is a search for intimacy forever unrequited. In a world permeated by proclamations that the real has lost meaning, leaving simulations in its wake, a world in which the digital decimates the real, these films ask whether it is possible to lay bare what is "in between" the real and virtual—the networks, the aesthetics, the ever-unsuccessful search for real intimacy—and declare the imperfection enough. The final image in LOL of Alex alone on the street with his guitar, defeated in his attempts to use digital technology to make tangible his desires for a lover and music career, posits an answer to the postmodern paradox. The search for the real is lonely and desperate but is in itself satisfying.

Appendix—A Select List of Mumblecore Films (Listed Chronologically)

Fanny Ha Ha (Andrew Bujalski, 2002)
Four Eyed Monsters (Susan Buice and Arin Crumley, 2005)
Kissing on the Mouth (Joe Swanberg, 2005)
Mutual Appreciation (Andrew Bujalski, 2005)
The Puffy Chair (Jay Duplass, 2005)
Quietly On By (Frank V. Ross, 2005)
Dance Party, USA (Aaron Katz, 2006)
The Guatemalan Handshake (Todd Rohal, 2006)
LOL (Joe Swanberg, 2006)
Old Joy (Kelly Reichardt, 2006)
Frownland (Ronald Bronstein, 2007)
Hannah Takes the Stairs (Joe Swanberg, 2007)
Hohokam (Frank V. Ross, 2007)
In Search of a Midnight Kiss (Alex Holdridge, 2007)
Orphans (Ry Russo-Young, 2007)
Quiet City (Aaron Katz, 2007)
Team Picture (Kentucker Audley, 2007)
Baghead (Jay Duplass and Mark Duplass, 2008)
Medicine for Melancholy (Barry Jenkins, 2008)
Nights and Weekends (Joe Swanberg and Greta Gerwig, 2008)
The Pleasure of Being Robbed (Joshua Safdie, 2008)
Wendy and Lucy (Kelly Reichardt, 2008)
Sorry, Thanks (Dia Sokol, 2009)
Greenberg (Noah Baumbach, 2010)
Tiny Furniture (Lena Dunham, 2010)