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## The Sound of Uncertain Voices Mumblecore and the Interrogation of Realism

For André Bazin, realism exists in the plural: “There is not one realism,” he writes, “but several...Each period looks for its own” (“William Wyler” 6). In what follows, I look to a recent example that reflects this ongoing search. Joe Swanberg’s debut feature *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005), a founding film of the polarizing “mumblecore” movement, proves an illuminating case, for it confronts the “problem” of realism on a number of fronts, among them the technological, the inheritance of antecedent realist styles, and the question of taboo and taste as it pertains to that which mainstream realisms so often elide: sex. Moreover, I submit that the film’s most intriguing undertaking lies in its curious interplay between sound and image. Specifically, the sounds, or more aptly, the sound-image relations, found in *Kissing on the Mouth* deviate considerably from a “realist” soundscape and stage a manifold interrogation of the possibilities of realism in a poststructural, postmodern, post-filmic age.

In order to proceed, we must first situate *Kissing on the Mouth* within the context of mumblecore, the now waning microbudget movement that tends to focus on the *ennui* of inarticulate, post-collegiate American hipsters.<sup>1</sup> In addition to sharing a common social milieu, these films are united by a similar aesthetic. Frequently improvised, cast with nonprofessional actors, and characterized by narrative looseness, mumblecore films attempt to make a virtue of their roughhewn visual style. Though Swanberg’s films fit this general mould, they stand out against the others for their graphic inclusion of what appears to be non-simulated sex. The director contends that this is not the gratuitous deployment of skin for shock value; rather, Swanberg claims

that *Kissing* was conceived as a rejoinder to the mumblecore progenitor, Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), a film in which its young protagonist’s awkward flirtations result most often in stolen, awkward, or misaligned kisses (Lim 11). Though both films are concerned with the listless longings of middle-class Caucasians, Swanberg explicitly depicts that which is omitted in Bujalski’s film. In *Funny Ha Ha*, sex is a subject that both the director and his characters seem to hesitantly dance around; in *Kissing*, sex seems more “natural” than conversation, which is often uncomfortable, clipped, evasive. Whereas the verbal exchange is fraught with peril, sex is at least a fleeting moment of shared interest or intersecting intention—intercourse as discourse.

The film’s opening scene immediately cues the viewer that sex is on the agenda, for it depicts the flip side of Bujalski’s chaste coin. Before any dialogue is exchanged, we are presented first with a man and a woman kissing, then a close-up of a condom being unrolled onto an erect penis. The title card of the film then appears over the characters engaging in apparently non-simulated lovemaking. So often associated with callow hierarchies of intimacy (as in the clichéd baseball analogy—first base, second base, and so on), the title registers ironically when placed atop the image of graphic sex. Clearly, the film is dealing with something other than the sexless sweetness of Bujalski.

It would be easy to write off Swanberg if his adoption of a realist aesthetic were merely an attempt to elevate the pornographic to the art house, and, indeed, many have made such a case.<sup>2</sup> Sex is, after all, one of the more “artifi-

1. A sampling of films that fall under the mumblecore heading include *Four Eyed Monsters* (Buice & Crumley, 2005), *The Puffy Chair* (Duplass, 2005), *Quiet City* (Katz, 2007), *Team Picture* (Audley, 2007), among others.

2. Amy Taubin, emblematic of the critical backlash against mumblecore, is one of the most outspoken detractors of Swanberg, whom she describes as a “clueless [narcissist]” whose “greatest talent is for getting attractive, seemingly intelligent women to drop their clothes and evince sexual interest in an array of slobby guys who suffer from severely arrested emotional development” (“Mumblecore: All Talk?”).



cial” of events in the cinema, calculated and choreographed to show some actions while cloaking (the lack of) others. Throughout much of his work, Swanberg counters this tendency with the graphic depiction of various sex acts, most notably in this case, the autoerotic. In one scene, we see Patrick (Swanberg) unobscured and masturbating in the shower, culminating with a close-up of him ejaculating. Instead of the sex acts that are merely suggested in mainstream fare, the depiction of the male climax in *Kissing* serves to “verify” the film’s sexual encounters. As Linda Williams in her path-breaking study on pornography posits, the visualization of ejaculation is the “ultimate confessional moment of [male] ‘truth’” (101), a “truth” that is effaced in the typical Hollywood sex scene wherein both penetration and the male orgasm are implied but not shown. Thus, in that it depicts the “money shot,” *Kissing on the Mouth* confirms the veracity of sex acts on display by indexing the male orgasm.

Though some have charged Swanberg with narcissism, I believe it an error to dismiss the film as sensationalistic on the grounds of its sexual frankness alone. What is most important about the ways in which Swanberg presents sex acts is that he does so in the same matter-of-fact manner that he depicts, for example, the washing of dishes. “We tried,” says Swanberg in an interview, “to make no separation between the way we filmed a body and the way we filmed a computer or a table. We left the imagination plenty of room to wander around when thinking about other elements of the film, but we did not think the imagination deserved anything in regards to the body” (Swanberg). In *Kissing*, graphic sex scenes are often followed by a character taking out the garbage, painting a room, or brushing their teeth.

This tempering of the more explicit elements of *Kissing* with the quotidian is not without antecedents. The focus on the banal can be found throughout a number of realist cinemas, for it subverts the cause-effect chain of classical narratives by leaving in that which is commonly excised in the Hollywood film. We find its origin in the Italian neorealist period—the famous scene of the maid going about her chores in *Umberto D.* (De Sica, 1952) comes immediately to mind—and it has endured as a common aesthetic (and political) strategy in art cinema. Writes Bazin of the De Sica film: “The narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists; it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of

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which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis” (*Umberto D*” 81). The deployment of *temps mort* founded with neorealism can be seen in perhaps its most overtly political articulation in feminist cinema of the 1970s, with Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) being the exemplar. Ivone Marguiles echoes Bazin in her monograph on Akerman: “Along with extended duration,” she argues, “the quotidian is undoubtedly the signifier par excellence of the realist impulse” (23). In this regard, the “money shot” in *Kissing* is hardly scandalous, for the surrounding banality wrests any eroticism or narrative drive from it; within the logic of Swanberg’s film, Patrick’s climax is no more bracketed off than any of the other mundane “instants of life.”

Indeed, throughout *Kissing on the Mouth*, Swanberg seems to be channelling Akerman. The scene in which Patrick and Laura (Kris Williams) paint the walls of a bedroom recalls a similar scene in *Je tu il elle* (1976). Furthermore, Swanberg’s comment about filming the body in the same “way [he] filmed a computer or a table” reflects an approach that Akerman utilizes in her short *La chambre* (1972), wherein the camera’s 360-degree pans pay no more mind to the lone human figure (Akerman), who sleeps, eats, and masturbates, than the tea kettle or chest of drawers.

In addition to this loosened approach to narrative events, *Kissing* utilizes another realist hallmark: the use of

nonprofessional actors, a strategy that also came to prominence with Italian neorealism. Swanberg, like most of his fellow mumblecore directors, employs amateurs in his films in an effort to tamp down the artificiality of trained performance. Moreover, Swanberg relies heavily on improvisation, another common realist approach. Taubin writes: “these non-actors are perfect choices for these films because their insecurity and embarrassment about voicing their characters’ ideas, desires, and feelings is not merely symptomatic of their lack of technique, it dovetails with a defining characteristic of the particular cohort (white, middle-class, twenty-something) to which the filmmakers and their quasi-fictional characters belong” (“Mumblecore: All Talk?”). Taubin alights upon both the effectiveness and stiltedness of this approach: in that the characters are only “quasi-fictional,” the performer never “disappears” fully into his character. Instead, a friction emerges between the “real” of the actor and the construct of the performance and/or the very performativity of “real” self. In some instances, the scene comes off as “natural” in that it lacks the polished style of traditional acting. However, in others, the result is ungainly, pointing to the artificiality inherent in the cinematic endeavour. Hence, the stutters and swallowed lines from which the moniker “mumblecore” is derived are crucial components of the movement’s interrogative or deconstructive project.



As these examples indicate, tactics utilized in *Kissing on the Mouth* are by no means unique, but rather, are inheritances from a number of prior realisms. The nonprofessionals who act in the film hearken back to neorealism and numerous new wave movements throughout the world. Similarly, non-simulated sex can be seen in the works of a

number of art house directors including Catherine Breillat, John Cameron Mitchell, and Michael Winterbottom. Where the film stands out, though, is that it is engaged with the problem of realism not only at a stylistic level, but also in terms of the narrative. The relationship between sound and image and how they interact with questions of representation and ontology become central concerns by film’s end.



Let us briefly recount the plot, slight though it may be. Patrick shares an apartment with Ellen (Kate Winterich), for whom he not-so-secretly pines. Ellen rekindles a relationship with Chris (Kevin Pittman), a former boyfriend, under the condition that it is of the “no strings attached,” sexual variety. Initially, Ellen, aware of both Patrick’s affection for her and his disapproval of Chris, hides these trysts from him. Thus, the narrative sets up a rather conventional love triangle in which the two male leads serve as foils for one another. Their schematic differences, though, are significant.

Both Chris and Patrick are aspiring artists, but their preferred media are in no way arbitrary within the logic of the film. Chris, a budding fashion photographer, is seen throughout the film snapping pictures of various female models ordered into just-so positions. Chris, therefore, dictates both the pose and framing before “freezing” the moment, halting time and space and his model within it. Posing a model against a black backdrop, in one sense, isolates the subject of the photograph; in another, however, it is an attempt to eliminate contingency, to gain tighter control of the subject via direction, and the untameable background through its masking. Key here is the fact that Chris derives his images photochemically.

This, of course, contrasts with Patrick, who compiles a series of audio interviews in which he asks acquaintances



about love, relationships, life goals, and so forth. Unlike Chris, who is associated with an analogue technology, Patrick records and edits his interviews digitally.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, nothing in the text suggests that his project is designed to be anything other than an aural one, for he is never seen

So how, then, does *Kissing* attempt to resolve or intervene in this crisis? The answer lies in a second binary: the audio/visual. Just as Swanberg announces his intentions to redress the staid lustfulness in Bujalski’s film in the opening scene, he follows it in the subsequent scene with the

	Chris	Patrick
1. Relationship to Ellen	Sexual	Platonic
2. Domain of Representation	Image	Sound
3. Method of Capture	Analogue	Digital

Table 1: *Kissing on the Mouth’s* Male Binaries

capturing or editing images to accompany his collection of spoken interviews. That Kevin’s is a visual approach and Patrick’s an aural one is of especial importance.

One can see, therefore, that the film organizes the two men vying for Ellen’s affection into three binary oppositions (see Table 1).

Though it is tempting to disregard the creative occupations of Chris and Patrick as tropes of the mumblecore genre, I contend it is more productive to think of them instead in terms of the contrasting ontological natures of their respective artistic media and their differing methods of “capture.” This dichotomy reflects back upon the very anxiety over the fate of photographic and cinematographic realism, now that the image no longer (necessarily) carries the indexical link between the material object and its representation. After all, Bazin’s conception of cinematic realism is tied in part to its photographic derivation—its registering of a trace of an object within the world onto the film-strip. The ontological difference between the technologies employed by Patrick and Chris serve to acknowledge the disquietude the digital turn has wrought to the notions of representational realism. In other words, the “great spiritual and technical crisis that overtook painting” (Bazin, “Ontology” 10) with the advent of photography is visited upon us again, ushered anew by the digital.<sup>4</sup>

introduction of a formal device that marks the film’s most striking deviation from our prototypical realist text. In it, Patrick is seen preparing a microphone for an interview with an offscreen subject. As we cut away (visually) from the interview scene, the voice of the subject carries over into the next. The identities of Patrick’s interlocutors (a total of four by film’s end) are never revealed. Interestingly, Swanberg deploys a seen-unseen dynamic by showing only Patrick, the interviewer, and keeping the interviewees invisible. These lengthy responses are heard exclusively in the form of voice-over narration, and reemerge throughout the film with little to no narrative justification. These voices rarely seem to “link up” to the film’s visual content, but yet form a running soundtrack that seems to be related only tangentially and in a thematic way to the visuals or the story.

This audio is curious, for unlike most traditional films, it seems to bear no relationship to what is visualized onscreen. The spectator attempts to unify and to reconcile what she hears and sees, which is why the voice that is heard but is not seen has garnered considerable attention from scholars of sound cinema. For instance, Pascal Bonitzer, speaking of documentary film, argues that the unseen narrator exercises a god-like (and thus, ideologically suspect) authority over the spectator. Along the same lines, Michel Chion has labeled the unseen voice the “acousmètre,” a spectral figure to whom he attributes a number of powers—ubiquity, omniscience, panopticism, and omnipotence (18–25). The acousmètre attains these powers by being “present” despite being “not-yet-seen” (21); yet, in *Kissing on the Mouth*, these voices trouble Chion’s theory because, despite functioning acousmatically, they *never* reveal themselves, and thus, cannot be linked with their physical sources. In this regard, these voices “issue from a space other than



that on the screen, an unrepresented, undetermined space” (Copjec 184). Hence, by disallowing the voices in *Kissing* the status of third-person, omniscient narration, and also by withholding their “de-acousmatization,” Swanberg denies them any of the powers associated with the acousmètre or the authority ceded to the documentary narrator. These are then “intemporal voices: they cannot be situated in—nor submitted to the ravages of—time or place” (185). In short, these voices hang in limbo.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, unlike conventional voice-overs, the audio and the visual elements of the film achieve a certain level of independence from one another; the voices that float over the images are not there to serve as interior monologue or commentary, nor do they align necessarily with the text’s dramatic situations, and when they do, it seems more serendipitous than by design. Instead, sound and image operate as equals, neither subservient to the other.

Gilles Deleuze theorized such a relationship between the aural and the visual in his two volumes on the cinema. According to the philosopher, the de-linking of sound from image is a crucial characteristic of the “pure optical and sound situations” of the modern time-image. The shift

5. Per the DVD commentary, the voices heard throughout *Kissing on the Mouth* were not scripted; rather, Swanberg and fellow filmmaker and co-star Kris Williams interviewed several of their peers and transferred this audio into the film. Thus, the interview audio is indeed a documentary, but the film leads one to believe that the people speaking exist within the diegesis. The appropriated voices, then, add yet another layer to the film’s already complex interaction between fiction and reality, sound and image.

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from silent to sound cinema allowed for the presentation of “direct” character speech (i.e., speech that is heard and synchronized with the moving lips of an actor, not speech conveyed via title card, which is an indirect method). The sound film, once it had overcome the initially awkward period of transition, developed into its classical form. The rupture initiated by World War II, according to Deleuze, inaugurated the shift from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image, following which, sound “began to “[turn] in on itself” for “it [was] no longer dependent on something which is part of the visual image; it becomes a completely separate sound image; it takes on a cinematographic autonomy and cinema becomes truly audio-visual” (243). By being discrete and autonomous elements, the aural and the visual attain the possibility of entering into a free indirect relationship with one another.<sup>6</sup>

6. Deleuze borrows the notion of free indirect discourse from Pier Paolo Pasolini, though as is his custom, he modifies it significantly. For Deleuze’s elaboration of cinematic free indirect discourse, see

Deleuze remarks that within the pure optical and sound situation, “talking and the visual [are] no longer held together, no longer corresponded, but [belie] and [contradict] themselves, without it being possible to say that one rather than the other is ‘right’” (250). This passage is key for two reasons: first, it assigns neither the visual nor the aural a place of supremacy; second, the two components come to contradict or falsify one another. Thus is born the “sound image” or “sonsign,” which exists on either side of “a fault, an interstice, an irrational cut between” sound and image (251). This interval is, for Deleuze, home to the true power of the cinema, for this space between is a locus of possibility, the site of viable becomings. He associates the emergence of the sonsign with a diverse array of filmmakers, from Eric Rohmer to Robert Bresson to Alain Robbe-Grillet. Most surprisingly, he cites ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch as an exemplar. In Rouch’s work, the documentary—the privileged site of the “real”—becomes home to audio-visual contradiction, which for Deleuze, marks the cinema’s greatest political potential. Instead of filling in or providing the aural complement to the image, sound enters into an irrational relationship with it, and out of this reciprocal interplay is born film’s ability to transform or destabilize “reality.” Only when the elements of cinema—the raw materials of image and sound—are divided from one another, may new potentialities be actualized. This irrationality is crucial to our understanding of the interview audio in Swanberg’s film.

We have grown accustomed to the voice-over in fiction film providing information or otherwise framing that which we see, but this authoritative voice is in most cases an identified character within the diegesis. *Kissing*, therefore, self-consciously withholds the voices’ identities, and in so doing, subverts the customary authority of the acousmètre’s disembodied voice—a tension is set up between what we hear and what we see. What I call subversion, however, Deleuze describes as a necessary trade-off: sound, by “entering into rivalry or heterogeneity with the visual images... [breaks] free from its moorings” and “loses its omnipotence but by gaining autonomy” (250).

Deleuze’s notion of audio-visual “rivalry” illuminates the tension between sound and image, and the visible and the invisible, upon which the climax of *Kissing on the Mouth* hinges. Late in the film, Ellen tacitly agrees to pose nude for a photo shoot with Chris after he begins to cajole her with camera in hand. It is implied that Ellen refused his requests to model in their initial, more traditional courtship. Thus, to Chris, her acquiescence signals an escalation in their relationship: he misinterprets the resulting photographic im-

127-155. See Schwartz for an illuminating explication of the differences between the two.



### *Sex and speech: both fleeting forms of intimacy, of mutual exchange between people, the recording of which serves the desire to fend off their ephemerality.*

ages as a declaration of intent. However, Ellen balks at any level of intimacy beyond that of a purely physical nature. When Patrick inadvertently uncovers the 35mm negatives from the shoot, he too misreads them. The photos verify his suspicion that Ellen and Chris have been engaging in a sexual relationship, despite her claims to the contrary. Like Chris, he believes these images signal a corresponding romantic attachment, one that Ellen staunchly refuses. Nevertheless, her participation in the photo session enacts an unwitting concession on her part.

In submitting to Chris’s lens, she is “pinned down” via representation and becomes, in a sense, a possession, locked into an ideal pose according to his preferences. Indeed, despite Ellen’s repeated denial of an emotional attachment, she finds herself unexpectedly hurt by Chris’s later rejection of her in favour of one of his other “models.” These photographs become for Ellen a two-fold predicament: primarily, they incorrectly signal to Chris her desire to engage in a bona fide, romantic relationship; consequently, through Patrick’s exhumation of them, she is exposed to his prying gaze and demands to defend her actions. Moreover, because Ellen has no interest in a sexual relationship with Patrick, the pictures become for him a particularly stinging reminder of the unattainability of the object of his desire.

Just as Ellen does with her relationship, Patrick keeps secret the interviews he is compiling, suggesting that he is embarrassed by his preoccupation with love and relationships. Mirroring Patrick’s discovery of her nude photos, Ellen finds and then copies the audio files that Patrick leaves open on his computer, surreptitiously gaining access to his covert collection of voices that flow throughout the film. Echoing our first glimpse of him, in the final scene Patrick is again setting up his microphone and prompting yet another unseen interviewee to tell him about her “last relationship.” Over the ending credits, we hear but do not see Ellen begin to tell the story of her affair with Chris. In so doing, she also submits to the second of her suitors, this time in voice but not in image or body.

Recall for a moment the earlier breakup scene, which suggests that what Chris had been seeking from Ellen was an intimacy of a different sort, one of emotional candour. Chris sits on Ellen’s bed looking over the negatives from their shoot, noting the way the light plays off her body. All the while, Ellen kisses and pets him in an attempt at arousal. “Can we talk?” he asks. “Can we do something other than sex?” Her refusal to provide access to her interiority is precisely the act that ultimately dissolved their relationship. And it is exactly this emotional transparency that she gives to Patrick at the film’s conclusion.

It is Patrick who now “possesses” Ellen’s voice, her thoughts, in a recording that is permeated with the type of intimacy that Chris sought and that Ellen was unwilling to give him. Thus, over the course of the film, Ellen moves from the realm of binaries associated with Chris (sexual/image/analogue) to those aligned with Patrick (platonic/sound/digital), and in so doing, she shifts from carnal, corporeal body to invisible, disembodied voice. Crucially, Ellen’s transformation is not of the physical sort, but rather, a shift in the form of her mediation. For both Patrick and Chris, it is not Ellen’s words or her touch that they seek so much as the representation thereof. Sex and speech: both fleeting forms of intimacy, of mutual exchange between people, the recording of which serves the desire to fend off their ephemerality.

As this essay demonstrates, *Kissing on the Mouth* is a film bound up with the “problem” of realism in the contemporary age, a problem that it engages on the formal, narrative, and technological level. Through its depiction of non-simulated sex, adoption of techniques from various antecedent realisms, and staging of a confrontation between analogue and digital technologies, and indeed, between sound and image, the film questions the relationship between reality and representation in provocative ways. In that it concludes with a moment in which the binaries it sets up are transgressed, reversed, and/or complicated, *Kiss-*

*ing on the Mouth*, for reasons rarely noted in the critical discourse surrounding it, marks a compelling intervention into the problem of contemporary realism.

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