



FEEL ALL THE FEELINGS: THE FILMS OF GRETA GERWIG

Hannah Takes the Stairs

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Directed by: Joe Swanberg

A film by: Joe Swanberg, Greta Gerwig, Kent Osborne, Andrew Bujalski, Ry Russo-Young, Mark Duplass, Todd Rohal, Kevin Bowersdorf
©: Film Science

Presented by: Film Science

Executive Producer: Rajen Savjani

Produced by: Joe Swanberg, Anish Savjani

Post Supervision: Meg Digiovanni

Written by: Joe Swanberg, Greta Gerwig, Kent Osborne

Additional Material: Andrew Bujalski, Ry Russo-Young, Mark Duplass, Todd Rohal, Kevin Bowersdorf, Tipper Newton, Kris Williams
Photography: Joe Swanberg

Edited by: Joe Swanberg

Digital Intermediate by: Offhollywood Digital (NYC)

Digital Intermediate (Supervision): John Eremic

Digital Intermediate (Colour): Yohance Brown

Equipment from: Zacuto Rentals

Additional Equipment from: Frank Ross

Audio Recording: Kevin Bowersdorf

Sound Mix: Chris James

Special Thanks: Matt Dentler, Jay Duplass, Karen Gerod, Aaron Katz, Lars Knudsen, Spencer Parsons, Janet Pierson, Rebecca Romijn, Ryan Smith, Michael Tully, Jay Van Hoy

Press Kit: Vincent Savino

Cast:

Greta Gerwig (*Hannah*)

Kent Osborne (*Matt*)

Andrew Bujalski (*Paul*)

Ry Russo-Young (*Rocco*)

Mark Duplass (*Mike*)

Todd Rohal (*Brian Duges*)

Tipper Newton (*Minnie*)

Kris Williams (*Gaby*)

Kevin Bowersdorf

Ivan Albertson

USA 2006©

83 mins

The screening on Fri 14 Jul will be introduced by Programmer Kimberley Sheehan

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SIGHT AND SOUND

Joe Swanberg's *Hannah Takes the Stairs* stands as a key moment in the career trajectory of Greta Gerwig, who co-wrote the film and delivered a memorable performance as the eponymous twentysomething romantically torn between two work colleagues following a breakup.

In the mid-2000s, a small movement of do-it-yourself, cinema vérité-style filmmaking was taking root in the US under the stewardship of Swanberg, Mark and Jay Duplass, Andrew Bujalski, Aaron Katz, Lynne Shelton, Adam Wingard and more. *Hannah Takes the Stairs* is one of the best-known examples and a unique convergence of several of the cohort's key players in turn. Mark Duplass (director of *The Puffy Chair*, *Cyrus*, *Jeff*, *Who Lives at Home*) plays Hannah's ex-boyfriend Mike, and Bujalski (director of *Funny Ha Ha*, *Mutual Appreciation*, *Support the Girls*) is one of the prospective love interests, Paul. Regular Swanberg collaborator Kent Osborne stars as the other colleague, Matt.

Hannah, Paul and Matt work in a small office space as screenwriters, and the film explores how their working lives and attractions dysfunctionally intersect. Scenes feature long awkward pauses, nuanced depictions of jealousies and characters finding it difficult to articulate grievances and discomfort. Gerwig's performance is incredibly nuanced, and the film goes beyond the core love triangle by featuring authentic-feeling discussions of mental health and the malaise felt by so many twentysomethings when navigating the balance between work commitments, creative endeavours and relationships. This fine line between humorous, light-hearted tone and devastatingly honest depictions of dating and breakups is a staple of Swanberg's filmography, and characters are permitted to waver between likeability and having patchier moments.

This flavour of filmmaking was christened 'mumblecore' by critics and audiences looking to distinguish it from prior coming-of-age narratives. Disliked by the directors, writers and actors associated with it, the label seemingly derides the delivery of dialogue and the sometimes-limited capacity in which sound was recorded. But awkward pauses and inflective ways of speaking line up more closely with how people really talk, and many of the actors were improvising and drawing from personal experiences, which is why the films have similar sentiments when looked at alongside each other.

Most of the actors in the films are non-professional, or were at the time, and the cohort of filmmakers that Swanberg, Duplass and Bujalski belong to would often act in each other's films or share writing duties, as is the case with *Hannah Takes the Stairs*. Conversely, Gerwig had intended to become a playwright, and that interest is reflected in the character of Hannah, who openly discusses the use of tragedy in plays in one of the film's trademark bathtub scenes, and who gets Paul and Mike to workshop dialogues she has come up with in the office.

At the time of *Hannah Takes the Stairs*' emergence, Judd Apatow's powerhouse productions with the likes of Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill and Steve Carrel were fulfilling the mainstream appetite for slacker narratives and performing well at the box office, eclipsing the more independently spirited output of Swanberg and his contemporaries. Thus 'mumblecore' lingered just out of view, with a devoted audience drawn from avant-garde circles and the

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Hannah Takes the Stairs

Sat 1 Jul 20:40; Fri 14 Jul 18:15 (+ intro by
Programmer Kimberley Sheehan)

Damsels in Distress

Wed 5 Jul 20:40; Sat 15 Jul 20:30

Greenberg

Fri 7 Jul 18:05; Sat 29 Jul 20:50

20th Century Women

Sat 8 Jul 20:30; Fri 21 Jul 18:10

Little Women

Sun 9 Jul 18:10; Tue 25 Jul 20:20; Sun 30 Jul 18:00

Frances Ha

Mon 10 Jul 20:50; Tue 18 Jul 18:30; Fri 21 Jul 20:45

Mistress America

Wed 12 Jul 20:50; Sun 30 Jul 12:50

Lady Bird

Mon 17 Jul 20:45; Tue 25 Jul 18:30;

Wed 26 Jul 20:30

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film festival circuit. As Richard Linklater and Kevin Smith had taken advantage of 16mm filmmaking's accessibility in their early careers, so Swanberg and co cemented their shoestring, lo-fidelity output with inexpensive high-definition video (HDV) cameras. This shift from standard definition MiniDV to HDV afforded a jump in quality while retaining portability, enabling shooting in real locations and using available light.

The limited sensor range of HDV cameras and the softness of their built-in lenses resulted in blown-out highlights when close to windows, a greenish, yellowed hue under generic office and home lighting, and acne, facial hair and sunburn being unjustly amplified. As such, the films came with a distinctive aesthetic quality, which accentuated their realism and underscored the close quarters of shared living in small apartments, warts and all. *Hannah Takes the Stairs* also takes advantage of the long-range digital zoom these cameras had, zooming in and isolating characters and their emotions during key moments. This makes a pivotal scene in which Hannah is repulsed by Mike's touch, setting their breakup in motion, feel particularly raw, as if a documentary crew were there reacting on the fly.

Looking retrospectively through Gerwig's filmography, her writing contribution to *Hannah Takes the Stairs* can be felt just as importantly as in *Frances Ha* (2012) and *Mistress America* (2015), which often feel more like Gerwig's vehicles than Noah Baumbach's. The film helped to define a certain period of independently spirited filmmaking, and the relatable and complex character developments have carried into Gerwig's genre-spanning directorial efforts.

With Gerwig at the helm of *Barbie* (2023), it feels a confident bet that some of that tone will seep into a mainstream film yet not feel too out of place. In fact, it seems likely that those who celebrate the cult status of *Hannah Takes the Stairs* will just as easily find something in this far more commercial venture, which is a rather unique testament to Gerwig's guiding hand.

Andrew Northrup, bfi.org.uk, 30 June 2023