

## Mumblecore, Normcore, and the in-betweens.

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**Mumblecore is one of those few recent movements in American cinema to have been consistent enough to merit a neologism of its own, as resented as that may be by both directors and crew. Likely unintentionally, it shares some of the traits of what in fashion we now call normcore, and yet as it remains outside of the industry, mumblecore has succeeded in achieving the improvised, most ordinary lukewarmth; the less self-centric attitude that normcore has yet only theorized.**

Mumblecore movies star and are filmed, often simultaneously, by Millennials like me and you, in days far from our best. All that can be is skimped upon, and a good deal of what shouldn't as well - give Joe Swanberg no budget, and he will churn out 14 features. Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha*, allegedly and reluctantly the first mumblecore film in 2002, had its closing credits hastily handwritten on paper. They are, some critics may say, all fur coat and no knickers, but it's to their merit that they make do without the coat either. Nothing that requires fastening will be worn on set, often, nothing is worn at all - clothes than can be slipped on, slept on, and forgotten are as much as anyone will put up with. Narrative structures are as diluted, wayward and languid as we know them to be in real life, and the eponymous mumble frequently

occurs in horizontal setting, while lying on an unmade bed, a couch or the floor, as if the weight of gravity in Williamsburg was suddenly too much to bear. They deal, according to The New York Times' Dennis Lim, with the "*quietly seismic shifts*" we all go through during the "*the tentative drift of the in-between years*", between postgrad and adulthood, when our identities still are tender and we're much too easily bruised. A rite of passage that we've got to believe especially delicate and unfairly long-lasting for members of what sociologists have labelled the *Peter Pan generation*, is howbeit handled with wit and a hint of self-irony. Although the topical theme of unemployment lingers through the movement, it rarely becomes its main focus, and hardly ever causes any real anxiety: not much anxiety is to be found, in the mumblecore world in general.

Lim's praising article, *A Generation Finds Its Mumble*, was published in 2007, the golden age of mumblecore if such a thing ever was. The IFC Center was about to run their *The New Talkies: Generation D.I.Y.* retrospective, only a couple of years after the milestones of the genre were first screened to the public of the South by Southwest Film Festival. Since 2010 though, with the release of the Duplass Brothers' *Cyrus*, things seem to have changed and many would say for the best: the *mumblecorps* as we knew them have grown out of their limbo, they now have spouses and kids, higher budgets, scripts. No more of what Swanberg described, looking back to his prolific noughties with film critic Eric Hynes, as "*the idealism of an angry young man coming out of film school and trying to reinvent the wheel*". A glossier glaze now graces their work, and only occasionally (read: *Frances Ha*) you would hear wistful mentions of any post-mumblecore sensibilities.

Now we have normcore, but that's not very exciting. It is, perhaps, as much the antithesis of excitement as any fad has ever been. Yet, is one of the first this decade that's not the comeback of a previous one, and warrants a Wikipedia page for itself too. To go look for the roots of normcore into mumblecore .mov files would be preposterous, if only because the trend can pride itself of its own ancestry: as a sociological attitude, although of a slightly different meaning, coined in October 2013 by trend forecasting group K-Hole. *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*. was then a proper manifesto, something mumblecore never had, to ardently welcome "*the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity*". A curious number of common grounds, however, could still be noted between mumblecore films and the normcore movement, as a style and behaviour both.

The two terms, for a start, are almost unanimously frowned upon, especially by those who should held them dearest. *Mumblecore*, that according to Katherine Connor Martin at Oxford University Press has been "*the first non-musical -core coinage to achieve widespread use*", was initially intended as a joke, by sound editor Eric Masunaga at the 2005 SXSW Film Festival, and has frustrated pretty much everyone ever since. As well, all those normcore shopping guides popping up online have left the writers of *Youth Mode* reasonably flustered. *Normcore* has nothing to do with fashion, they've hurried to explain, we've confused

it with another one of their concepts, *ActingBasic*. Too late: as journalist Alex Williams puts it, normcore has been "a hypothetical movement that turn[ed] into a real movement through the power of sheer momentum" - just like mumblecore.

In its original connotation, it's the boundless elasticity of *normcore* that would have made it impossible to associate a single item of clothing with the word. Normcore was meant to "move away from a coolness that relies on difference to a post-authenticity coolness that opts in to sameness". Fluidity and homogenization, as a balm to soothe our souls from that aching process of identity formation so clearly captured on mumblecore screens. At first, indeed, came youth: a matter of mind over age according to K-Hole, but it's the very specific issues of us Lost Boys that are still a critical requisite of mumblecore and normcore both. In fashion, obviously, but as an attitude too.

Let's go back to the matter of unemployment for instance: sociologically speaking, Millennials are known to switch jobs much more frequently than previous generations, due to our great expectations. We've learnt that we're special, and like Alan in *Mutual Appreciation* or Frances in *Frances Ha*, that we're meant to become great musicians and dancers. This will often lead to a series of inevitable disappointments, until, hopefully, acceptance, fulfillment and respite will follow. But normcore, *Youth Mode* states, is *post-aspirational*. It divests the youth of this hurtful sense of superiority and entitlement, and tells us that we all are normal simply because "there's no such thing as normal". Like Doug in *Cold Weather*, we can now find a job in an ice factory and be a hero on the side, of the most inconspicuous kind, the very best kind.

The essence of normcore as a whole seem to be that we not only shouldn't need our clothes to make a statement, we possibly shouldn't need to make a statement at all. Or yet, we may do, but are allowed to change our minds and pants as soon as we wish. And while mumblecore films may not have directly inspired the movement, their moody, believable protagonists are still the best examples to look at, on how to put this philosophy to practice - because in real life, dressed up like tourists with our khakis and fleeces, we've so far only partially succeeded.