

## **Theorising ‘bad’ sound: what puts the ‘mumble’ into mumblecore?**

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Few film genres, styles or movements are named with respect to their sound quality; ‘mumblecore’ – a cycle of independent, very low-budget American movies that emerged in the middle of the last decade – is a rare exception. The label is somewhat pejorative – the ‘origin myth’ is that it was jokingly coined by a sound mixer, but has since stuck.<sup>1</sup> Aymar Jean Christian observes that mumblecore directors are uncomfortable with the term and tend not to self-identify as mumblecore, making the term analogous to the subcultural term ‘hipster.’<sup>2</sup> However, despite being named with reference to its sound, there has been little analysis of its soundtracks, either academically or in the popular press, beyond dismissing the sound as ‘bad,’ with no further comment.

This particular notion of ‘bad’ sound bears closer examination; however, close attention to mumblecore’s audiovisual style needs to be contextualised within the broader category of American independent cinema, of which it is a part. Hence, the label is attached to more than just a style – as has been widely argued, American independent or ‘indie’ cinema is partly an economic category, partly a style and partly a discourse.<sup>3</sup> As an economic category, given their very low budgets and self-financed status, mumblecore films can be categorised as ‘house indie,’ as delineated by a critic cited by Michael Z. Newman: “fully DIY operations based out of people’s homes.”<sup>4</sup> However, the economic context is not the only element that associates it more broadly with ‘indie’ or the ‘indie sensibility’. According to Newman, the category of American

‘indie’ cinema combines textual features with contextual factors such as promotional discourses and viewing strategies.<sup>5</sup> Given that the term mumblecore reached prominence through use by critics and bloggers, the mumblecore category can be understood as operating in a similar fashion to the American ‘indie’ category itself – it is critically positioned relative to a perceived mainstream, often articulated as a Hollywood mainstream or even a perceived set of professional standards. Therefore, formal analysis of the sound of mumblecore is best contextualised through consideration of the sonic taste hierarchies articulated by critics in their use of the term mumblecore and their categorisation of mumblecore’s sound as ‘bad’. I have argued elsewhere, with reference to work by King, that very low-budget movies can convey a ‘low-fi’ sonic style that situates their soundtracks distinctively as ‘beneath the Hollywood style’<sup>6</sup>. Following on from that assertion, this article will demonstrate how mumblecore’s bad sound similarly operates as a mark of its distinctive, perhaps excessive, indie-ness, by answering two interrelated questions; namely, what do critics and academics mean when they say mumblecore has ‘bad’ sound, and how does mumblecore actually sound?

The exploration of mumblecore’s ‘mumble’ that follows will also reveal the term’s operations at a thematic level. The films subject to analysis herein all share young characters preoccupied with uncertainties regarding sense of self, finding one’s place in the world, and the struggle to communicate, connect, and forge meaningful relationships. Christian asserts that mumblecore is about “a generation in flux”, for whom “the desire for connection—reality, honesty [...] becomes itself a virtue, the only truth in a deconstructed, postmodern world in which all references to ‘truth’ are continually questioned.”<sup>7</sup> In part, these notions of connection, honesty and truth are similarly manifested at the sonic level, as will emerge through an

interrogation of articulated notions of 'bad' sound contextualised by analysis of mumblecore's sound style.

### **Mumblecore and its critics**

While the term mumblecore might refer to its sound, definitions by critics emphasise a variety of non-sound characteristics too. Both the press and (more recently) academics have characterised mumblecore as naturalistic as well as lacking audiovisual polish. Justin Horton summarises the style as: “[f]requently improvised, cast with nonprofessional actors, and characterized by narrative looseness, mumblecore films attempt to make a virtue of their roughhewn visual style.”<sup>8</sup> According to the press, mumblecore is characterised by “a tendency toward semi-plots, improvised dialogue, low-key acting, and an aversion to pretence and sheen that's at once studied and off-handed”;<sup>9</sup> “a low-key naturalism, low-fi production values and a stream of low-volume chatter often perceived as ineloquence. Hence the name: mumblecore”;<sup>10</sup> “...generally these films are severely naturalistic portraits of the life and loves of artistic twentysomethings. The genre's ultra-casual, low-fi style has been simmering for the last decade, made possible by the accessibility of DV and inspired as much by reality shows and YouTube confessionals as by earlier American independent cinema”.<sup>11</sup> As evidenced from these quotations, two of these critics describe mumblecore as a form of “naturalism,” with the aesthetic approach described as “low-key, “ultra-casual”, “roughhewn” and having “an aversion to [...] sheen.” The few references to sound specifically cite improvised dialogue and “low-volume chatter.”

Lynn Hirschberg posits mumblecore as a character-centred micro-budget response to a movie business which has “lost its middle,” with mega-budget action blockbusters dominating

the major studio's slates.<sup>12</sup> She therefore pits mumblecore in an oppositional stance against mainstream bigger budget film-making in a similar fashion to the earlier Dogme 95 movement, with its Manifesto berating contemporary cinema for "the elevation of cosmetics to God."<sup>13</sup> Just as press and academics quoted in the previous paragraph tend to tie together 'naturalism' with 'low-fi'-ness of sound in mumblecore, some film sound academics have observed more generally that technically perfect, noise-reduced soundtracks "[result] in a sound that is somewhat 'unnatural'",<sup>14</sup> and that: "[...] superior sound reproduction has gone hand in hand with filmic spectacle, a situation that continues, ironically, to make rich, full, highly textured sound a signifier of artifice."<sup>15</sup> Hence, a lack of sonic finesse tends to be associated with greater naturalism.

Justin Horton has posited mumblecore oppositionally too, but as a reactive quest for the 'real' in terms of sincerity, in opposition to the pastiche and "ironic cool" knowing-ness of contemporary cinema's postmodernist tendencies, "predicated upon cheaper modes of production and distribution".<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Amy Taubin's vitriolic attack on a "movement" that has "had its fifteen minutes," is most critical of mumblecore director Joe Swanberg's apparent solipsism and narcissism, as well as the self-consciousness and technical limitations of mumblecore, including its sound: "More than a soundperson's nightmare, however, the mumbled speech in the movies that emerged as hardcore mumblecore is significantly overdetermined. On a technical level, these are micro-budget movies where sound is almost always a neglected element".<sup>17</sup> What is observable throughout these critical articulations of mumblecore is that the 'mumble' refers to two aspects of the sound. In both respects, the 'mumble' is a mumble of unintelligibility; but in one respect, it refers to a casual and improvised tone of inarticulate dialogue, and in another respect, to low-budget production values, in which sound is "low-fi",

“low volume” or even “neglected.” Indeed, these articulations suggest mumblecore sound has a synecdochal relationship with more general (non-sound-specific) notions of naturalism.

Horton’s analysis of Swanberg’s mumblecore film *Kissing on the Mouth* (2005) includes some discussion of sound. However, for Horton, the most interesting use of sound is in *Kissing on the Mouth*’s blatant separation of sound and image, with the use of asynchronous recordings of interviews by one of the characters with other young people, which, although apparently part of the diegesis, are never unambiguously revealed to be visually part of it.<sup>18</sup> While this analysis is certainly worth pursuing, there is little exploration of the material qualities of the synchronised, onscreen, diegetic sound of mumblecore with only asynchronous sound deemed worthy of discussion. Critics, commentators and academics make vague acknowledgement of mumblecore sound’s “lo-fi”, “low-volume” and “neglected” quality, with little positive examination of what these qualities might amount to, or what they might do.

Having established the critical position on mumblecore’s style as a context, the next sections consider in more detail the aesthetic aspects of mumblecore’s sound, using examples from mumblecore films. There is no mumblecore ‘canon’; every writer (journalist or academic) stakes out a slightly different set of films and directors as mumblecore, and by 2009, some of mumblecore’s ‘stars’ were already refusing to participate in journalistic features covering the movement<sup>19</sup>. As far as ‘canonisation’ has been established, this can be ascertained in three respects (1) by examining curated sets of mumblecore films, such as New York City’s IFC’s 2007 season entitled *The New Talkies: Generation DIY*<sup>20</sup> or (in the UK) Channel 4’s mumblecore season, aired in August 2009<sup>21</sup> (2) referring to mumblecore already highlighted in other academic work (3) referring to films most often cited as ‘mumblecore’ by journalists and bloggers. I have chosen examples from mumblecore films released up to and including 2007, the

year in which many press articles drawing attention to mumblecore as a movement first appeared, and on films directed by the most cited directors – Joe Swanberg, Aaron Katz, Andrew Bujalski, and two directorial pairs: Susan Buice and Arin Crumley, and brothers Mark and Jay Duplass. While these directors’ films share stylistic similarities, they are not interchangeable and not perceived as such by critics – for example Lim describes Swanberg as “the most prolific and the most committed to improvisation,” Katz as having “the most poetic sense of place” and Bujalski as the “elder statesman” and “the most artful and sophisticated,” distinguished not only by age but also his decision to eschew digital video in favour of 16mm film (Lim makes no special mention of the Duplass brothers’ style, and Buice/Crumley only directed one film, albeit an influential one).<sup>22</sup> Despite these distinctions, these directors are personally linked via the mumblecore ‘scene’. Writing in 2007, Mark Asch noted: “...the filmmakers know each other and appear in each others’ movies [...] and are fixtures at the annual South By Southwest Film Festival”<sup>23</sup>, and the importance of SXSW for the directors’ networking and the facilitation of alternative distribution and exhibition strategies has been similarly noted by Chuck Tryon.<sup>24</sup>

### **‘Mumbled’ dialogue**

As mentioned earlier, the ‘mumble’ in mumblecore is deemed by critics to be one of unintelligibility, but in two respects; firstly as ‘inarticulate’ dialogue, and secondly as the ‘low-fi’ ‘bad’ sound quality associated with its lower-budget production values. This section addresses mumblecore’s dialogue, and the casual and improvised tone that is widely accepted as a key characteristic, looking at three examples. The importance of the improvisation of actors has been stressed to varying degrees in interviews with mumblecore directors.<sup>25</sup>

The plot of *LOL* (Swanberg, 2006) can be summarized simply as a portrait of three sets of heterosexual relationships and how they are affected by communication technologies. Much of its comedy and pathos revolves around characters failing to communicate with each other while occupying the same physical space, and being overly preoccupied with communicating via mobile phones or internet rather than face to face. A short scene in *LOL* in which Tim (played by Swanberg) lies in bed with his girlfriend Ada, as she berates him for spending too much time on his computer, illustrates both the importance of dialogue and the improvisational quality of the dialogue. The shot is framed quite tightly, sometimes on both their faces, sometimes on one of their faces, but always the same angle, and the scene includes some elliptical jump cuts. I have included a transcription of some of the dialogue in this scene to convey the heavy use of pauses, sighs and phatic sounds in the characters' exchange:

Ada: ...and doing stuff with Mike in front of the computer when you're at home  
*[pause]*.  
*[Tim chuckling]*  
Tim: Does Mike bother you?  
Ada: No-o-o. *[pause]*  
Tim: Um is there anything I can do?  
*[pause]*  
Ada: Yeah, I mean you could pay attention to me while I'm over there!  
*[long pause. Tim sighs. Pause. Tim lies down]*  
Tim: Well do you think maybe *[pause]* like uh just a few times a *[pause]* month or maybe like you could sleep over at my place?  
Ada: eerh, umm, I don't know. *[pause]*  
Tim: I bought those new sheets.  
Ada: Yeah but your bed is small.  
Tim: I can't really fit a bigger bed in there. *[long pause]* Are you going to sleep now?  
Ada: Yep. *[pause]* Just, be quiet.  
Tim: hh I'm not sleepy!  
Ada: Well I am! *[pause. She sighs]*  
Tim: You wanna kiss more?  
Ada: No-o-o-wuh!  
Tim: *[giggles]* You sure?  
Ada: Ye-heh-hes! *[puts light out]*.

As well as conveying the improvised nature of the scene, the qualities of the dialogue above signify on an emotional level. In *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, Sarah Kozloff uses a transcript of a scene from *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Curtis, 1994) in which Hugh Grant's character Charlie, declaring his love to Carrie, uses frequent hesitations and phatic sounds which: "guarantees to the viewer that his declaration is heartfelt".<sup>26</sup> Setting the foreknowledge that the dialogue in *LOL* is improvised aside, if my transcript of dialogue above is analysed as a text in itself, it similarly exhibits the signs "verbal awkwardness [...] used as special signifiers – either of the pressure of emotions or of character traits".<sup>27</sup> We therefore glean from these signifiers that this scene is to be understood as sincerely emotional. In this respect, the improvisatory 'mumble' in mumblecore can be understood to represent a heartfelt mumble. This heartfelt-ness goes along with Justin Horton's contention that mumblecore is a quest for sincerity in the face of an increasingly ironic, postmodern world:

...mumblecore articulates the strong desire for connection, for real emotional resonance, between people in a time when meaning what one says is passé.<sup>28</sup>

Mumblecore movies have also been labelled "New Talkies" referring to a cycle of 1990s 'indie' films sometimes referred to as 'talkies', however what is noticeable in *LOL* and more widely throughout mumblecore is how hesitations, pauses and silences are a defining feature of the dialogue, rather than the rapid-fire, erudite, wise-cracking dialogue of *Clerks* (Smith, 1994) and *Before Sunrise* (Linklater, 1995). If mumblecore is indeed regarded as a "dirty word",<sup>29</sup> the mumble can be construed in one respect as yet another articulation of the prejudice against dialogue-heavy films identified by Kozloff.<sup>30</sup> There is a pervasive idea that films are best at "showing" not "telling," with a lack of analysis of dialogue amongst critics (dialogue is described in very vague terms as "witty" or "clumsy" with no analysis or examples).<sup>31</sup> In "Designing a Movie for Sound", the eminent sound designer Randy Thom also expresses disdain



for the over-use of dialogue in cinema: “In recent years there has been a trend, which may be in insidious influence of bad television, toward non-stop dialog in films. The wise old maxim that it’s better to say it with action than words seems to have lost some ground”.<sup>32</sup> It is paradoxical that mumblecore movies are regarded as overly reliant on dialogue (telling not showing), yet simultaneously regarded as inarticulate and unintelligible, as summed up by the article quoted above describing mumblecore as “a stream of low-volume chatter often perceived as ineloquence”.<sup>33</sup> While mumblecore’s heavy use of dialogue might contribute to its negative critical reception, in another respect the improvisational quality of its dialogue, replete with hesitations, contributes to its perceived ‘mumble’ of inarticulateness.

Not only does the dialogue convey the improvised nature of mumblecore acting along with the implied sincerity of its characters, it also conveys a yearning for connection that is paradoxically failed by this very dialogue. This is evident in the first scene of *Quiet City* (Katz, 2007), the plot of which hinges upon missed and forged connections – Jamie, in her early twenties, arrives in New York City from Atlanta, and fails to rendezvous with her friend and host Samantha whose cellphone is switched off. Instead, by chance she meets a stranger, Charlie, when asking for directions to a diner at a subway station, and spends a few days with him. In this scene of their first meeting, their conversation finishes as follows:

Jamie: You know where it is?

Charlie: Yeah.

Jamie: Okay. So what should I do?

Charlie. Okay. Uhhm... Basically... uhm...okay. Go... out... this exit. Go... to your right... and then take the left staircase... out... to the floor level? *[pause]*

Um. Okay. And then...okay... you’re gonna get out... and then... go left? On the street, right there?

Jamie: So I...

Charlie: This street right here?

Jamie: So I take a left when I go out...

Charlie: Yeah. Go left out of the station, left on the street, and go like... two blocks up... and then... um... what do you see over there... I'm tryin' to think... [pause] Uhm...<sup>34</sup>

We then cut to a shot of Jamie and Charlie walking to the street above ground, and after a few seconds Jamie says: "Thanks for walking me." The upshot of the scene is that Charlie chooses to walk Jamie to the diner because he cannot find the words to express where it is.

*Four Eyed Monsters* (Buice and Crumley, 2005) – in which its two co-directors/co-leads Susan and Arin re-enact their real-life meeting via the internet and (as described on the DVD cover) 'the birth, life and death of our real relationship' – differs stylistically from *LOL* and *Quiet City* by featuring flashbacks, superficial action and fantasy sequences imagined by the characters. There is less of an improvised quality to its dialogue too, except in video-diary-like direct address sequences, with much of the film narrated in a retrospective tone. However, *Four Eyed Monsters* engages with this notion of speech as an inadequate mode of connection in other ways. Initially, Susan and Arin contact each other via a dating website, and Susan then invites Arin to stop by at the bar where she works, however when he goes there he is too shy to speak to her. Instead, he records a video diary while locked in the toilet, then surreptitiously photographs Susan leaving her work and emails her the photos. Impressed with his act of stalking, she emails him suggesting they meet, then imagines their meeting in a bar and their attempt to engage in conversation.

The dialogue in this short sequence is as follows:

Susan: Those pictures...[pause] Wow [pause]

Arin: I know. [pause]

Susan: I mean... getting them was really exciting. It must have been...

Arin: Yeah.

Susan:...for you to... do that...

Arin: Yeah... I mean... [pause] it was really... just... exciting... [very long, awkward pause]

This scenario of shy, awkward, inarticulate conversation is so horrifying to Susan that she proposes that, upon meeting, they do not speak at all, and instead communicate via hand-written notes. One critic went so far as to describe *Four Eyed Monsters* as “pre-mumblecore” because the characters choose not to speak to each other at all.<sup>35</sup> The characters even engage in sex without ever speaking to each other, establishing a physical connection without articulating a sonic, verbal connection. What is noticeable about the above transcript is that it reads almost as a parody of dialogue in other mumblecore films. Altogether, these dialogue transcripts show that the mumble can be understood, not only as a mumble of emotional sincerity, but also as the failure of speech as a mode of human connection – the mumble is therefore thematic as much as stylistic.

### **“A soundperson’s nightmare”**

In this section, I wish to shift focus away from the performative and thematic aspects of dialogue to consider wider aspects of the mumblecore soundtrack as part of its overall audiovisual style, in an effort to better understand what is meant by its ‘bad’ sound. Christian states that mumblecore is defined stylistically “through its use of low-quality film (or, most often, digital video) and poorer sound quality, which was the inspiration for the ‘mumblecore’ label”.<sup>36</sup> Sound in mumblecore movies is noted by critics as sounding different to other movies, but in what way, other than “poorer”? Regarding Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), which depicts the peripatetic working life and romantic struggles of recent graduate Marnie, Taubin complained that in an early screening: “the sound was so terrible in the Chinese restaurant scene that the buzz from the fluorescent lights drowned out the dialogue. (The track was cleaned up for the

subsequent 35mm and DVD versions).”<sup>37</sup> However, this is an exceptional incident of very poor quality sound, rather than the norm, and as a technical issue it was later rectified.

Given that in mumblecore, the soundtrack is as vococentric as other conventional narrative movies and the dialogue is intelligible, Christian’s description of the sound as “poorer quality,” and Taubin’s description of it as “a soundperson’s nightmare” is intriguing. As I observed earlier, in critical discourse on mumblecore, the ‘mumble’ is a thematic mumble of unintelligibility; but this is *despite* the dialogue’s intelligibility. I will now attempt to elucidate what is meant by these negative descriptions through consideration of film sound writings that address practitioners, in order to determine more precisely what makes mumblecore sound ‘bad’, as well as considering how its ‘badness’ contributes to its aesthetic quality. I do not wish to wilfully ignore the technical issues with sound in mumblecore. A qualitative assessment of the sound in several mumblecore films finds numerous instances of sound that could be judged as below a professional technical standard, in keeping with critical commentary. This is manifested by overly distracting background noise, variations in dialogue volume (especially dialogue recorded off-axis or not close enough), a lack of Foley detail, and occasional distortion.

To use *Quiet City* as an example (and a pertinent one given that it has been praised for its superior aesthetic sensibilities<sup>38</sup>), in a scene in which Charlie and Jamie share a cigarette on the roof of Charlie’s building, there is audible wind rumble; in a scene where Charlie playfully gives Jamie a fright by speaking through a megaphone at her, her scream is distorted; a scene in which Charlie offers Jamie a drink in his apartment, the dialogue is almost overwhelmed by the hum of the fridge, and Charlie’s audibly off-axis voice is only just intelligible, with a low signal-to-noise ratio of Charlie’s voice to the fridge. A scene in which Charlie and Jamie hang out in a park

includes the noise of an overhead plane and audible hiss, and although their dialogue is intelligible, Charlie's is louder and more clearly recorded than Jamie's.

In comparison, the Duplass Brothers' *The Puffy Chair* (2005) has a more consistent standard of dialogue recording overall. Yet it includes some scenes with dialogue recorded either off-axis or not very close, most noticeably during the scene in the warehouse in which the lead character Josh (played by Mark Duplass), his girlfriend and his brother, collect the 'puffy chair' of the film's title that motivated their road trip. In this scene some of the warehouse workers' dialogue is recorded either off-axis or not very close, either making the reflected sound of the dialogue's reverberation around the warehouse disproportionately loud, or making the dialogue seem thin and indistinct. If space permitted it would be possible to list numerous further instances of poorly recorded dialogue in mumblecore; those mentioned are meant to be illustrative of a broader tendency.

How then do we account for what seems like a paradox – the dialogue is badly recorded, yet is intelligible? The answer lies in a brief consideration of the professional standards of film soundtracks as articulated by instructors and academics. In fiction films, 'clean' dialogue recorded on location (with minimal interference from other sound sources) represents the industry standard, prescribing a complete separation of the dialogue track from M&E (music and effects) in the service of creating international versions of the soundtrack.<sup>39</sup> Sandra Pauletto's industry research has confirmed how dialogue recorded on location is later edited and mixed from a mixture of multiple takes and (if necessary) ADR (dialogue re-recorded in post-production): "a fragmented record [...] of a fragmented performance [...] of a fragmented subject"; yet the process of dialogue editing and mixing is self-effacing: "the aim of the design process is to create a fully understandable and aesthetically coherent voice for the character on

screen.”<sup>40</sup> In contrast with industry practice, what is evident from the examples of badly recorded dialogue in mumblecore is its lack of precise rendition of the voice in post-production, and a lack of separation of the dialogue from background interference.

This lack of separation has implications for non-dialogue elements such as Foley. A scene in Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha* between Marnie and her co-worker Mitchell (played by Bujalski), in which Marnie quits her job, includes body movement sound picked up during the dialogue recording of Marnie’s jewellery jangling distractingly, as well as indistinct location-recorded footsteps. Conversely, a lack of Foley is evident throughout mumblecore, for example in *Four Eyed Monsters* a shot of Arin running through the streets of New York City does not include any Foley footsteps or body movement sounds, just background traffic noise, so Arin’s body lacks any kind of physicalized presence on the soundtrack. A noticeable lack of Foley is also a feature of *Quiet City*, contributing an ‘unfinished’ quality to its soundtrack, for example when Jamie walks through the subway in the first scene and takes out a piece of paper, her body seems strangely mute. In Katz’s *Dance Party USA* (2006), about the meeting and blossoming friendship and relationship between two teenagers Gus and Jessica, there is an inconsistency to the recording and rendition of these types of body sounds; for example the final scene shows Gus walking through a fairground with a similarly strangely mute body, yet in contrast the opening scene shows Jessica wandering about the debris of the previous night’s house party with her footsteps and clothing rustle recorded at overly-close proximity such that it dominates the mix completely.

What these issues with sound recording highlight is an emphasis in mumblecore sound recording of capturing a raw, minimally processed record of a contingent performance event. However, it would be an erroneous simplification to interpret the mumblecore approach to sound

as more or less naturalistic than the industry standard. In a chapter entitled “The Real and the Rendered”, Michel Chion highlights commonly held misconceptions regarding location-recorded (direct) sound and the illusory unity of realistic-sounding soundtracks:

Even with so-called direct sound, sounds recorded during filming have always been enriched by later addition of sound effects, room tone, and other sounds [...] [T]he processed food of location sound is most often skimmed of certain substances and enriched with others. Can we hear a great ecological cry – “give us organic sound without additives”?<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, despite its perceived sonic naturalism, mumblecore resists industry-standard sonic realism. Not all of the mumblecore directors I have mentioned have discussed sound recording methods in detail, apart from Swanberg. In the commentary track of the *LOL* DVD, Swanberg mentions that rather than employing dedicated production sound personnel when shooting a scene, very often he will shoot a scene alone, with one camera, and one microphone attached to a stand, and he has also mentioned using hidden microphones.<sup>42</sup> This simplified approach to sound recording means that not much control can be exerted on capturing clean, on-axis dialogue, meaning that dialogue is at risk of being overly reverberant, overwhelmed by background noise, and at worst unintelligible. But for Swanberg, this is less of a concern than capturing the spontaneous, uninhibited performance of the actors. This suggests therefore that technical standards are subordinate to the contingent quality of the improvised screen performance event in mumblecore. Another clue, this time regarding post-production sound editing and mixing, can be found in the closing credits of Katz’s *Dance Party USA*, which state “Picture and Sound Edited on Final Cut Pro”. This particular editing platform allows only minimal and crude sound editing and mixing, compared with a dedicated sound editing and mixing programme such as ProTools. I am not arguing that mumblecore sound is merely a case of technological

determinism; rather these two clues point to a different set of shooting and recording priorities in mumblecore compared with professional-quality soundtracks.

On the commentary track of the *LOL* DVD Swanberg and co-actor Kevin Bewersdorf offer a fascinating piece of self-theorising regarding their soundtracks' 'unfinished' quality. Referring first of all to an unsatisfactory attempt to add office sound effects in post-production to office-set scenes in *Hannah Takes the Stairs* (2007), they explain their aversion to working with sound professionals:

Joe Swanberg: Had we shot *LOL* just the way we made it and everything like that, but we had taken it to a Hollywood sound mixer to completely create the soundscape and the sound designs, they would be so far apart that the movie would feel really horrible I think. It would be like, it would sound amazing and it would look, y'know...

Kevin Bewersdorf: It wouldn't look like it should.

JS: Exactly, it's gotta fit.

KB: It's gotta be consistent. In the same way that you're missing stuff from the shot, like by, y'know, if you've panned away and you've missed what someone's doing or you miss a reaction, and that becomes part of the mystery of it, and y'know in the same way you can't hear the Foley of every footstep, you can't hear... there's a whole bunch of holes, and they have to be there in the audio, they have to be there in the video, they have to be there in the story, and the holes have to be consistent, or else, because if you have something that's totally filled in and all the rest of the stuff is holes, it doesn't work, so if you're gonna be crappy, be crappy across the board [*They both laugh*].

What Swanberg and Bewersdorf imply here is that they are perfectly conscious of how mumblecore sound has noticeable gaps or an unfinished quality. They also are conscious of 'bad' sound as a stylistic quality that interplays with the visual and narrative qualities of mumblecore. In a similar vein, Mark Duplass has posited his films' lack of audiovisual finesse rather romantically as signifiers of 'truth' and of 'organic' creative processes: "...there was no crew—just Jay behind the camera and me acting. And that was our first movie that got into Sundance. It



won a ton of awards, and got us our agents and all that stuff. That was basically what taught us what we're good at in making movies. They don't always look beautiful, they don't always sound beautiful, but if we try to keep an organic performance that's kind of truthful and funny and sad, then people tend to connect to it."<sup>43</sup> Implicit in Duplass's statement is a notion that not sounding "beautiful" signifies the heartfelt sincerity of minimally mediated performance. Duplass, Swanberg and Brewerdorf's opinions chime with the assertions regarding mumblecore made by Horton (they "attempt to make a virtue of their roughhewn visual style") and Levy (referring to their "aversion to pretence and sheen that's at once studied and off-handed"), as well as extratextually reinforcing mumblecore's primary thematic preoccupations.

### **Mumblecore's "sonic signature"**

In this section I will focus on the role of background noise in the mumblecore soundtrack in contributing to mumblecore sound's materiality, and as a feature that marks it out as falling short of professional standards. Writing on the role of noise in the film soundtrack, Andy Birtwistle loosely defines noise as sound that resists signification, emphasising noise's "refusal to submit to a code, musical, linguistic or otherwise."<sup>44</sup> In contrast, Douglas Kahn has made the following assertion: "With so much attendant on noise it quickly becomes evident that noises are too significant to be noises"<sup>45</sup>, underlining the slipperiness of noise theory above and beyond rough technical definitions of noise as 'unwanted' sound, or that which obscures signals or information. While noise is a widely theorised topic in sound studies<sup>46</sup>, for the sake of concision I will focus on background noise in mumblecore that starts with 'everyday' practitioner conceptualisations, alongside Birtwistle's theorisation of noise in the film soundtrack. Although

background noise might threaten to overwhelm the semantic content of dialogue-driven mumblecore, it contributes to a process of oblique signification.

Mumblecore tends to be posited as a digital-era film-making movement,<sup>47</sup> therefore an assessment of mumblecore sound would be incomplete without a consideration of its digital status. Birtwistle explores in detail qualities of the soundtrack usually ignored, in particular its audible materiality, which have changed over time as film sound recording and reproduction has changed. Furthermore, historic sound recordings carry a sonic signature<sup>48</sup> to which we are sensitive: “old sound recordings do *sound old*.”<sup>49</sup> As digital sound then, does mumblecore have an identifiable sonic signature, and is it possible to detect it given a lack of historical distance? Writing in 1987 on the subject of recorded music, before digital audio had been adopted in film production, post-production and exhibition, John Mowitt asserted that “electronically reproduced art has radicalised noise by seeking to eliminate it,”<sup>50</sup> which is an intriguing statement to consider in relation to the background noise present in mumblecore’s digital soundtracks. The digital may have eliminated ground noise or system noise in the reproduction of digital recordings, however as Birtwistle points out, “the promise of noiseless recording [...] has been with us since the very beginnings of commercial film sound technology”<sup>51</sup>.

More to the point, background noise is ever-present in the environment of a film shoot, regardless of the analogue or digital status of sound recording and reproduction. Advice regarding how noise might be handled during shooting can guide us as to what constitutes ‘unwanted’ background noise. In a 2008 book aimed at budding filmmakers, Jay Rose highlights the relationship between dialogue recording and background noise: “Environmental noise [is] almost always improved by moving the mic closer.”<sup>52</sup> This tip is pertinent to the issues with

mumblecore dialogue recording highlighted earlier – the less proximity between dialogue source and microphone, the more unwanted background noise dominates a recording.

Rose delineates common problems with background noise in the same chapter: “The most common noises in interior shots are caused by machines that you forget are running, such as air conditioners, refrigerators, computer fans, or things like air pumps in fish tanks. Turn them off.”<sup>53</sup> With its emphasis on dialogue-driven scenes shot in interior (mostly domestic) locations, fridge and computer fan hums could almost be postulated as “defining sounds” of mumblecore films (to use Gianluca Sergi’s film sound analysis term).<sup>54</sup> The scene in *Quiet City* cited earlier in which Charlie offers Jamie a drink and the hum of the fridge – disproportionately loud compared to Charlie’s voice – threatens to overwhelm the intelligibility of the dialogue, is one of numerous examples. A scene in Bujalski’s *Mutual Appreciation* (2005) in which lead character Alan, a musician recently relocated to New York, awkwardly attempts to clarify the status of his friendship/relationship with Sara, a radio DJ and fan, takes place in the kitchen of a small post-gig after-party, as the intrusive sound of the fridge blends with the stutters of their inarticulate, improvised dialogue. Similarly, in Swanberg’s *Hannah Takes the Stairs*, a scene featuring Paul (played by Bujalski), Hannah, and Mike (played by Mark Duplass) set in Paul’s kitchen shows the three drinking beer and awkwardly discussing the vague possibility of having a party at some indeterminate point in the future, the dialogue uttered over the initially distracting hum of the fridge. One might consider fridge hum, a taboo noise in professional sound recording, as an oblique signifier of the shared domestic intimacy of the kitchen space, conspicuously marking out gaps in mumblecore’s mumbled dialogue.

It is true that professional sound recordists record background noise referred to as ‘roomtone’ alongside dialogue, however roomtone is not intended to be perceived. Rather, it is a

component used in dialogue editing and mixing to smooth over edited dialogue – it is part of a process that is inherently self-effacing. In contrast, the sound of mumblecore is considered ‘bad’ because the background noise sometimes draws attention to itself, as in the examples above. Rose’s troubleshooting chapter is entitled “Help! It Doesn’t Sound Right!” and his advice regarding problematic recordings is headed “Too Many Background Noises” with the subheading “Too Much Machinery, Noise, Traffic, Footsteps.” These titles and headings demonstrate the gap between the mumblecore soundtrack and the idealised, professional quality soundtrack – mumblecore sound is ‘bad’ because it doesn’t sound ‘right’. However, the background noise carries connotations beyond mere technical sloppiness – as Jeffrey K. Ruoff has noted, this intrusion of noise is a characteristic of documentary sound,<sup>55</sup> and as Chion has observed, with direct sound seeming like a “moral choice” to some film-makers, this kind of unwanted noise can lend perceived legitimacy and truthfulness to realist film-making,<sup>56</sup> chiming with the roughhewn aesthetic sensibility articulated by Mark Duplass and Kevin Bewersdorf quoted earlier.

Furthermore, the mumblecore films examined herein tend to be mixed in screen-centred two-channel stereo, rather than in the 5.1 surround sound that has become the standard of digital exhibition. Writing on the subject of cinema surround sound and spatial perception, Birger Langkjaer distinguishes between what he terms “open” and “compact” sound spaces. Langkjaer argues that, prior to the introduction of noise reduction technologies and digital audio, film soundtracks had “open” sound spaces, with a few, easily distinguishable sound elements:

Films which used an optical sound system made use of relatively sparse sound detail, in order to maximise the clarity in the transfer of audio information from film to spectator. This was often done with one or two clearly foregrounded sounds (most often dialogue, at other times music) and low-volume ambient sound (or music) in the background. This paradigm minimised the number of sound elements, thereby

maximising the technical clarity of the individual sounds, in order to increase the transparency of audio elements in the conveyance of information to the audience.<sup>57</sup>

As Mark Kerins and Jay Beck have noted in their analysis of surround sound usage, what is noteworthy about digital surround sound is its ability to accommodate numerous disparate sound elements that are all technically clear and distinctly audible from one another.<sup>58</sup> Langkjaer notes that this is often used in horror films, with numerous distinct and dynamic sound effects off-screen “calling on our attention”.<sup>59</sup>

...it seems that sound designers are inclined to fill in more sound detail, thus pushing sensorial awareness toward the edge of perception. This kind of extremely dense sound texture is often hard to separate for the ear, and represents what I call a compact sound space.<sup>60</sup>

The digital sound of mumblecore, in contrast, presents a digital rendition of Langkjaer’s “open” sound space of earlier cinema. A minimal number of sonic elements, centred on the screen rather than immersing spectators within the exhibition space, allow for concentration on dialogue. However, the wider dynamic range and noiseless reproduction of digital sound creates a different soundscape in mumblecore to that created by the “open” sound space of pre-digital, optical sound. The wider dynamic range of digital audio reveals and ‘lets in’ more detail of those few elements, including unwanted background noise (fridges, overhead lights, computers). This digital ‘open’ sound space allows the background noise of the recording process in – some system noise (microphone, mixer, camera, power supplies and their connectors) to a small extent, but more prominently the insignificant yet inescapable drones of contemporary life, captured by digital audio’s relatively wide dynamic range. It also makes ‘gaps’ in the soundtrack more noticeable, giving the mumblecore soundtrack the ‘unfinished’ quality discussed above. Arguably, this digital version of the ‘open’ sound space is what gives a new and different

material quality to the mumblecore soundtrack compared to that of the pre-digital mono optical sound that is more typically associated with the ‘open’ film sound space.

Critics consider the sound of mumblecore in terms of its ‘mumbled’ dialogue and ‘bad’ sound, whereas a more subtle aspect, its sonic signature, is not defined or identified. Birtwistle observes that this is because media seem silent until they become historical (referring to Chion’s description of the “silence of the loudspeakers” enabled by “Dolby”<sup>61</sup>): “While the listener can hear and perhaps identify the sonic signature of films made in the 1930s, we are hard pressed to hear what defines the precise quality of film sound today: hence, post-Dolby, Chion can hear *nothing*.”<sup>62</sup> The background noise, unwanted, and however intrusive or faint, in mumblecore, is what gives it its sonic signature, which is likely to become more apparent over time, as mumblecore films become historical artefacts. With its sensitivity to the electrical buzzes and drones of everyday modern life, which we unconsciously listen ‘through’ in our struggles to communicate sincerely with one another, the material quality of mumblecore’s sound further reinforces its broader thematic and stylistic preoccupations.

### **Mumblecore and sound design**

I shall continue to consider mumblecore sound, but from the perspective of what constitutes good *sound design*, rather than good technical sound. A key work in this respect is David Sonnenschein’s *Sound Design: The Expressive Power of Music, Voice and Sound Effects in Cinema*. In his first chapter,<sup>63</sup> Sonnenschein talks the reader through the earliest stages of the sound design process, reading the script in an effort to hear the world of the film creatively. Initially he considers sound emanating from characters, but this does not consider dialogue, and by this omission he inexplicitly matches Thom’s disdain for over-dependence on dialogue. Next,

Sonnenschein considers environment and the creative potential for the environmental sounds of a film to be designed to communicate the narrative and the emotions of a scene. While recognising that the sound designer's job is to build the sonic reality of the film, he also emphasises that the sound designer should "look for the subtext that these environments may lend to the development of the story and characters".<sup>64</sup> Hence, the sonic environment can be designed to communicate the emotions that the characters are feeling in a scene. In contrast, mumblecore movies tend to downplay environment and the surroundings of characters. Characters exist in a near vacuum of interior close-ups and medium close-ups, with no distinctive off-screen sounds (beyond electrical hums) communicating their environment (to an extent that is arguably at odds with mumblecore's perceived naturalism).

*LOL*, described by Christian as "the most visually daring of the mumblecore films"<sup>65</sup>) eschews establishing shots completely – as admitted by Swanberg, he wants to downplay the role of the characters' environment:

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. It's unnecessary to have a wide shot of Chicago to show you where they live, or even of their bedroom for that matter. I like working extremely close because it's all about that moment.<sup>66</sup>

The scene of Tim and his girlfriend in bed in *LOL* analysed earlier is a good example of this – we never see what Tim's girlfriend's apartment (or even bedroom) looks like and the frame only reveals their faces and immediate surroundings. Hence, the 'bad sound design' of mumblecore not only refers to an 'over-reliance' on dialogue (in the words of Thom), but also to a lack of 'expressive' design (to borrow from the title of Sonnenschein's book) of the characters' environment. Swanberg eschews non-verbal environment in favour of "that moment" of verbal interaction between characters.

In his consideration of the role of sound in film, Thom makes the distinction between “what passes for ‘great sound’ in films today” (i.e. loud explosions, high fidelity gunshots, convincingly fabricated alien creature voices, a well-crafted score), and what he considers great sound design which starts at the script stage, citing *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1978) in particular, a film in which the characters had “the opportunity to listen to the world around them”.<sup>67</sup> As well as defining a widely held perception of what constitutes great film sound, Thom’s critique of film sound norms is very measured, and while he enthuses about the possibilities afforded by “designing a movie for sound,” he is not didactic: “Does every film want, or need, to be like *Star Wars* or *Apocalypse Now*? Absolutely not. But lots of films could benefit from those models.” According to Thom, films such as *Apocalypse Now* are exceptional, whereas for the most part, film-making practice remains deaf to the narrative power of sound:

Many directors who like to think they appreciate sound still have a pretty narrow idea of the potential for sound in storytelling. The generally accepted view is that it’s useful to have “good” sound in order to enhance the visuals and root the images in a kind of temporal reality. But that isn’t collaboration, it’s slavery.<sup>68</sup>

For the most part, in Thom’s words, mumblecore sound is ‘enslaved’ to its images. Synchronised location-recorded sound is primarily what is used, with the sound merely rooting the images in “a kind of temporal reality”. To assess mumblecore sound in terms of how ‘creative’ it is would yield a negative verdict, simply because in most instances the sound is synchronous with the onscreen image, and appears to come from onscreen sources. The exceptional use of asynchronous sound occurs only in instances in which non-diegetic music substitutes the synchronous sound in striking ways. An example of this occurs in *Quiet City*, in a scene near the end where the two leads and two of their friends dance at a party. Non-diegetic music plays on the soundtrack that is clearly a slower tempo than the music to which the



characters are dancing. This mismatch of tempos gives the scene a dreamlike, plaintive quality – however, this is hardly an innovative or exceptionally creative use of sound.

In *LOL*, this “slavery” of direct sound synchronised to image is also apparent, but particularly intriguing are the musical interludes at various points created by the musician character Alex’s “mouth noise” audiovisual mash-ups, or “noiseheads” – videos shot in close up of people making non-verbal sounds. Christian points out the noiseheads’ thematic and visual importance: the close-up signifies personal revelation and intimacy, yet the gibberish spoken renders this intimacy unreachable and incomprehensible.<sup>69</sup> However, the material of these noiseheads is comprised of moments of fused sound and vision that Alex has captured exclusively with the lens and on-board microphone of his DV camera – thus the creativity of these moments is through the cutting-up of fused audiovisual chunks of time, rather than in the separation of sound and image. In *LOL*, as with mumblecore more generally, the synchronization of sound and image is axiomatic. Yet it is asynchrony that tends to be the subject of academic attention, as evidenced by Horton’s analysis of sound in *Kissing on the Mouth*, mentioned above. Therefore, an emphasis on synchronised, on-screen location-recorded sound is regarded either negatively (in Thom’s case), or is overlooked (in Horton’s case); which suggests that its predominant use in mumblecore may contribute to negative perceptions of its sound in both technical and creative terms. In short, mumblecore sound is ‘bad’ because it is deaf to the creative potential of sound design.

## **Conclusion**

Critics that brought the term ‘mumblecore’ into the public consciousness tend to posit the ‘mumble’ as a mumble of unintelligibility, but in two respects; a casual and improvised tone of

inarticulate dialogue, as well as low-budget production values, in which sound is “low-fi”, “low volume” and “neglected.” The former is confirmed by analysis of transcripts of mumblecore dialogue, which not only convey the stuttering, inarticulate tone identified by critics, but also reveal a broader mumblecore theme of the failure of verbalized communication to forge connections between human beings, as well as a prevalent tone of sincerity – the ‘mumble’ is a heartfelt one. In contrast, the notion of “low-fi” “neglected” sound in tandem with low-budget production values is less well explained by critics. At the centre of this confusion is the paradox that while the ‘mumble’ might be widely posited as one of unintelligibility, the dialogue is actually intelligible.

Close analysis of these films at the sonic level reveals sonic taste hierarchies at play, as expressed not only by critics but by film sound specialists and some mumblecore directors. Mumblecore sound is considered bad because sometimes reverb or background noise threatens to overwhelm dialogue intelligibility – mumblecore sound is also considered bad because it “doesn’t sound right”. However, analysis of these qualities enhances an understanding of the simultaneously low-fi and digital sonic signature of mumblecore sound. More positively, deeper exploration of mumblecore’s style reveals an aesthetic framework of ‘low-fi’ sound, and its relationship to a perceived naturalism. The mumble is thematic even beyond the narrative systems of the films – notions of connection, honesty and truth are similarly manifested at the sonic level. Directors such as Duplass and Swanberg discuss their simplified, uncontrolled approach to sound as less important than capturing a roughhewn representation of sincerity and contingent ‘truth’ in improvised performance. Mumblecore also resists conceptions of good sound design, with sound ‘enslaved’ to image in a manner in which the synchronisation of sound and image is axiomatic. Overall, mumblecore’s ‘bad’ sound can be considered an excess of

‘indie’ stylistics, the ‘bad’ sound acting as a synecdoche for more naturalistic performance, positioned in contrast with the perceived aesthetics of a bigger budget mainstream.

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<sup>1</sup> This was mentioned in several press articles, including O’Hehir, Andrew, “Does ‘Beeswax’ mark the death of mumblecore?” *Salon.com* [website], 6 August 2009. Available at: <http://www.salon.com/2009/08/06/beeswax/> (accessed 20/07/2012); and Lim, Dennis, “A Generation Finds its Mumble”. *nytimes.com* [website], 19 August 2007. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/movies/19lim.html?ex=1345262400&en=bfbe1222d5a64a80&ei=5124> (accessed 12/07/2013).

<sup>2</sup> Christian, A.J. “Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic” *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Summer 2011, 117, n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> King, Geoff, *American Independent Cinema* (London: IB Tauris, 2005); Tzioumakis, Yannis, *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2006); Newman, Michael Z., *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-18.

<sup>6</sup> Johnston, Nessa, “Beneath Sci-fi Sound: *Primer*, Science Fiction Sound Design, and American Independent Cinema”. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, Issue 3 (Summer 2012). Available at: <http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue%203/HTML/ArticleJohnston.html> (accessed 20/07/2013).

<sup>7</sup> Christian “Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic”, 119-120.

<sup>8</sup> Horton, Justin, “The Sound of Uncertain Voices: Mumblecore and the Interrogation of Realism”. *Cinephile*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2011), 22-29. Available at: <http://cinephile.ca/files/Cinephile7.2-PDFVersion-Web.pdf> (accessed 20/09/2012), 23.

<sup>9</sup> Levy, Shawn “Sunday Extra: Interview with Aaron Katz of ‘Quiet City’”. *OregonLive.com* [website], 16 September 2007. Available at: [http://blog.oregonlive.com/madaboutmovies/2007/09/sunday\\_extra\\_interview\\_with\\_aa.html](http://blog.oregonlive.com/madaboutmovies/2007/09/sunday_extra_interview_with_aa.html) (accessed 20/07/2013).

<sup>10</sup> Lim “A Generation Finds its Mumble”.

<sup>11</sup> Van Couvering, Alicia, “What I Meant to Say.” *Filmmaker*, Spring 2007. Available at: <http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/archives/issues/spring2007/features/mumblecore.php> (accessed 26/10/2013).

<sup>12</sup> Hirschberg, Lynn, “Core Values”. *nytimes.com* [website], 23 November 2009. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/06/t-magazine/culture/06talk-mumblecore.html> (accessed 20/07/2013).

<sup>13</sup> Roman, Shari, *Digital Babylon: Hollywood, Indiewood and Dogme 95* (Hollywood, CA: iFilm Publishing, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Belton, John, “Technology and the Aesthetics of Film Sound”, in *Film Sound: theory and practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Buhler, James, Neumeyer, David & Deemer, Rob, *Hearing the movies: music and sound in film history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 398.

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- <sup>16</sup> Horton, Justin, “Diamonds on a Jeweler's Felt: Sincerity, Irony, and Utopia in Emo and Mumblecore”. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Marriott, Chicago, IL. 21 May 2009. Available at: [http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p\\_mla\\_apa\\_research\\_citation/2/9/9/8/9/pages299891/p299891-4.php](http://citation.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/9/9/8/9/pages299891/p299891-4.php) (accessed 19/07/2013), 14-16.
- <sup>17</sup> Taubin, Amy, “All Talk”. *Filmmaker Magazine*. November/December 2007. Available at: <http://filmlincom.siteprotect.net/fcm/nd07/mumblecore.htm> (accessed 20/07/2013).
- <sup>18</sup> Horton “The Sound of Uncertain Voices”, 25-38.
- <sup>19</sup> Yamato, Jen “Is Mumblecore a Dirty Word?” *Moviefone* [website] 14 December 2009. Available at: <http://news.moviefone.com/2009/12/14/is-mumblecore-a-dirty-word/> (accessed 20/07/2013).
- <sup>20</sup> Programme no longer listed on IFC Center’s website, but available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20070824235207/http://www.ifccenter.com/seriesh?seriesid=701> (accessed 25/10/2013)
- <sup>21</sup> The six films are listed at: <http://www.channel4.com/entertainment/tv/microsites/G/generationnext/film/> (accessed 25/10/2013)
- <sup>22</sup> Lim “A Generation Finds its Mumble”.
- <sup>23</sup> Asch, Mark, “The New Talkies: Generation D.I.Y.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 4<sup>th</sup> 2007. Available at: <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2007/09/film/the-new-talkies-generation-d-i-y> (accessed 30/10/2013).
- <sup>24</sup> Tryon, Chuck, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick, NJ / London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 100. See also Jenkins, Henry “Reinventing Cinema: An Interview with Chuck Tryon (Part Two)”. *Confessions of an Aca/Fan* [website], 19 July 2010. Available at: [http://henryjenkins.org/2010/07/reinventing\\_cinema\\_an\\_intervie.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2010/07/reinventing_cinema_an_intervie.html) (accessed 14/07/2013).
- <sup>25</sup> Levy, Shawn, “Sunday Extra: Interview with Aaron Katz of ‘Quiet City’”; Wagner, Brigitta, “Accidental Cinema and the YouTube Sublime: An Interview with Joe Swanberg”, *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 59 (2011), available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/accidental-cinema-and-the-youtube-sublime-an-interview-with-joe-swanberg/#1> (accessed 19/07/2013); Berkowitz, Joe, “‘Like a Demo Tape from Your Favourite Band’: Mark Duplass Talks Improvisational Filmmaking” *Fast Company* [website], June 19, 2012, available at: <http://www.fastcreate.com/1680947/like-a-demo-tape-from-your-favorite-band-mark-duplass-talks-improvisational-filmmaking> (accessed 26/10/2013); Koresky, Michael “The Mumblecore Movement? Andrew Bujalski on his Funny Ha Ha”, *Indiewire* [website] August 22, 2005, available at: [http://www.indiewire.com/article/dvd\\_re-run\\_interview\\_the\\_mumblecore\\_movement\\_andrew\\_bujalski\\_on\\_his\\_funny\\_h](http://www.indiewire.com/article/dvd_re-run_interview_the_mumblecore_movement_andrew_bujalski_on_his_funny_h) (accessed 31/10/2013).
- <sup>26</sup> Kozloff, Sarah, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (London: University of California Press, 2000), 79.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.
- <sup>28</sup> Horton “Diamonds on a Jeweler's Felt”, 22.
- <sup>29</sup> Yamato “Is Mumblecore a Dirty Word?”
- <sup>30</sup> Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, 4-7.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

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- <sup>32</sup> Thom, Randy, “Designing a Movie for Sound”. *FilmSound.org* (1999) [website]. Available at: [http://filmsound.org/articles/designing\\_for\\_sound.htm](http://filmsound.org/articles/designing_for_sound.htm) (accessed 19/07/2013)
- <sup>33</sup> Lim, “A Generation Finds its Mumble”.
- <sup>34</sup> In my transcription, I have used a question mark to indicate a rising question intonation in the character’s voice, rather than an actual question.
- <sup>35</sup> Van Couvering, “What I Meant to Say.”
- <sup>36</sup> Christian, “Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic”, 119.
- <sup>37</sup> Taubin “All Talk”.
- <sup>38</sup> See Taubin “All Talk”: “Katz’s sound design is as expressive as both his cityscape images and his ambient-light close-ups of characters lost in their own heads or engaged in tentative tête-à-têtes”; Holcomb, Mark “Quiet City” *Time Out Los Angeles* Aug 29 2007, available at: <http://www.timeout.com/los-angeles/film/quiet-city> (accessed 06/11/2013): “...it’d be a mistake to peg the film as a prettified point-and-shoot DV wank [...]for all its lo-fi convention-thwarting, *Quiet City* is as meticulously hyperstylized as a Jet Li chop-’em-up. It helps that Katz has an eye for pertinent visuals: Painterly scene- and pace-setting landscape interludes highlight the film’s wistful between-the-seasons vision of Brooklyn”; and also Lim “A Generation Finds Its Mumble”: “Mr. Katz, 25, is more sensitive than his peers to the aesthetic limits and possibilities of digital video and has a more poetic sense of place”.
- <sup>39</sup> Yewdall, David Lewis, *The Practical Art of Motion Picture Sound* (Fourth Edition, Boston, MA: Focal Press, 2012), 481-508.
- <sup>40</sup> Pauletto, Sandra, “The Sound Design of Cinematic Voices” *The New Soundtrack*, vol. 2, (2012), 131-2
- <sup>41</sup> Chion, Michel, *Audio-vision: sound on screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 95-6.
- <sup>42</sup> Wagner, Brigitta, “Accidental Cinema and the YouTube Sublime: An Interview with Joe Swanberg”, *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 59, 2011. Available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/accidental-cinema-and-the-youtube-sublime-an-interview-with-joe-swanberg/#1> (accessed 10/09/2013).
- <sup>43</sup> Berkowitz “‘Like a Demo Tape from Your Favourite Band’: Mark Duplass Talks Improvisational Filmmaking.”
- <sup>44</sup> Birtwistle, Andy *Cinesonica: sounding film and video* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 128.
- <sup>45</sup> Kahn, Douglas, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 21.
- <sup>46</sup> As well as Kahn, see more recent work such as Hainge, Greg *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); and Schwartz, Hillel *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang & Beyond* (New York: Zone Books, 2013).
- <sup>47</sup> For example, Christian emphasizes the use of digital video and mumblecore’s “digital aesthetic” (“Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic”, 119-120). See also Popescu, S. “Digital Media and the Emergence of Contemporary Film Subgenres” *Scan* vol. 10 no. 1 (2013), and also note 23.
- <sup>48</sup> Birtwistle, 88-89.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.
- <sup>50</sup> Mowitt, John “The Sound of Music in the Era of its Electronic Reproducibility” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. R. Leppard and S.

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McClary (New York: Routledge, 1987), 184-97. Reprinted in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 213-224.

<sup>51</sup> Birtwistle *Cinesonica: sounding film and video*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Rose, Jay, *Producing Great Sound for Film and Video* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2008), 401.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Sergi, Gianluca *The Dolby Era: film sound in contemporary Hollywood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 153.

<sup>55</sup> Ruoff, Jeffrey K. "Conventions of Sound in Documentary". In *Sound theory, sound practice* ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 217-34.

<sup>56</sup> Chion *Audio-vision: sound on screen*, 108.

<sup>57</sup> Langkjær, Birger, "Spatial Perception and Technologies of Cinema Sound". *Convergence*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (December 1997), 99.

<sup>58</sup> Beck, Jay, "The Sounds of 'Silence': Dolby Stereo, Sound Design, and The Silence of the Lambs". In *Lowering the Boom: Critical Studies in Film Sound* ed. Jay Beck & Tony Grajeda (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 68-85.; Kerins, Mark, *Beyond Dolby (Stereo) Cinema in the Digital Sound Age* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> Langkjaer, "Spatial Perception and Technologies of Cinema Sound", 100.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>61</sup> Chion, Michel, "The Silence of the Loudspeakers, or Why with Dolby Sound it is the Film that Listens to Us". In *Soundscape: The School of Sound Lectures 1998-2001* ed. Larry Sider, Diane Freeman & Jerry Sider (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 151.

<sup>62</sup> Birtwistle, *Cinesonica: sounding film and video*, 91.

<sup>63</sup> Sonnenschein, David, *Sound design: the expressive power of music, voice, and sound effects in cinema* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2001), 1-52.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>65</sup> Christian, "Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic", 118

<sup>66</sup> Swanberg interview: Grant, Andrew "'More excited than I have ever been': Joe Swanberg". *Greencine* [website], 29 August 2006. Available at:

<http://www.greencine.com/article?action=view&articleID=325> (accessed 19/07/2013).

<sup>67</sup> Thom, "Designing a Movie for Sound".

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Christian "Joe Swanberg, Intimacy, and the Digital Aesthetic", 128.