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The Steadiest Shoulder in Filmmaking: An Interview with Matthias Grunsky

by Gautam Valluri

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Matthias Grunsky on location with Kate Dollenmayer and Andrew Bujalski. Photo: Ethan Vogt

Valluri: Like so many important filmmakers, you've had your beginnings as a 10 year old shooting on Super 8. What is it about Super 8 that makes 10 year old boys grow up into serious filmmakers?

Grunsky: Exposing Super 8 reversal film forces you to be aware of exposure and the decisions you make before you push the trigger more than you probably want at the age of 10. The film rolls were expensive for me and I really needed to use all my pocket money. I probably wouldn't have done that if I were not really serious about making my little films.

You were a clapper loader on Richard Linklater's 'Before Sunrise' which was shot in your hometown Vienna. The film functions a lot like the mumblecore films you're so well known for- young people in love, lot of talking about mundane things and an unresolved end. What was your experience working on the film and how much of it was useful to you a decade later in america and in mumblecore cinema?

Back then when I worked as a loader on „Before Sunrise“ it felt mostly like a big American production I was very proud to work on. I still had many years as an assistant and focus puller and as a student ahead of me before shooting my first feature „Funny Ha Ha“. Now I can say that „Before Sunrise“ is probably my favorite movie in my career as an assistant. What I have learnt on „Before Sunrise“ from Lee Daniel back then was that good camera work does not have to be a spectacle but sometimes the simple solutions are the more effective ones to tell a story and capture the characters emotions. I guess one thing that the couple in „Before Sunrise“ and the characters of some of the movies I have shot so far have in common is the fact that they talk about matters that seem mundane at first. But when you look closer there is so much being told emotionally and between the lines, and that is what I find fascinating about these films.

The Handheld camera is used to represent a sense of urgency or make the shot look more 'real' but its range is vast. For instance, when one compares the

handheld camerawork of Cassavetes' films with the shaky-cam technique of Greengrass' films, there is large difference between what the technique represents in both. You employ the use of this technique a lot in your work but it is very subtle, Vishnevetsky even remarked that you have "the steadiest shoulder in filmmaking"¹. What does the handheld camera represent to you? How much of it has been influenced by your time spent on documentary projects?

Although handeld camera might feel more „real“ to us because we are used to seeing it in the news in homevideos and nowadays even in cell phone videos, for me it mostly means being more organic. It makes me feel I can breathe with the actors when I operate the camera, being able to adjust spontaneously, even if it is just an inch. There can be many reasons for choosing to shoot handheld, but it only makes sense to me if it supports the action in front of the lens may it be frantic or settle. Handheld also allows me to be in the right spot when actors do not have marks and are free to move, although that usually has its limits since you have to make it possible for the focus puller to do her or his job, and there is usually a part of the set that you cannot show. After „Funny Ha Ha“ I started to work on documentaries in Europe between feature films. I have always loved the freedom you have by handholding a camera, but on the documentaries I could really experiment with it. Shooting docs also trains you to put the camera in the right spot. I love to be able to work in both fiction and documentary. It lets me stay open for ideas and sometimes shoot a feature scene using a documentary approach and the other way around.

A majority of the "mumblecore" films that you work on are set inside apartments and bedrooms. How do you light your shots especially when you're moving around with the camera on your shoulder and the actors don't really have any marks to hit?

What I really learnt on shooting documentaries is to work with little means and a small crew. On docs you usually don't have the time and equipment to light a lot and I try to use that principle on features when I find it appropriate. I love to use a small amount of lights and so many times one single light in the right spot is so much better than adding more. Whenever I can and it makes sense I try to light from the outside through windows and doorways rig lights on the ceiling and use practicals within the shot.

The most important thing though is to pay close attention to the actors when they talk through or rehearse the scene with the director. Without making them hit marks I usually still can figure out where people end up. I then try to light in a way and find camera angles that make those situations work. Sometimes I would recommend positions without interrupting the natural flow and without getting technical, especially with non actors. But I also try to be sensitive to that when I shoot movies with a different structure where actors do hit marks and the camera positions and dolly moves are precisely rehearsed. This is one of my priorities because the actors and the emotions they need to bring across are always the most important element of a scene and need to be supported and protected on any movie.

Your first collaboration with Andrew Bujalski was on his debut 'Funny Ha-ha'. Bujalski has stated that in the time somewhere between Austin and Boston he had met you in Los Angeles and knew right away that he wanted you on board. How did he convince you and what did you expect when he first told you about the film?

After two years at the American Film Institute I met Andrew in Los Angeles and he told me about „Funny Ha Ha“ and how he wants to shoot it. We watched Cassavetes „Faces“ together, which is a very special movie to watch when you are talking about the shooting style of a movie, especially when you just went to the cinematography program of a Hollywood film school. Andrew and me connected right away though and I found his ideas challenging and exciting. When we ended up shooting „Funny Ha Ha“ in Boston a year later it was a big experiment for me in the sense of how far you can go in being not obtrusive with the camera and your lights but still doing your job and make it all work. I feel I walked on a very thin line on our first collaboration which we probabaly both could not repeat in the same way.

What was the reason behind choosing Black and White filmstock for 'Mutual Appreciation'?

Andrew asked me what I think about black and white for our second movie and it totally made sense to me for this story about a young musician coming to New York, with

funny but also many sad moments and loneliness. Andrew always says that black and white is funny, I think it can also be very sad and dramatic and I found it great for showing the lonely moments in „Mutual Appreciation“. I loved the lack of color and being able to light more contrasty.

Some of the recent Black and White films such as Good Night and Good Luck (2005) and Control (2007) were actually shot on colour stock and later de-saturated in post for a better 'latitude'. How different is it when you actually shoot on Black and White as opposed to shooting on colour stock and then correcting to Black and White in post?

Although color negative would have given me more latitude, it would have been hard to achieve the contrasty look doing our prints through the photochemical process without a DI. Being able to shoot through color filters to manipulate the brightness of skies and skintones on black and white negative was a great tool that I have used very often on „Mutual Appreciation“. The movie was shot on the only two Kodak black and white negative stocks Plus X and Double X, which have been introduced in the sixties and their classic look has not been changed since then. For „Mutual Appreciation“ I loved the grainy and contrasty look of those emulsions, which have a certain realistic emotional quality

For Joe Swanberg and Greta Gerwig's 'Nights and Weekends' you've worked with a co-cinematographer- Benjamin Kasulke. How do two cinematographers with visibly distinct styles work together on a project like this especially, when a large portion of the film is composed in tight, almost suffocating close-ups of the two lovers?

We actually didn't really work together but one after each other. When I have been working on „Nights and Weekends“ nobody knew that there will be a second part being shot a year later. We wrapped believing that we have shot the entire movie. When Joe started editing he found out that he needed to continue the story which plays and also has been shot one year later when I had already been committed to another movie. The first part is shot by me and the second part by Ben. I think to have two cinematographers working on the two different parts made sense in the end because the lives of the two lovers have changed their flavors, too.

How was it different for you shooting a mumblecore film on the HD format? Andrew Bujalski had said that he finds it "difficult to fall in love with a computer image", what do you personally prefer- film or video? Why?

In general I do prefer film stock to video, just because I feel it is more capable of capturing human emotions than any electronic camera. This is a very abstract reason that I am not able to support by technical facts other than maybe the grain that is different in each frame on film and the way film is capturing color and contrast. There is also more magic for everyone on the set to a film camera starting to roll and exposing 24 frames a second on expensive film than to a video camera which is capturing images on cheap tape or memory cards as long as it is connected to a power source. But of course I understand that every production has its own needs and limits. Also video cameras are getting better and better rapidly, making it possible to work with them in almost the same manner as shooting on film. I do not think that any genre should have a specific medium to shoot it on. On „Nights and Weekends“ choosing HD video made a lot of sense for the way that Joe and Greta wanted to work. We did not have a script and we usually would roll for 20 minutes on improvised takes which you could not do on film. On „American Zombie“ , a feature I shot with director Grace Lee in 2006, we shot on DV because we wanted it to look very technical and real.

For 'Beeswax', you've achieved extremely warm tones in the Austin summer to the extent that everything looks 'Yellow' like an aged vintage print of a 70s movie. How did you achieve this look? What filmstock did you use and what do you think this represents in the film?

The main location which Andrew found in Austin was a vintage clothing store which we did not change or dress at all. It had a very unique color palette which Andrew loved. Since the store is such an important element in the movie, it influenced the mood and I think even the characters. It was also a very hot summer in Austin and it felt right to use and emphasize the warm light of the sun mostly coming through a layer of haze with my lighting. I have shot „Beeswax“ on Kodak 7205 for all the day scenes and 7218 for nights. I love how the 7205 handles color and the sometimes mixed lighting in a

settled way. We had a great color timer, Ryan Adams at Alpha Cine in Seattle, who did our Super 16 dailies and the 35mm blow up prints and was great to work with at our final timing.

Both 'Funny Ha-ha' and 'Mutual Appreciation' were shot in the 1.33:1 aspect ratio. How different was it shooting a Bujalski film in a wider aspect ratio? How much of a difference do you think it would have made if you had shot 'Beeswax' on 1.33:1?

„Funny Ha Ha“ and „Mutual Appreciation“ are the only films besides my childhood Super 8 films that I have shot in the 1.33:1 aspect ratio. Shooting 1.85:1 this time seemed less of a statement to me than 1.33:1. It also made a lot of sense to have a wider aspect in the store which needed some space in the frame. Since a lot of Andrew's movies consist of singles, I really was glad we shot 1.85 this time because it gives you more options to place somebody within your frame and you do have more room next to people to feel the environment. Our main character is in a wheel chair and I wanted to be on her eye level and see the world through her eyes. The wider frame somehow gave me more room to show that. For example if there is somebody standing right next to her, often a hip or a hand of the other person would be on her eye level instead of a head or a shoulder. It was important to me to show some of that which would have been harder in 1.33:1.

What is the importance of this movement globally and in America? Where is it heading?

Personally I do not believe that the films which are called mumblecore in the press are a specific genre. I never did on one of them think that I am working on a mumblecore movie, I always see each of them as a unique story. That the characters tend to mumble sometimes and that the awkward moments are not cut out but are an important part of the story is just one characteristic. I believe though, that future cinema will need movies that show more of the spectrum of life than most mainstream movies are able to capture today and that might also include some more awkward moments and mumbling.

All film movements eventually end and the filmmakers move on- some onto making better films, some worse and some none at all. Where do you see yourself going as a cinematographer when mumblecore cinema is finished?

Since I never saw myself as a cinematographer specializing in mumblecore and because I work on a variety of films, I am not personally worried about a genre coming to an end, if it actually is one. But I certainly hope that I will be able to work on many more good movies.

ENDNOTES

1. Ignatiy Vishnevetsky's capsule review of "Nights and Weekends", <http://soundsimages.blogspot.com/2010/12/11-more-c-f-blurbs-on-12-more-films.html>, December 20th, 2010.