

“The Story of Us”: *Frances Ha* in Three Parts

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“I’m so embarrassed; I’m not a real person yet,” Frances remarks over a plate of pasta at a dimly lit Italian restaurant after her card is declined. In a typical love story, Frances’ male companion would casually pull out his wallet, smirking, and hand over his platinum credit card to the waitress. Frances would smile, feign protest, and coyly tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. The two would walk out of the restaurant, hand in hand, as a cheesy song swells to life in the background. The New York City skyline would shimmer, and the two would seal their encounter with a kiss overlooking the Hudson River. But *Frances Ha* is not your average love story--or even one at all, at first glance.

Frances Ha tells the story of 27-year-old Frances, played by Greta Gerwig, a dancer who doesn’t really dance, who lives in New York City but doesn’t really have a place to live, with a best friend, Sophie, whom she doesn’t really talk to anymore. Directed by indie darling Noah Baumbach and co-written by and starring the charming Greta Gerwig, *Frances Ha* is an endearing, quirky, and authentic portrayal of the experiences of a 20-something-year-old woman in New York City trying to make ends meet while chasing a dream. Sound familiar? Like so many other films, Baumbach and Gerwig have created a piece of work that attempts to express the awkward transition from adolescence to adulthood, a period in one's life that is frequently exhilarating, confusing, and heartbreakingly lonely. Unlike so many other coming-of age-stories, there is no man in shining armor who aids in transforming her flaws; however, this is a love story. Now, hear me out. I don't mean to say that *Frances Ha* is a romantic chick flick; instead, it is a gorgeous and *real* love story. *Frances Ha* is a three-part saga--each part more detailed than the next--of the multidimensional qualities of love, shown through the relationships

of Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig, Frances and her best friend Sophie, and finally, between Frances and herself.

Part I: A Match Made in Mumblecore Heaven

Noah Baumbach was born to be a filmmaker. His father a film theorist and mother a movie critic at the *Village Voice*, Baumbach has gone on to make some of the best, most complex films of the last decade (Taylor). Known for films like *Kicking and Screaming* and *The Squid and the Whale*, among others, Baumbach's style of offbeat films that are often tied closely to his own experiences has garnered the director critical acclaim. Arguably, Baumbach's best movies have been created in collaboration with mumblecore star Greta Gerwig. Maria San Filippo, author and professor of film studies at MIT, Harvard, and Wellesley College, defines mumblecore as a genre identified by its elements of low-budget aesthetic and unpolished idiom that, similar to other subcategories like film noir and Italian neorealism, are discernible through a "reflective moment of self-recognition by its creators and consumers." It just so happens that Greta Gerwig is something of a mumblecore staple. "It was a convergence of new technology and people feeling like movies didn't show how their lives were actually being lived," says Gerwig, referring to the origins of the genre and her subsequent participation (San Filippo). So when the brooding Baumbach collided with the complex and completely adorable Gerwig, the two fell in love, both literally and figuratively. Now partners in life and work, the duo wrote *Frances Ha* together, with Gerwig going on to star and Baumbach to direct the film.

"Over the decades I have learned to recognize a kind of film in which the director is doing the picture to be close to the actress because he loves her," film critic David Thomson remarks. Perhaps it's true; maybe *Frances Ha* is so effortlessly a love story because while it was being written, filmed, produced, and released, its two creators were

falling in love. It has been said that both Baumbach and Gerwig carry a notebook and pen with them at all times, scribbling down dialogue heard in passing and descriptions of the simple scenes of daily life we often overlook. The pair shares a love for the authentically mundane aspects of the human experience, a trait running through both individuals' respective works. "It's fun, being inside this imaginary world with somebody else," Gerwig remarks, thinking back to the early writing and production stage of *Frances Ha* in collaboration with Baumbach. "It's pretty thrilling when it feels like something clicks in and it seems like you're sharing consciousness." However, this sentiment does not mean that the duo is so intertwined that their intentions behind the film perfectly align. Where Baumbach is known for his sardonic proclivities, the development of his films since meeting and partnering with Gerwig have shifted towards optimism (Purcell). Despite Frances' perpetual shortfalls over the course of the film, its resolution is refreshingly sanguine--not in the way of a fairytale, but with a sense of clarity, refinement, and hope for the future. This satisfying end is shared between Frances and the audience that has watched her flail through life for the past ninety minutes. I won't go so far as declare that Gerwig and Baumbach have found their own happy ending, although their subsequent works speak to the notion that they have.

While influence of the pair's personal dynamic bleeds into the film's nature, each individual brings forth a unique set of abilities as artists that contributes to the quirky disposition of *Frances Ha*. The film's romantic nature is derived directly from each contributor's influence. For instance, Baumbach's gorgeous portrayal of New York City is compelling because of how he presents it; a breath of fresh air, the director shapes a New York that is untamed, natural, and celebrated for its imperfections. With its unique style, from shooting in black and white, to the filming on real New York City streets and apartments, to casual camera movements, *Frances Ha* is a direct homage to French New

Wave Cinema in the greatest city of the 21-century (Thomson). As for Gerwig? She makes Frances not just a character in a lovely and funny film about the struggles of a twenty-something-year-old; instead, she is indescribably real. It takes a gifted actress, an authentic human being, and a woman's eye to be able to capture the indescribable feeling of being young, confused, and alone, yet still in love with the world. Similar to its genre, *Frances Ha* is as beautifully flawed as its creators, allowing its viewers to accept their own shortfalls and relish their relationships.

Part II: The Flawed Female Friendship

“It's a party, and you're both talking to other people, and you're laughing and shining, and you look across the room and catch each other's eyes but not because you're possessive or it's precisely sexual, but because that is your person in this life”: Frances says this at a party at the beginning of the film to a group of people who are hardly listening, regarding her best friend, Sophie. *Frances Ha* is a poignantly real portrayal of the intricacies of female friendship so often glossed over in the film world.

Frances and Sophie are opposites, but their relationship is as codependent as any other of a romantic nature. As Sophie's life begins to move away from the pair's childlike antics--shown through gladsome scenes of the two sharing a cigarette and laughing on their fire escape, play fighting on the street, sharing a bed and dozing off to their favorite movie playing on a laptop, and strumming a ukulele while dancing jigs in Central Park--Frances grapples with losing the person she had, up until then, shared her life with. In a way, this loss is even more heart-rendering than a traditional breakup. “I love you, Sophie, even if you love your phone that has email more than you love me,” Frances murmurs, a piteous sentiment that reflects their foreboding distancing. Where there was once nothing that could keep the two apart, the introduction of careers, partners, and

advances in their individual adult lives underscores Frances' reliance upon Sophie and inability to find contentment alone.

With a backdrop as cutthroat as New York City, it would be far simpler for viewers to digest Frances and Sophie's dynamic if the two were hypercompetitive and ruthless with one another--a trope so many other films fall into when depicting female friendships. It is true that Sophie and Frances compare themselves, though they each relish traits in one another that, deep down, they resent in themselves. Where Frances desires Sophie's imminent successes, Sophie struggles to allow herself the freedom that Frances possess. Over the course of the film, Frances grows to resent Sophie for moving on with her life, driving a wedge between the two, yet she savors and attempts to preserve what they once had--referring to Sophie throughout the film as her "best friend," though the pair hardly speak.

In *Frances Ha*, Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig are able to capture the intimacy encapsulated by a relationship between two women. Ultimately, Frances and Sophie love one another; to say that they do not or that their relationship is worthy of less emotional heartache simply because it is platonic is asinine. "We're like an old lesbian couple that doesn't have sex anymore," Frances jokes to Sophie as the two brush their teeth, crowded in a small, dimly lit bathroom and clad in oversized pajama tops. Perhaps that's what makes this film so effective in the portrayal of a bond between two women. There is no underlying sexual tension between the two, nor is their relationship depicted in a way that is gratifying to the male gaze. They simply love each other. Erisa Apantaku writes to this sentiment in her article for *Margins Magazine* and brings attention to the filmmakers' choice to provide Frances with a flawed friend with whom she has a deeply intimate relationship, rather than a male romantic partner (Apantaku). Over the course of the film, there is an underlying pretense that Frances will end up with Benji--a character who

seems to be intentionally canned, and a perfect candidate for our bumbling heroine to end up with--though, thankfully, the director avoids this cliché and the romcom aficionados go without their perfect meet-cute moment. It is Frances and Sophie's platonic love story that leaves viewers with tears in their eyes, prompted to phone an old best friend and reminisce for simpler days.

Ultimately, the film closes with Frances "making eyes" at Sophie from across the room; when asked who she is looking at, Frances responds, "That's Sophie. She's my best friend." The two stare at one another, laughing, for no matter what, they have each found their person. The film is a striking, authentic, and beautiful example of the love two friends can share despite their personal shortfalls. In a way, *Frances Ha* reminds us that we are not as alone as we might believe ourselves to be, as the most authentic form of love can be manifested in endless ways.

Part III: Falling in Love With, and Accepting, Yourself in Your Twenties

We are all Frances. That is not to say each one of the film's viewers will go on to chase a pipe dream in New York City, aimlessly fumbling their way through their day-to-day existence. But life is hard enough to go through without seeing a character who is doing absolutely everything just to keep their shit together--something that most of us do as we attempt to make it through the day as well. At the beginning of *Frances Ha*, Frances is reliant upon Sophie, running from the fact that she will never be a part of a dance company, consistently making excuses for the pile of wreckage that is her life and fearful of her fleeting youth. "Frances is neither blandly agreeable nor adorably quirky. Rather, she is difficult. She hogs conversations, misses obvious social cues and is frequently inconsiderate, though more in the manner of an overgrown toddler than a queen-bee

mean girl," writes A.O. Scott. He's right. Frances is flawed and inexplicably hard to handle, but she's all the more authentic because of it.

As the film advances, Frances falls into disarray. Where she could once get by ignoring her shortcomings and go through life oblivious, the events that ensue, from rash decisions to blatant confrontations, force her to address these traits. Excuses follow one after the other with each opportunity. "I'm not messy, I'm busy," Frances remarks, a lame justification for her living situation. From statements like "I'm too tall to marry" or "I have trouble leaving places," Frances attempt to pass these off as valid vindications of her own inadequacies. As we watch Frances pirouette through the streets, painfully stand out at high-end dinner soirees, and awkwardly--figuratively and literally--dance around her future, we see our heroine spiral down the long road of self-discovery and eventual acceptance.

As we watch her drifting from apartment to apartment, filtering through friendships, and struggling to keep her head above water, we also see her grow into herself. Where she was once a gangly dancer fated to be an apprentice forever who seems to drift through life putting out fires and acting on impulse, the film comes to a satisfying close with Frances, coffee cup in hand--as if she thought far enough ahead to make it at home--walking up to view a show she herself has choreographed. It's a satisfying and endearing moment, watching our imperfect star finally get it right. In the film's final moments, we see Frances writing out her name, only for her mailbox display panel to be too small to show it in its entirety. Cutting off the final letters of her last name, she slips the label "Frances Ha" into her mailbox. This scene is not merely the explanation for the film's title, but also a final emotional resonance regarding Frances' journey, for she has grown exponentially over the course of the film; however, she is far from finished. Despite

this, Frances is content with being two thirds complete and accepts not knowing what is to follow.

“I like things that look like mistakes,” admits a slightly older, wiser, and more refined Frances. Well, Frances, so do I. If we dare admit to ourselves that some of the best things in life look like mistakes, perchance we have to acknowledge our own flaws. So when I say that *Frances Ha* is up there with *Titanic* or *The Notebook* as far as love stories go, I mean it (that’s right Rachel McAdams, Greta Gerwig is coming for you). A character who was built out of love, experiences it with others, and eventually, with herself: Baumbach and Gerwig have created the very personification of the complexities of love, all bundled up into one deeply flawed and highly captivating individual. So, take a note from Frances. Run around Chinatown while listening to David Bowie’s “Modern Love.” Hug your best friend. Smoke a cigarette out of a window in the middle of a city that you love but that doesn't always love you back. Break into dance in the middle of a park. Take that trip you’ve always wanted to go on but that is wildly unreasonable. Call your parents. Laugh. Cry. Most of all, dare to love and accept love in return--after all, life would be pointless without it.

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