



ΥΠΟΥΡΓΕΙΟ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ

48ο ΦΕΣΤΙΒΑΛ

ΚΙΝΗΜΑΤΟΓΡΑΦΟΥ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗΣ

16-25.11.2007

MINISTRY OF CULTURE

48th THESSALONIKI

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

# MASTERCLASS

## JOE SWANBERG



*Introduction by Lefteris Adamidis, TIFF Independence Days' artistic director, and Athina Rachel Tsagaris, Cinematexas (Austin) ex artistic director, film director and producer, and discussion's moderator.*

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So, let's just start the discussion. So, you guys together with the Duplass Brothers who did "The Puffy Chair" and Andrew Bujalski who did "Mutual Appreciation" and were three years ago here in this festival, you guys did "mumblecore". This summer you made really big news in America, such as "The New York Times". As members of a new and groundbreaking cinema movement called "Mumblecore", you're true representatives of this movement. So, I'd like to start by asking -figuring out how to form a movement- what it means to be part of a movement and how your films differ from each other.

**Joe Swanberg**

Can I start by saying that there is no movement, that it does not exist? It's a lie. What happened was that all of us were making movies in different parts of America; we didn't even know each other. It just happened. We were working in a similar way with improvisation and with friends of ours really low-budget films and a lot of time shooting on video like Andrew shoots on film but everyone else shoots on digital video. So we went to a festival in 2005 called "South by Southwest" in Austin, Texas and it was there that we met each other for the first time and also where the word "Mumblecore" was first spoken.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Do you want to explain a little bit the origin of this word?

**Joe Swanberg**

I don't know the origin of that word but, it's like a joke at the time. It's still a joke. It's a bad and terrible word.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

And it refers to the way that your actors talk?

**Joe Swanberg**

Well, it mostly refers to the way Andrew Bujalski talks, because the term was created by his sound guy, the person that holds the microphone, who couldn't understand everything he was saying. So it just got blanketly applied to all of us, I think, even though the films are really different. It's just like we're all friends; there is no movement.

**Ry Russo-Young**

I mean, more than the films necessarily having something unifying and similar about the way that they are. It's more about the fact that so many of us are taking advantage of the digital revolution which is that everyone can have a digital camera and that they are not that expensive and you can go and you can get, if you have good sound and good microphones, a really great looking film; if you have good ideas and you're passionate, you can go make a really good movie for not that much money with digital.

And I think that a lot of us in this "movement" went and did that. Took a digital camera and got as many people as we could or as few people as we could. I mean, my movie was made with six people basically, including the actors. Seven including the actors and crew and went to a house and shot a film. And I think that having worked on "Hannah Takes The Stairs", it was done on a similar fashion, and a lot of these movies are. So, I think that's a little bit more what the movement is about than necessarily that.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

How did Joe end up casting you for “Hannah Takes The Stairs”?

**Ry Russo-Young**

Well, I think, we all met at film festivals. I had a short film called “Marion” which was at “South by Southwest” and played at some other festivals.

**Joe Swanberg**

We met in Chicago the year before.

**Ry Russo-Young**

At Chicago International Film Festival and we got along and then we stayed in touch over the e-mail.

**Joe Swanberg**

It’s because we like dancing together.

**Ry Russo-Young**

And there’s dancing scenes actually in both of our films, so it’s nice.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So, it seems to me that in your movies and in both of your movies plus the movies of the rest of the movement members there are really very few boundaries between cinema and life. Because, it seems like you are something between observers and voyeurs of your very close environments. You cast your friends; you shoot in places that are very familiar; you have very intimate shooting process.

So, I’d like you to speak a little bit about the way you incorporate life as you know it without really talking about things that you haven’t experienced or you don’t know about. How do you incorporate it into your work and then what kind of effect does it have to your personal life? How does it circle around?

**Joe Swanberg**

I work without a script so, for me, it’s really like working a documentary but in a narrative framework. I started out making pretty traditional films in film school, you know, shooting on 16mm, writing a script and doing storyboards and the whole process, which is just really...

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Were they bad films?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, they were terrible. Not only were they terrible but I wasn’t having a good time making them. I mean, I didn’t love the process. So, when I got out of film school, I started making a film with my friends where there was no script and we just started shooting scenes not even really knowing what it was necessarily going to be and we felt like making it and if it’s bad we won’t show it to anyone, and if it’s good we’ll try and show it. And so there is no pressure. It was just like easy scenario.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Did you have a general idea of what you wanted to talk about or was it just based on improvisations?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, we just knew we wanted to talk about relationships and being at a stage in your life where you’re moving away from your parents and sort of starting your own life but you still need your parents but you don’t like that -you know, it’s frustrating to still need your parents. So, that was the theme that we were working on and then we also incorporated documentary interviews like audio interviews with a narrative story.

And so for the first time I was actually enjoying the process of making the film so much and also

I think because we were so passionate about it then the film was working too. I was not embarrassed by it, you know. I was proud of it.

**Ry Russo-Young**

When making "Orphans" we did have a script and we had storyboards to start with.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

As you told me you had not been in Film School, per say.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

You're self-trained?

**Ry Russo-Young**

I studied visual art and I studied cinematic theory, I guess, but I definitely come to filmmaking from a variety of other arts like photography and performance. I also studied acting and I think that for me that was really helpful to inform, to sort of bring all these other things into filmmaking. I didn't go to Film School traditionally and was never interested in studying in that kind of a formal process. I knew that I really wanted to make films and by the time I went to make "Orphans" I kind of took everything I had ever learned in a backpack and put it in there and went off and made the film. I think it shows in the way that the movie is.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Was it difficult for you to sit down and write the script and then follow it through with your actresses?

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes, writing the script is really difficult. I think that writing is one of the toughest things in the world and I admire writers beyond belief because it's really hard. I worked in a vintage clothing store while I wrote the script and I think that job helped because it would let my mind wander and I knew that I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life. A little bit it was like "I know that I want to make movies" so I'd go and sell clothes and then I'd come home and again "I want to make movies" and I'd go and try and make it- I'd do the best I could with that.

And I think that motivated me a lot, and just being disciplined; saying to yourself "I'm going to sit down and write three hours, even if I just sit there and do nothing for three hours, I'm going to sit there". So, you're just kind of making yourself do it no matter what.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

How closely did you follow that script when you cast and you started shooting?

**Ry Russo-Young**

Well, you just let it go on set. For the most part the script is pretty true to the movie but if scenes weren't working then I'd say to people "Forget the lines. Let's just do it the way you want to do it. Put in your own words or do whatever you want. Let's all like run around and then come back and do it".

So it does and it doesn't. But we rehearsed for about two months, which is a lot longer than most films rehearse. One thing that I knew we had was time, because, I think, if you're making a film on a larger budget, then you don't have time and you have to work because time is money, but if you're making a film with people that you know, you can have a lot of time.

I cast the two lead actresses in my movie and my movie is pretty much only two people, it's called "Orphans". For two months, we would just sort of sit around and talk about our childhoods and talk about theater games that we played, we'd go to locations and say "What do you think about this? What does this remind you of?" We shared a mutual childhood. For two actresses that are going to play sisters, that was very helpful for them to develop a communal past. So, that was helpful.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Joe, let's talk a little bit about lazy cinema.

**Joe Swanberg**

We didn't get to the good stuff about how making these movies affects your personal life. You promised we would talk about that.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

I'll ask you in a little bit about that.

**Joe Swanberg**

Maybe when we talk about "Nights And Weekends".

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Exactly, it's a little bit later. I'll embarrass you. Don't worry. So, we were talking yesterday about you being a very lazy person and having chosen this way to make movies.

**Joe Swanberg**

Lazy and selfish.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Right.

**Joe Swanberg**

Because it's easiest for me and I get the most out of it, so both of these things.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

And impatient.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Great. So, these are great traits for cinema obviously. You know, you're 25 and you've made three movies and a pretty successful web series. So, tell us how you do it. How can you put laziness to good effect?

**Joe Swanberg**

You take the things that you don't like and you just don't do those things. For example, I don't like writing script, so I don't and I don't like working with actors, so I don't. So I work with my friends and then make them do all the work. I just point the camera at it, you know.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

I'd like to say that this is not at all how you do it from what I understand.

**Joe Swanberg**

No, it's true.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

I think it's really hard work what you do in terms of pre-producing it in your head.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Because you're a total control freak when you work and a good traffic director who knows where all the movements have to go, where there will be the collision.

**Joe Swanberg**

I'm like a chemist working in a lab and I'm just mixing ingredients and hoping it doesn't explode. I hope that I get the result that I want. I'm just interested in people, I'm not interested in camera movements and lighting and a lot of this sort of traditional pieces of what we call cinema.

You know, I like people; I just want to use the films as a way to get close to people and discover

character traits. So, when I'm thinking about stories, I'm just mostly thinking about: "Why did my friend behave that way?" or "Why did he say that to me?"; "What made him say that?" So I develop a story around an idea like that, not around like somebody who robs a bank, and then how they get away with the money. It's not interesting to me. This one I think about all day long. It's like people and relationships and why we behave the way that we do. And when we were talking yesterday, we were talking about nature films, you know, and I feel like that's accurate. Like what I'm trying to do is like nature films about people. Like that show "Planet Earth". Richard Attenborough.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Right, exactly. So for example, you know talking about nature films, I find very practical and at the same time inspiring the fact that you create your own private habitat. So, you create it and then like a teenager Richard Attenborough, you just venture into that habitat with your magnifying lens and you magnify human behavior. So, for example, in "Hannah Takes The Stairs", although you live in Chicago, it took a very small trick I think for this film to be developed, which is, you decided to rent a house that was not familiar to you as an environment, then have all of your friends invited from across America to come and live there, all of you together.

**Joe Swanberg**

Like Big Brother or something.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Yes, like Big Brother, and do your own take of a reality show situation.

**Joe Swanberg**

But actual reality, not fake reality.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Yes, exactly. So like you would wake up and have breakfast and scratch your bellies.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, exactly. But don't you think so from working on the movie, like it was more like hanging out? To talk about laziness, like in a 24-hour day, the filmmaking was about two hours and having fun twenty-two hours.

**Ry Russo-Young**

It's true. I've never been on a set that relaxed before. My set wasn't like this. We would hang out and then I'd go to the art museum. There were all kinds of great thing that we did and we'd hang out a lot.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, mostly we played video games and danced. We had dance parties. And everybody drank a lot, I remember. But I don't drink.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So you had just made a movie that had a different method.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Well, we all lived in a house as well actually, which is worth noting that we all lived in the house that we shot in. We shot in this big farm house in the middle of nowhere. We all would go there four days a week and shoot the movie. So, that was similar. But I did more takes and my film definitely has a stylization and a kind of theatricality to it. That's a little bit more cinematic in that kind of way. It kind of creates another world.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

You shouldn't apologize about it.

**Ry Russo-Young**

No, I'm not apologizing at all.

**Joe Swanberg**

Don't apologize because your film looks better than mine.

**Ry Russo-Young**

It's just a different style, I think, more than anything else. But the process was different. We would work really long days of shooting basically. The ratio, I'm sure -I mean, how many hours did "Hannah Takes The Stairs" shoot?

**Joe Swanberg**

We shot 23 hours of footage.

**Ry Russo-Young**

For like, an hour and a half movie.

**Joe Swanberg**

84 minutes.

**Ry Russo-Young**

And I think we shot 90 hours. So, the difference is big in terms of how much your shooting is.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

How did you go about working with your actresses, with your experience as an actor also?

**Ry Russo-Young**

Because they're playing sisters we talked a lot about their past which is the subtext of the entire movie. The movie is about their inability to communicate, but there needs to be like a basis there why they can't communicate that is outside the film. Otherwise, you know, it will just be air. So we really made that really rich, so that then, within the film, there's an unspoken language that necessarily maybe the audience doesn't speak but they can feel it outside.

So we rehearsed for a long time, we developed a relationship between the two whether it be the smell of something like passing around somebody. That's something as an actor that you learn, there are certain triggers, you know, like if I was playing a part, I'd put on a pair of boots, like a certain pair of boots would make me feel I was that character. Like the heels or whatever it was.

And those are the things as an actor that really got me inside a character and so we tried to develop those things before set, so when you're doing lighting or whatever else, there are so many pressures. We shot "Orphans" in a blizzard, so intense shooting conditions.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

How many days?

**Ry Russo-Young**

It was around 25 days, 28, 25, 28.

**Joe Swanberg**

And then, when you came to Chicago I made you not do all those things.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Right, I tried to do them though. I tried. So, what's my character about? Remember when we talked about that?

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So, how does this feel, you know, to be collaborating with other directors on the set?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, it's really good because when they're not acting I can make them work behind the camera. So, it's good. They were all, I think, on their best behavior, because everybody was worried to be the first actor to start directing accidentally. Because that's just how they work. I think for Andrew it was a really miserable experience making the movie.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Because he wanted to jump in and direct his own way.

**Joe Swanberg**

No, because he was extremely self-conscious about being on camera. It was like he forced himself to do it because he makes other people do it all the time for his films and so I feel it was like punishment for him to make the thing he makes other people do. So, I think, he had fun in Chicago, but I think he didn't like acting, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't like the movie, though we don't talk about it really. When I showed it to him, the next day he said "it's a thick soup of a movie". That's what he said and then we never talked about it again.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

What was your experience acting in his movie?

**Ry Russo-Young**

It was mixed. I had a good time; I had a really good time. We did hang out a lot. And there were great people, you know. I mean working with other directors, Mark Duplass is a charmer; he is a great guy. And so, it was fun, I think.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, everyone had a crush on Mark.

**Ry Russo-Young**

And Greta is great. Greta Gerwig is the one who plays Hannah in the movie. Her and I were like roommates so Joe put us in the same flight from New York and we always suspected that being put on the same flight was no accident and that there was some kind of relationship forming and going on.

And we did. I mean she told me when we were on the flight together, she whips out this rock, this really big stone rock and says "This is my lucky rock, this is what I need to fly with", and she put the rock to her chest when we were taking off and I was like "Okay, a rock", and then I was "Can I touch the rock?" So it was kind of a bonding ritual, I think.

**Joe Swanberg**

She gave me the rock.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Whether she likes to fess up to it or not.

**Joe Swanberg**

No, no, that was after it. She gave me the rock one time when I would travel.

**Ry Russo-Young**

It's the rock.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So, let's show some clips before we continue the discussion. So, would you like to show this?

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes, let's show "Orphans". I think it will be interesting because the style is so different but they both are young people. I'm just going to show you the beginning of "Orphans", the first 5 minutes, and it's screening today 15:15 in Olympion so you guys should check it out. And here is the first 5 minutes so you can get a feeling.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Your film is in competition here, right?

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes, it's in international competition.

(screening)

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So, it's really impressive, you know, with a minute budget that you were working with and with your -what could be called- lack of formal experience in filmmaking, how assured your directing seems, just from these 5 minutes.

So, in terms of actually making the best out of very little money and, you know, a very small crew, I guess, how did you go about it? Was there a lot of planning involved? I mean, there is this thing in the Do-It-Yourself cinema, that it's like something that you just go out and shoot and with no money usually but lots of the time with no thought really.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Not enough pre-production, not enough working on the ideas that you want to convey.

**Ry Russo-Young**

For me it was really helpful to plot everything out in advance, to be able to use the best of our time. If you're asking someone to use their gallery, a friend of a friend of a friend, "Can I shoot in your gallery?" you have to be punctual. We had like three hours to shoot that entire thing so we needed to know what we were doing when we got in there. Mike Weiss who owns that gallery in New York was like: "Okay, you have three hours. See you in three".

And at the end of those three hours we were all standing there, completely finished, ready to go. That was because, as soon as we got in there, everyone knew what they were supposed to do. I mean we were talking about six people. Not even six. I think it was me, the DP, the sound person and the two actors. So it's five people.

So, as soon as we got in I started setting up cups, the DP was like: "Where is the first shot?" and it was like she knew already those kinds of things. That helped. And I think that does help because not only can you get more favors and more things for free, which you're going to need and that is something, if you're shooting.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

It's also very good, building up your reputation, because as you were telling me, finishing your film now and you're doing it as in a similar way, so it's important to pull favors.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes, this film, yes. And, I think, people want to work with you again if they know you're respectful and serious and care about their feelings. I don't know; it's a respect thing I guess in some ways.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

We're going to open it up for questions very soon but I would like you Joe to show

**Joe Swanberg**

The different.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Yes, the different.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, the first thing that I'll show is from my second feature called "LOL", and while I was making the films, you know, I don't make any money. I spend my money, I don't make money. And so, I was doing web design, and really got interested in Internet culture and the way the people were using technology in their lives, so this film, "LOL" is about relationships and technology and these three different men that all are sort of caught up in the Internet and cell phones and things like that to

the detriment of the women in their lives.

So, I'll show the beginning of this film and then -should I talk in between?

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Yes.

**Joe Swanberg**

So, we'll just watch a few minutes from this film, "LOL".

*(screening)*

So I'll just say a little bit and then we'll watch another clip, is that all right? So, for that one, in the beginning, the video that they are watching on the computer screen, I wanted to really not just talk about the Internet, not just talk about this sort of digital tools but also to incorporate them in the filmmaking process.

So, what I did was, I just took a mini DV tape and I had Kevin, the guy that I do the scene with -he wrote the song that she's dancing to- and I wrote to a friend of mine who lives in Baltimore and I said "I'm just going to send you a CD and a tape, a DV tape and a release form and I want you to find the actress and I want you to shoot the thing and set it all up and send it back to me. I don't want to know who she is; I don't want to know anything about her. I want it to be as anonymous as possible". So I just mailed him the stuff and a week later he just mailed me the tape and that's the video that they watch.

And I had a lot of the "noiseheads" -that's how we call them-, the things that just played like that: I just put a thing on the website that says, "Anybody who wants to send me a video just point a camera at your face, make noises and just send it to me". And then I just gave all these tapes to Kevin and he created those things, which are throughout the film like sequences. A lot of the film was done that way, in an anonymous way like that.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

I want to say something about that. It's actually quite nice the way you work with your collaborators, because for example Kevin who is a good friend of yours and a great sound designer; as I understand, you gave him all this material and you just asked him to just go do whatever he thought it was right.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, yes.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

And he did it, and he gave it to you incorporating the film.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, he had complete freedom with the videos and also with all the music he wrote for the film. I'm not interested in a back and forth collaboration, where ultimately I'm just getting him to do the work. I'm more interested in just having artists create work and then I incorporate it into the film. So all the music he wrote is exactly as he wrote it the first time; I didn't give him notes or any feedback, he just sent it to me and I put it in the film.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

What if you don't like it?

**Joe Swanberg**

That's too bad. I shouldn't have asked him to do it.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So you end up using it, anyway?

**Joe Swanberg**

Sure. No, but I like it. I mean, I trust him. There's never been an instance where he's done something I don't like. And then the next thing that I'll show is, as I was making this film, I was really interested in creating work specifically for the Internet. So, it's really hard, with the feature films because you can show them at film festivals and if you're lucky you get some kind of theatrical distribution but really that's stuff hard to see.

I wanted to make a project for the Internet that was free and everybody all over the world could watch it if they wanted to. So, I pitched this idea for the show called "Young American Bodies". Each episode is about 5 minutes long and like a television show but for the Internet. And so I'll show the first episode of that show and then also, this show deals again with relationships more instead of technology and stuff like that. It's more like sexual relationships between a bunch of young people in Chicago and once again it's all completely improvised.

And I met a lot of the actors that I work with on the show through MySpace; I just put a thing up saying I was looking for actors and then, my wife and me would meet with people and have coffee with them and tell them about the show and give them a DVD of the films and so we're now doing season three. So right now, if you go on [www.youngamericanbodies.com](http://www.youngamericanbodies.com), there are around 20 episodes online right now and we're doing 12 more so as soon as I go home next week I'll be shooting more stuff for that.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

And I should add that each episode costs 500 dollars.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes that's how much they give us, 500 dollars per episode.

(screening)

So, this is the show that I do in between making the features and it's just something that I'm able to stay in practice and keep working on stuff and keep working with actors and developing this process more and more. So, you can see it, it's nice because it's available online for anyone to see.

And I think that in the future I'll probably keep making features but I think that I'm moving away from that thing but I'm more interested in this format, this kind of episodic short format because I feel like it's how people are watching things now; there are fewer going to the theatres and seeing 90-minute films and more watching YouTube and things like this.

The next thing, the last thing that I'll show is the new film that I'm doing, and actually the only people that have ever seen any of this footage is me and the producers. So, this is the first time I'll ever show it in public. And it's still a working progress but I'll show a few minutes from it and hopefully it will be completed earlier next year. It's called "Nights and Weekends" and it's about a long-distance relationship. Greta Gerwig, the star of "Hannah Takes The Stairs" also stars in it and also acts in it and we worked with the cinematographer for Andrew Bujalski's movies; his name is Matthias Grunsky.

(screening)

Well, the first two, "Kissing on The Mouth" and "LOL", are on DVD now in North America. So, I got a little bit of money from the DVD distribution. For the on-line work they give me 500 dollars an episode to make the show. It's not much at all but at least I'm not spending my own money but it is money coming in. And with "Hannah Takes The Stairs" we all were paid a little bit to make the film. And so, I made some money and Ry made some money and the other people that worked on the film.

But, you know, I make not much money every year; it's an embarrassing amount of money every year. But my wife is a teacher and together we're able to not starve. We can afford rent and things like that; we'll see. I'm not trying to make people feel sorry for me. I'm choosing to do this. I could make money if I wanted to but my philosophy has always been that, if I stay busy and I make a lot

of work and it all makes a little bit of money then collectively it will make enough money.

So, some filmmakers just make a film once every five years and then they have to make all their money from that, whereas I can make two films a year, and they each make a little bit of money.

**From the audience**

I know it's also a question of the budget but do you consider that the loose control in case of lighting the scene is a disadvantage for the director of photography? I mean, you don't use many lights and all that but do you consider it as a disadvantage for the end result?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, exactly. There's something about a typical film set that I think discourages people from behaving naturally and I will use lights if necessary. There's still an aesthetic that I really like. It's incorrect to think that I will sort of point the camera and just not care about what it looks like in the color schemes and in the way that it's shot; I'm really particular about what I like but also I don't want a lot of equipment around and things that make people nervous and make them not feel comfortable.

So, when I'm shooting, if we're doing a scene in a room, I'll stand as far away from the actors as possible and use a telephoto lens and really like make myself invisible to them if I can. Everything that I've done in my process is geared 100% towards the performances and not towards anything else. Not towards the cinematography, the sound, the editing, anything. It's all about the performances and the use or non use of lights is just a decision that I make based on the performances.

So, if we have time to set up a light and we have time to do that stuff and I feel it won't affect the performances then I'll do it. But if I feel like taking the extra 5 minutes to set up some lights is going to make me lose the moment that's happening then I'll just won't do it and I'll deal with the results, you know.

**From the audience**

My question is, why do you yourself act in your films? Have you thought about the inside of your movies, like the psychological thing you got to do, like therapy let's say?

**Joe Swanberg**

No, it's good. Now we're asking interesting questions.

**From the audience**

And I'll be waiting for you. Even the issues you're dealing with would seem like everyday things, which are, and it's probably your everyday things and the fact that you're in it is a bit weird because you pick to do this thing but without people. So, it would be like a mirror of your life but it's not really a mirror of your life because you're in it.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes.

**From the audience**

So, is it part of your life?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, absolutely. I'm still figuring it out myself, like why I'm compelled to acting it. I think it's a lot of issues. I think that as much as I trust my collaborators, I still think that I have major trust issues in general and the only person I can really trust to do it is myself in order to do it right and so then I just do it myself. You know, so there is that aspect of it.

Also it makes me feel more involved in that; I can direct from within the scene rather than behind the camera. I can be more in control of how things are going if I'm there. Like the way I respond to people and the questions that I ask them can sort of lead them down the path that I'm hoping the scene takes. Instead of leaving it entirely up to chance, I can loosely sort of control it.

And then there's probably also some psychological compulsion that I haven't figured out yet but

I'm thinking about it. I want you to know I'm thinking about it. I'm trying to figure it out but I'm not there yet. It will be probably another 20 years before I really understand why I'm doing this; also on a superficial level I just like attention, you know it's nice to feel people like me and give me attention. So there is that too. That's another aspect of it.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So do you actually believe that cinema can be a way of self-help process?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, I think so.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Like auto-psychoanalysis?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes. Well, it's allowed me to pull myself away from myself. You know, in how I view the things. But in the films what I'm doing is I'm taking the aspects of myself that I like the least and making my characters be that. So I'm not trying to make something where I'm cool. I'm trying to make a movie where I'm uncool, where the things that I think are bad about me are the most exploited in the film.

And so, in a way it is like putting myself under a microscope. But it's done good things for me in some ways. It's allowed me to be less concerned about my appearance and my presence and things like that. Because at first when you're editing footage of yourself it's really weird and you're really disappointed in yourself and you think that you look horrible and you think that you sound stupid. You sort of gain some perspective, like an objective idea of yourself and you stop being, it stops being me, it starts being a character. And so, that's been a good process I think.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

So, in the end do you love yourself more or less?

**Joe Swanberg**

Well, I've always loved myself a lot. I don't know if it's more or less. I'm very much a narcissist, you know it's like "How could I love myself less? I'm great". Where is somebody that doesn't like this? Come on. I know you're out there like you watch this and you just think it's stupid. I want to hear it from you.

**From the audience**

Hi, can I ask you something?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes.

**From the audience**

Ok, I enjoyed your work. I enjoyed it very much because it's very spontaneous but I would like to ask you something concerning the acting area. I think that you both don't use professional actors. Do you? Both of you, I mean.

**Joe Swanberg**

Only a little bit. I mostly don't work with professionals.

**From the audience**

Okay, so I'd like to ask if money is the only reason why you don't use professional actors. Or do you find that professional actors probably, if you have the chance to pay them, won't give what you want according to the realistic part of it?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, exactly. It's not a money thing because in America actors are so desperate to get work that professional actors would gladly work for free just to be doing something. So, it's not a money thing. I

don't like actors; I'm not interested in it. Somebody who would like to devote their life to just acting is boring to me. And at some point I'll probably stop working with myself because I'm acting so much. You know, I'm becoming less interesting to me.

It's like big and theatrical, I don't know, I don't like it. I don't like to be friends with actors and I don't like to work with actors. I want someone to make a movie; really my ideal situation would just be for everybody to be in one movie and then like, it's a movie about them. And then they'd give the performance that's themselves and then we never see them again. Some of my favorite movies are like, they're just characters that you can believe because you've never seen them before. Like Tom Cruise, he's great, I think he's a really talented actor but the thing is, he's played all these different parts so how can we believe that he's this guy when we already know he's also been that guy.

And so, I want to put on screen someone you've never seen before and will never see again. So, the only connection you have with them is as that character. They become that.

**From the audience**

My only objection to this, perhaps

**Joe Swanberg**

Are you an actress?

**From the audience**

I am, but I was wondering, although I like it very much and I received it really good, I was wondering about the style and about the aesthetic part and the artistic one. I didn't find any style in this.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, right.

**From the audience**

And I don't know if style -I ask that question for myself sometimes. Style is something necessary to art sometimes. As if you're playing a piano piece, you have to have a specific style sometimes according to the aesthetic part of art. Are you interested in this or not?

**Joe Swanberg**

That lack of style is a common criticism of my work. No, I'm not interested in it. Filmmakers who have a style, I think get boring really quickly. And they're exciting at first because it's a new style and you've never seen it before and after 2 or 3 movies they're copying themselves. They have actually critics and their own sort of group of people that they work with, they slowly paint themselves into a corner where they are no longer free to do what they want because they're known for their style.

Somebody like Jim Jarmusch or like Hal Hartley or a lot of these American filmmakers. They were really exciting and fresh in the 80's, but their movies are like a joke to me right now. It's like they're making parodies of their earlier movies. That's a result of style, of placing importance on style.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

At the same time I'd like to say that your perceived lack of style is a style in its own. And you definitely have your own personal style.

**Joe Swanberg**

I agree.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

It's like the Joe Swanberg no-style style.

**Joe Swanberg**

But, it also allows me to then have a style if I want. I mean I don't feel that I have to make movies like this. My lack of style is just a result of continuing to do the same thing over and over.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

But also, be careful of what you say because in five years when you come back with a big movie with real actors from Hollywood, there will be a tape of what you said about actors.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, yes, in April I am making movie with real actors but it doesn't mean I have to like them.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

But you will make sure they will never be in another movie afterwards.

**Joe Swanberg**

Remember when I said I will have to split myself in two, so that's the dividing now. Like I'll go down one path and I'll go down another path and then I'll be a totally schizophrenic but it's an entirely different thing. Those people won't be my friends. That will be a job that I do and they will be employees and it will be like I'm the boss at an office and then we show up everyday and we work and then we go home to our separate lives. And the work that I'm doing now isn't like that. It's like it is my life and these are my friends and this is what I'm doing. I'll do the other thing because it will be a good experience for me but I won't do it because I love it and because I feel compelled to do it. I'll do it because it's a job.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Let me just say one thing on the style. I think that my movie is very styled. And I like style and I love aesthetics, I love pure aesthetics. I love the idea of making a movie just that it's beautiful maybe and it's just about the visual. But my next movie is going to have a complete style but the style is very different from the way that "Orphans" looks and I'm interested to see it once it's completely finished; I think there's more of a content similarity in terms of what I'm interested in but I think that every film that you make hopefully will be about something slightly different and the style in which you choose to approach it will change based on what that film is.

So I think that style can be an amazing thing as long as you keep changing it and varying it up and approaching it differently and not get locked into a certain idea of what works or what your aesthetic ideas are. It doesn't have to be that.

**From the audience (inaudible)****Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

The question is if his characters are happy in the environment that they're living, in the society that they live in.

**Joe Swanberg**

It's a really good question. I mean, there is a criticism in America of the work because it's all young white people in their mid 20s that all don't have jobs. That bothers a lot of people, and they say "you live in Chicago and you live in a really diverse city, and you should make movies with black people and with gay people and you should really capture it". For me it's like a matter of representation. There's criticism of it being boring to watch middle class white people talk about their existence.

Yes, maybe that's okay if it's boring. But I don't feel like I'm the right person to tell everybody's story. I feel like I'm the right person to tell my story and the story of the people close to me. And then another filmmaker can make a film about their friends and another filmmaker can make a film about their friends. I think it's an old idea that somebody who lives in New York City and who's a professional filmmaker would be the right person to tell a story about slavery or something like that.

I don't know, I don't have to have causes. Personally, I'm very political and I have my own beliefs but I don't feel like necessarily they have a place in the work. Because I don't want to use filmmaking as just a podium and a megaphone, to say what I feel about the world. I would rather quietly observe than be really loud and say "This is wrong, and this is wrong, and this is wrong". That's exploiting cinema just because it's loud and big. I don't want to do that.

**From the audience**

If there was no issue of money, where would you like to show your movies? In which sites you would like to show your movies?

**Joe Swanberg**

The thing that's most important for me is that they're just available. I mean, it's still the most fun for me to watch it in a theatre with people and to have a group experience and to hear people laugh and talk. That's my preference. But also, it's an entirely different experience to sit at home, in a dark room, with a laptop and headphones on, listening to something really quietly at 3 o'clock in the morning. And I think that they're both really cool valid experiences. I don't think that I have a preference. It's all different. I don't think there is a right way to see my work. I just think that there is different ways to see it.

But also for me, I don't think it's worth spending the money to do a theatrical release in the United States. Because it's really expensive and so if I have money I would rather spend it making a new film than spend it promoting the old film.

**From the audience**

So, apart from your invention to make new kind of movies, no-style movies, the way you want to show your movies to the audience is quite regular and ordinary?

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes. It's a just system that exists so, I'm not that original. I was born where there were movie theatres and that's where people went to see movies so I was: "Oh, okay, well that works". If I was smart enough to create a brand new way to view movies I would spend my time doing that but I wait for other people to think of that stuff. Something like a video i-pod, like as soon as that was invented, then I was excited about putting work there.

What's happening, I think is that it's cheap to get projectors now, like video projectors and I think the home experience is going to become the cinema experience and will sort of meet somewhere in the middle. But it's all driven by money, it's economics, it's not interesting for me. I think that money is always the wrong reason to do something but ultimately that's the reason most people do everything.

**From the audience**

Let's say you make a big feature film, with a big studio which will be your dream. What happens when a teenager over the other side of the world downloads this off the Internet illegally? What's your opinion about it?

**Joe Swanberg**

My movies that are in distribution in the United States are already checked and they're available online illegally. I don't care. Here's the thing; when I make these movies I spend as much money as I feel like I can afford to lose. I basically kiss that money goodbye and expect to never see it again. And so, with the first two movies I spent 3000 dollars because I was like, "This is as much money as I don't care if I never see again. And if people choose to go to the store and buy it and then I make money from that, great! But if they download it illegally I already assumed that that money was gone. So it's not like stealing from me if I thought it was gone.

That will continue to be my attitude and if Warner Brothers or Fox or Sony gives me millions of dollars to make a movie and then people download it illegally then that's their problem not mine. That's Fox's problem, not my problem. I'm not going to try and stop people from seeing my work. I want them to see it.

**From the audience**

You've been singled out as being part of a movement that you say: "No, you've got it wrong, it's not a movement". In view of that, because critics and journalists need something to write about,

it's a great hook. Do both of you feel your actual films have been assessed fairly or do people get sidetracked by the that and say "this is a branch of this which started here, which always involves these people and it's all interconnected etc.?"

**Joe Swanberg**

I don't know, it's been weird right? It's been a weird couple of months.

**Ry Russo-Young**

It's been a weird, yes. I think, our films are really different and I think that we all come from the digital revolution, what we've been talking about this whole thing and I think that people make assumptions; my film doesn't have distribution in the United States and I think that a lot of people who haven't even really researched it will make assumptions about it that are completely incorrect. And I think that there is that kind of grouping that goes on. It certainly happened with my films. I'm sure it happens with plenty of other films. That's what happens when a movement, the idea of a movement comes in.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, I think that that was the biggest concern; people would see one movie and then feel like they had seen them all just because they belong to the same block of some kind of new genre. Also, far be it from me to complain about what's happening because it helps me come here and show my work. It makes it part of the discussion of what's going on in cinema right now and it's nice to feel part of the discussion.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Exactly, for sure.

**Joe Swanberg**

And certainly I prefer what's happening now to two years ago when no one wanted to show my movie and I was sending it everywhere and I was getting a lot of rejection letters. So, this is better than that. I'll take it. But, at the same time, I hope that people will see the works as individual works.

It's funny because I'm totally expecting in two years from now nobody to give a shit about what I'm doing or ever remember that they saw my movies. It just happens. People are excited for 10 minutes and then everyone forgets about them. So, it's nice to feel like I'm exciting for 10 minutes and then when people forget about me I'll still be in Chicago making movies. I'll wait for 20 years and then there'll be a big retrospective or something.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

It's also really nice that this whole movement thing whether your films share similarities or not, if nothing else, the most important is you share camaraderie and community building which is extremely important.

**Ry Russo-Young**

It's amazing that Joe and I are in Greece now, because we met in Chicago and in Austin and our films often do play at the same festivals so it's really great to have friends across the world that you meet making films, that have similar interests as you despite whether our films are alike or belong to a movement or anything like that. It's just a community.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

And also form collaborations. And also he might act in your movie or he might write something for you, you might write something.

**Ry Russo-Young**

For sure.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

It's great to have such a growing circle of people.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, that's the thing too. The idea of being a movement, if people want to view it that way, they have to be ready for it to continue to expand each year and for like new work that's really different to become part of our group of friends. It's happening all the time.

**Ry Russo-Young**

Yes, I mean, we meet people at festivals all the time that we never knew about, and I know Joe specifically says: "Come be in my next project or my movie". So there's a continuous collaboration. Once that door opens, it goes on and on and there is no stopping; the network will continue to grow. And the movie that I'm making now, there's Aaron Katz, who made a movie "Quiet City", who is also going to be in it as well. So, I think that basically is just growing, which is great.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Yes, two more questions and we'll have to leave unfortunately.

**From the audience**

I'm greedy; I'm going to ask two questions. This is for the young lady, I'm sorry I forgot your name.

**Ry Russo-Young**

It's Ry.

**From the audience**

Right. There's a sense I get from you even though I have not seen your films so I cannot be realistic on this. This is just what I'm seeing you now here. I sense differently to Joe, because I think this medium suits him. It's really easy for him to develop and show things through this medium. Whereas you like aesthetics also and think about the cinema, you will see it in the end and maybe place the camera a bit more thought out.

Do you pick digital because of digital or do you pick it because it's cheap only? Because I can picture, even the way you are dressed now, the way I see you, you like aesthetics. Obviously film, for me anyway, is much more beautiful. So, is it only the money criteria or are there some other criteria by which you're picking digital?

**Ry Russo-Young**

I think it really depends on the movie. I think that "Orphans" is a small story, there are only basically two characters in the entire movie that you ever really see and I wrote it knowing that I was going to shoot it on digital. I knew that I wouldn't have a lot of money to shoot it on film and so I wrote a story that was small for digital video. There was a contained world. I mean, I think that just because it's digital video it doesn't mean you have to throw aesthetics out the window. I think that digital video can look beautiful and why shouldn't we make it look beautiful?

**From the audience**

Would you've shot on 35 if you could have?

**Ry Russo-Young**

I don't know. I mean, that was never a thought, that was never a consideration while writing the screenplay. I don't know if I would have; yes, I think I would have for sure. If someone had said, you know, if I had written "Orphans", and someone came to me and said: "Here, shoot it on 35" I'd say "Sure, no problem, great, of course". But when I wrote it, I knew that I was going to shoot it on digital, so I wrote it intentionally much downsized, very small and minimal. And I think that digital would fit that appropriately, that digital would be a good medium to tell that story with.

So, it was suited but the film that I'm working on now is not; most of it is hand held and it's also shot on digital. But we are shooting some things on film as well. It's going to be a mixed hybrid format piece. And so, the stuff that we're shooting on film is not going to be shot that differently from the stuff that we're shooting on digital. It's not like all the stuff that I'm shooting on film is going to all be shot on tripod with intense lightning versus the stuff that I'm not. I'm actually a fan of aesthetics

but I don't think that form is the most important thing in filmmaking. I think that content is.

#### **From the audience**

Just one last thing. I'm sorry from overstepping my boundaries. The fact that you said that style -I'm talking to Joe- you don't have your style. Maybe you don't even know what your style is but maybe there is something there. I was reading a book lately where different directors write in it and they all say -they are big or important directors- you can watch a film of theirs for like a minute and you'll know who it is, and they say that's a sign of a great director. Even Lars Von Trier, who is the Dogma and all that, yes, he is very free and everything and he tries new things and this and that and he is very free, but still I would know his film in like a minute. Does that sound a bit weird towards your cinema?

#### **Joe Swanberg**

No, no I don't think so. But I would never say that I was a great director either. I mean that, I feel like what I'm doing is just a small piece of something much bigger that it includes everyone. It includes Lars Von Trier and Steven Spielberg and everyone else. I'm just one small piece of what's happening right now. So, I don't view it any bigger or smaller than that. Each day I wake up and I try and make the films as good as possible but I don't approach from the idea that I'm a great director and I need to have my signature on this project. I just want to connect with people every day.

#### **Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Going back, I have an issue I'd like to raise in the choice of the format. Film versus video or web. It seems to me that it's always discussed in terms of budget, how much access to budget you have; You can shoot a film at video and then spend so much time transferring it to film that in the end it might be the same money. So it seems to me that the choice in the end is about what kind of atmosphere you want to set, you want to have on location.

#### **Joe Swanberg**

Well, it's really practical.

#### **Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

What big or small apparatus you want to have.

#### **Joe Swanberg**

Yes, but it's even more practical for me because if I shot on film I couldn't edit that night because it would take time to get processed. So if I shoot on video, immediately after we finish shooting I can put it in the computer and start editing. And that's impossible with film. So, to shoot film wouldn't just be an aesthetic difference, it would completely change the way that I work and sometime I'm sure that will happen and I'll shoot something on film but it will also be an entirely different experience.

#### **Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

But also for Ry, you said that if someone gave you 35mm film camera and stuff you would have shot it. Do you think all of that huge equipment and more formal process of shooting would have gotten in the way of your relationship building with your actresses?

#### **Ry Russo-Young**

I certainly wouldn't have have so much time probably to spend and the intimacy of "Orphans" which is something that I really wanted to get to in terms of not having a lot of people on set and having intimate relationship between the two actors. I just think it's different. It's like different processes and different mediums, different formats. They really change how you can approach your work and it's great to take advantage of what each offers.

If I had a huge budget then I'd probably fit the film to fit the budget; I'd choose a script that demanded that kind of a budget. I don't know if it would make sense to shoot a film with only two characters that takes place in one location. On 35 it doesn't seem appropriate. As long as they're in

sync I think is the most important thing. What you shoot on with what you're shooting. They need to be of the same ilk, of the same language. If you're saying something completely different on a medium that's not appropriate for that then it doesn't feel right. That's kind of what I believe in.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

One last question. All questions asked and answered.

**From the audience (inaudible)****Joe Swanberg**

How old? I just turned 26.

**Ry Russo-Young**

I just turned 26 as well in November.

**Joe Swanberg**

Ok, ask yours quick. One more in the back.

**From the audience**

Well, I'll just go back to the discussion about actors to play a bit the devil's advocate because you talked about faces and the fact that we've seen this guy in many films etc. It seems you've done already 3 or 4 films with Greta and we've already seen her as Hannah and I will have to believe that she is something else in the new film.

**Joe Swanberg**

Exactly.

**From the audience**

And also I would like to turn back and ask; I'm ready to second your problems with actors, even being one you could be absolutely right but what is the difference between an actor that devotes his life in acting from a director who devotes his life in directing?

**Joe Swanberg**

No, I'm with you. Of course, I'm being an idiot when I say that stuff but there's a big difference for me and even working with Greta. For example, she went and did a film after we made "Hannah Takes The Stairs" with the Duplass brothers and was surrounded by other more professional actors. And when she came back and we made "Nights and Weekends" together, she had changed. I could tell that she had changed. And she had sort of learnt some tricks; picked up some technique and things like that. And it was painful for me to see that shift from being a totally natural open spontaneous person, to being an actress.

It just took some adjusting for me because I still think she's really great but I had to learn to work now with the new Greta, not the old Greta. It's not interesting for me to have a conversation with someone about the process really. I think that it doesn't need to be so thought out. I think that all you need to do is to know how to respond in a situation and just put yourself in that situation and do it.

If I were to ask someone to eat cereal, for example; it's something you've done a thousand times and so you just sit down and eat cereal, you don't think about it. And then if I were to ask somebody to have a conversation; it should be the same thing. You just sit there and have a conversation. To think deeper about it, I don't know if that's necessary for the work that I'm trying to make. I think that you just need to do it. I want people to draw from their own experiences, not from fake experiences that they've created for the character.

**From the audience**

But you can eat cereal in ten thousand different ways, you know.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, but I want you to eat cereal the way you do it. Because you can eat cereal in ten thousand different ways but each of us eats cereal our own way. So I want your way, if you're playing that part.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

Thank you so much.

**Joe Swanberg**

Yes, thank you.

**Athina-Rachel Tsagaris**

And I guess you'll be available outside for any kind of private discussion.

**Joe Swanberg**

Sure, yes.

