



Creative resistance: Noah Baumbach's literary filmography

Kim Wilkins

To cite this article: Kim Wilkins (2021) Creative resistance: Noah Baumbach's literary filmography, *Textual Practice*, 35:10, 1629-1646, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2021.1965293](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1965293)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1965293>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 12 Aug 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 663



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Creative resistance: Noah Baumbach's literary filmography

Kim Wilkins

ABSTRACT

It is frequently asserted in both film scholarship and criticism that Noah Baumbach is a literary filmmaker. While Baumbach's oeuvre certainly showcases his interest in literature through a range of stylistic techniques, this article presents the case that Baumbach projects his literary filmmaking as an authorial trademark in line with Timothy Corrigan's conceptualisation of contemporary auteurism. By critically positioning himself as an auteur, Baumbach seemingly defies insurgent pushes toward broad discourses of neoliberal creativity and attendant preoccupations with entrepreneurialism, adaptability, and flexibility. This strategy resonates with the narratives presented in Baumbach's films, which overwhelmingly centre on the plights of medium-specific artists in crisis. As such, at first glance, Baumbach's auteurist positioning and his narrative and thematic preoccupation with artists unfulfilled by the promises of the creative class could be read as resistance to neoliberal creativity *per se*. Yet, as an auteur within the highly marketable American indie tradition, Baumbach's literary filmmaking ultimately facilitates his participation in the neoliberal creative practices that his discursive auteurist positioning and film narratives appear to resist.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 25 January 2021; Accepted 31 July 2021

KEYWORDS Literary filmmaking; Noah Baumbach; auteurism; indie; creative class

Introduction

'Your filmmaking has always had a very literary edge' observes Jordana Horn in an interview with Noah Baumbach about his 2010 film, *Greenberg*. 'Who are your favorite fiction writers?' 'Well, for this film, I'd have to say distinctly American stories about men at crisis points in their lives. I love Philip Roth ... There's also John Updike's *Rabbit* stories, Saul Bellow's *Herzog*,¹ replies Baumbach, before asserting that, although his indebtedness to these novelists is profound, he is reluctant to adapt their work for fear of '[losing] something' essential in the process. Nor is he tempted, despite encouragements, to pen his own novel. Rather, Baumbach proffers that *Greenberg* is his

CONTACT Kim Wilkins  kim.wilkins@media.uio.no

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

filmic version of the type of stories authored by America's triumvirate of great white male twentieth century novelists. His rationale is both deceptively simple and immediately recognisable to anyone familiar with auteurist imperatives: 'I really don't think in terms of novels. I think in terms of movies.'² To be sure, *Greenberg* can be summarised in precisely this manner – yet, is it not the case that stories about 'a man in crisis' is also an – if not *the* – overarching theme in dominant American film culture? In fact, couldn't 'distinctly American stories about men at crisis points in their lives' be the tagline for Baumbach's own generation of American indie cinema, from Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* (1989) to the hip male ennui cinema of Wes Anderson, Charlie Kaufman, and David O. Russell? Why then did Baumbach opt to carve a line of inheritance to decorated novelists of the American twentieth century literary canon?

This interview sits among a wealth of articles and reviews that, in one way or another, assert Noah Baumbach's literary propensities. To be sure, Baumbach's filmography provides plenty of textual material to support these assertions. His characters are often writers who speak in dialogue peppered with literary allusions. Scriptive elements are often inserted into his film's diegesis, such as the opening title cards in *While We're Young* (2014) that quote Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. Indeed, this essay is premised on precisely what Horn infers: Noah Baumbach is a literary filmmaker. Yet, as the exchange illustrates, the literary filmmaker demarcation is not merely – or not solely – a matter of stylistic or thematic consistency within his films. Baumbach asserts his literary status as an authorial marker of distinction.

Baumbach's excursions in adaptation – co-writing the screenplay for Wes Anderson's *Fantastic Mr Fox* (2009), his screenplay adaptation of Curtis Sittenfeld's *Prep*, and aborted attempt to adapt Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* as a television series for HBO – certainly indicate a less wholesale disavowal of literary adaptation than his comments imply. Yet, the claim that he '[thinks] in terms of movies' in light of – and in concert with – his stated commitments to literature is illuminating as it evokes the notion of single-medium purity, and in doing so, frames his 'literariness' as a cinematic authorial marker. Indeed, the sentiment is redolent of the traditional *politique des auteurs* line and its celebration of those true '[men] of the cinema.'³ In courting auteur status, Baumbach assiduously resists the woollier, and trendier, moniker attributed to artists and practitioners (among others) in the contemporary neoliberal moment: the 'creative'. But what does it mean to steadfastly determine oneself as a medium-specific artist – insisting, as Baumbach does, on a singular commitment to film over other arts – in a socio-political and cultural climate that champions generalised 'creativity' – with concomitant notions of flexibility and transferable skillsets – as a coveted attribute for social, economic, and individual success?⁴ How

does an appeal to the masculinist traditions of auteurism function in the neoliberal American socio-political context in general and indie cinema culture in particular?

Noah Baumbach's demarcation as an auteur is, in large part, predicated on his identity as a literary filmmaker; however, this demarcation is not merely – or not solely – a matter of stylistic or thematic consistency within his films. Rather, Baumbach frames literariness as a fundamental, intrinsic, and discriminating component of his auteurist signature – and its traceability across his oeuvre in turn as evidence of his control over the filmmaking process. Following Timothy Corrigan's conceptualisation of contemporary auteurism as a 'brand-name vision whose aesthetic meanings and values have already been determined',⁵ Baumbach's auteurist demarcation appears to promote defiance or opposition to the insurgent pushes toward broad celebratory discourses of creativity in the neoliberal context, where creativity is conceived as a necessary and learnable skill that facilitates the adaptability, problem-solving, innovative, and product development capacities required of modern economic participants.⁶ Thus, in fervently asserting his identity as a filmmaker to the extent that he (purportedly) does not think in any other artistic terms, Baumbach projects an image of himself in stark contrast to such flexible and multiskilled creatives whose inherent capacities for introspection, self-motivation, and self-expression provide the foundations of the model neoliberal worker.

However, as Sarah Brouillette asserts, 'creative work tends to be figured contradictorily by creative-economy rhetoric, as at once newly valuable to capitalism and romantically honorable and free'.⁷ Indeed, as an auteur within the indie tradition (in contrast to the moneyed Hollywood entertainment industry) Baumbach discursively aligns himself with Romantic conceptions of the naturally talented and intrinsically dedicated – rather than financially motivated – artist. Baumbach's preoccupation with unwavering single medium artists is echoed within his films. His characters are identified by their art. They are authors, dancers, filmmakers, musicians, directors, and actors. Like Baumbach himself, his characters are part of what Richard Florida influentially termed the creative class' 'super-creative core' in the 2000s – a group 'most motivated by their work's intrinsic rewards – which flow from its very creativity'.⁸ As such, Baumbach's characters should be highly motivated figures reaping the inherent emotional and mental rewards of their art, and yet they are invariably depicted as fractious figures in moments of crisis. Baumbach's narrative and thematic preoccupation with artists unfulfilled by the promises of the creative class could be read as resistance to neoliberal creativity *per se*. Yet, considering Florida's assignation of true creative genius as the saleable execution of original ideas in concert with Claire Molloy's and Claire Perkins' excellent work on American indie cinema's deliberately marketable stylistic registers, I argue that as an

auteur within this tradition, Baumbach is the benefactor of the very strategies of neoliberal creativity that his discursive auteurist positioning and film narratives initially appear to resist.⁹

Baumbach, literary filmmaker

If Baumbach's proclamation: 'I think in terms of movies' can be read as an invocation of François Truffaut's 'men of the cinema' how does his literary filmmaking function as an auteurist trademark? Warren Buckland summarises *la politique des auteurs* as:

a narrowly focused, evaluative form of film criticism that not only privileges the work of directors over other above-the-line filmmakers (screenwriters, cinematographers, producers, etc.), but also isolates a small, elite group of directors, conferring upon them the title of auteur. The specific object of analysis is comprised of one or two properties of film – style, themes – which are, furthermore, defined in terms of the criterion of consistency, for consistency signifies the director's control and mastery over film.¹⁰

Following Buckland's apt precis, the key indicator for auteurist analysis in this originating conception is thematic and stylistic consistency. Baumbach's literary filmmaking tendencies have been evident since his debut feature *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), which centres on four precocious male literature and arts graduate struggling to define themselves beyond their cloistered college experience. As such, that the men's dialogue namechecks authors from Aristotle and Plato to Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is in keeping with both characterisation and the college setting. Yet, the sheer volume of literary references nevertheless renders it decidedly unnatural. The effect created is a duality between contextual isomorphism and textual artifice that allows the dialogue itself to be construed as literary. For example, Max (Chris Eigeman) explains his emotional inertia in the following way:

I'm nostalgic for conversations I had *yesterday*. I've begun reminiscing events before they even occur. I'm reminiscing this right now. I *can't* go to the bar because I've already looked back on it in my memory ... and I didn't have a good time.

Such dialogue draws attention to itself in a manner that seeks to 'remind audiences that what they're hearing and seeing is unconventional, constructed, and performative'.¹¹ To borrow a phrase from Thomas Leitch, these characters tend to speak 'like characters in a book'¹² – a fact that Baumbach reflexively highlights not only through the film's verbal components but also its cinematographic tactics.

In an early scene, Grover (Josh Hamilton) unsuccessfully attempts to convince his girlfriend, Jane (Olivia d'Abo), that her decision to accept a

university position in Prague is ill-conceived. Rather than employing a close-up shot-reverse-shot formation as would be conventional for an intimate break-up conversation sequence, Jane and Grover are framed shoulder to shoulder in a two shot, allowing both faces to remain visible as they volley lines back and forth. The staid two-shot framing and emotionally restrained performance facilitates the impression that Jane and Grover's exchange is directed as much at the spectator as it is to one another. The framing and performance reflexively highlight the dialogue's formal composition – that is, as the product of a screenplay. Yet, the scene does more than suggest the written form; indeed, the process of writing manifests visually. Mid-muddled retort ('I'm not postponing anything. I'm postponing months of emotional paralysis'), Jane produces a notepad and animatedly transcribes the quarrel while Grover, uncomfortable with her success, bemoans their inability to 'have one spontaneous conversation where my dialogue doesn't end up in your next story.' Combining visual and verbal literary gestures with Grover's use of the word 'dialogue' – a term that specifically denotes the written speech of literary, theatrical, or film characters – performs a secondary reflexive turn that can be read as an authorial gesture. In highlighting composition, the moment pulls the screenplay out from its common relegation to a film's blueprint, scaffold, or organisational document and re-presents it as an interstitial literary form, with Baumbach the literary filmmaker responsible for both its authorship and audiovisual realisation.¹³

Since *Kicking and Screaming*, Baumbach has shifted from overtly referential stylisation and loquacity to a more observational register, yet his films have remained centred on verbal communication as a distinct storytelling style.¹⁴ His films tend to be episodic, plotted by way of specific conversations or arguments that gradually reveal underlying interpersonal tensions and as such advance the narrative – as in Margot and Pauline's (Jennifer Jason Leigh) episodic explication of psychic wounds inflicted through family dysfunction and emotional violence in *Margot at the Wedding* (2007); or Charlie (Adam Driver) and Nicole's (Scarlett Johansson) exchanges that oscillate between supportive love, respect, resentment and contempt, as they navigate their divorce proceedings in *Marriage Story* (2019). As Jennifer O'Meara notes, film scholarship and criticism tend to rather simplistically label those films that privilege the communicative power of words over the image 'literary', as opposed to 'cinematic'.¹⁵ However, as Jane and Grover's exchange demonstrates, it is precisely Baumbach's audiovisual style – be it reflexive and performative, or naturalistic and episodic – that gives rise to his films' literary qualities.

In addition to verbal communication, Baumbach showcases scriptive elements within his films' diegeses for narrative and thematic purposes. As noted, *While We're Young* opens with title-cards quoting Ibsen's *The*

Master Builder that articulate the perceived threat of youthful moxie underlying the film's tensions between a generation whose generalised creativity appears flippant and anathema to an older generation of artists. In other films, creative works attributed to writer-characters function as framing, characterisation, or plot devices. For instance, *Mistress America* (2015) opens on a blank screen with Tracy's (Lola Kirke) voice-over reading the first lines of her short story about a young gregarious woman, the title of which is later revealed as 'Mistress America'; in *Greenberg* (2010), the narrated missives of Roger (Ben Stiller) to Corporate America develop his character as a malcontent in the spirit of Bellow's Herzog; and in *The Squid and the Whale*, Lili's (Anna Paquin) in-class performance of her hypersexual short story is ecstatically commended by Bernard as 'very racy', establishing the premise for their subsequent professor-student sexual relationship. Perhaps the most obvious example of Baumbach's literary filmmaking in recent years is *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)* (2017). Not only is the film's title clearly reminiscent of short-story collections – particularly J.D. Salinger's Glass family stories – but this generic conceit governs the film's narrational strategy.

The film is punctuated by title cards that signal and introduce its sections as short stories devoted to the intersecting perspectives of the Meyerowitz siblings, which together present a dysfunctional family narrative catalysed by the ailing health of its sculptor-turned-academic patriarch. Yet, these intertitles do more than signal shifts in protagonist; they highlight Baumbach's interest in the tension between literary and cinematic narration *per se*. For example, the opening intertitle, 'Danny' clearly designates the section's protagonist in a manner that recalls a short story title. Yet, the second intertitle, 'Danny Meyerowitz was trying to park', magnifies the fissures between literature and cinema. The title-card dissolves and Danny (Adam Sandler) materialises in a close-up, attempting to reverse-park on a chaotic New York street while his daughter regales him with ethical eating factoids. Employing the literary as a narrational device affords Baumbach the possibility of slipping between a past tense that is unavailable, in any sustained sense, to cinema; and the immediacy of the continually unfolding act in cinema's inherent present tense, *qua* Roland Barthes and André Bazin.¹⁶ Which is to say, where the written word can describe an act that has already taken place, cinema must show that act as currently occurring. 'Danny Meyerowitz was trying to park' thus becomes a sequence in which we see Danny trying to park. Moreover, while the written word may suggest frustration by using the continuous form, the audiovisual incarnation visually and aurally solidifies this emotional response. The claustrophobic close-ups draw attention to Danny's furrowed brow and darting eyes, while the dialogue is stilted, interrupted by traffic noise and Danny's exasperated profanities. By deploying both the literary and the filmic, Baumbach lays bare the distinctions between the two forms – the imaginative space afforded the literary

as a 'single-track, uniquely verbal medium' and the fixedness of cinema as a multitrack medium 'which can play not only with words (written and spoken), but also theatrical performance, music, sound effects, and moving photographic images', in Robert Stam's formulation.¹⁷ While this may be a particularly obvious example, it is nonetheless illustrative of Baumbach's approach to filmmaking in that it mobilises the intersections, and slippage, between literature and cinema as specific aesthetic and communicative forms.

There is a pervasive tendency in film criticism to cursorily account for Baumbach's literary proclivities in biographical terms. The degree to which Baumbach's literary tendencies can be neatly attributed to biography is unclear, particularly in light of his writing collaborations with Jennifer Jason Leigh and Greta Gerwig. Yet, in line with Buckland's assertion that auteurism privileges directors above screenwriters (and compounded by longstanding tendencies to downplay female collaborator's roles in aid of the traditionally masculine auteur figure),¹⁸ the suggestion often made is that given his literary pedigree – renowned writer and critic parents (Jonathan Baumbach and Georgia Brown), English literature degree from Vassar, and temporary employment at *The New Yorker* – Baumbach's filmmaking was destined to be 'literary' and that these biographical details are the scaffold of his highly educated, hyper-literate characters.¹⁹ The claim made is that the consistency of literary influence across Baumbach's oeuvre affirms that his filmmaking evinces a singular authorial vision, and that this vision is literary precisely because of who he is: an American indie auteur of literary stock. Baumbach has frequently supported linkages between his biography and filmography.²⁰ As the exchange with which I began this essay indicates, Baumbach engages in what Timothy Corrigan terms a 'commercial performance of the business of being an auteur', in which filmmakers 'strategically embrace the more promising possibilities of the auteur as a commercial presence, since the commercial status of that presence now necessarily becomes part of an agency that culturally and socially monitors identification and critical reception.'²¹ Baumbach's auteur status is not the product of a neutral process of observation and analysis on the part of critics, cinephiles, and scholars but an element in a wider strategy that incorporates filmmaker interviews as branding mechanisms that discursively position Baumbach as a belated peer to Truffaut's 'men of the cinema'. In doing so, Baumbach mobilises his self-presentation as an artist who resists neoliberal market-driven creativity in service of his marketable auteurist brand.

The unfulfilled promises of the creative class

Echoing the biographical dimensions of contemporary auteurist discourse, Baumbach's filmography is generally populated by characters whose

identities are largely defined by their art. Yet, these artistic attributes are also framed as the loci for dysfunctionality, as in the case of Margot, whose cruelty and narcissism are at once attributes that have aided her literary success and drastically hindered her familial and social relationships. Indeed, Baumbach's narratives often centre on members of the intelligentsia in situations of personal turmoil and interpersonal breakdown, particularly within family units. The most pronounced link between artistic identity and interpersonal crises is found in Baumbach's divorce films. The underlying marital dissatisfaction in both *Marriage Story* (2019) and *The Squid and the Whale* in large part arises from the inability of the partners' artistic careers to equitably coexist. The texture of failed professional coexistence within these marriages are decidedly gendered. Throughout *Marriage Story*, Charlie is frequently described as a 'genius' while Nicole's decision to return to Los Angeles to take up a television gig is regarded, patronizingly, as 'fun' or a 'new adventure', despite the fact that it was her prominence as a budding Hollywood film star that initially drew audiences to Charlie's productions. As the divorce proceedings illuminate, Charlie built their marriage into his career, while Nicole forfeited hers. Similarly, in *The Squid and the Whale*, Bernard's masculine egocentric author identity demonstrably affects his family negatively. He advises his elder son, Walt, to understand his relationships with women purely in terms of his own development, is dismissive of his younger son's interest in tennis, and contemptuous toward his wife's burgeoning literary career. As a passive-aggressive battle over a copy of *Buddenbrooks* illustrates, Bernard cannot share the title of literary genius with Joan. In Baumbach families, alteration to assumed intellectual and artistic hierarchies – particularly those founded on male genius – overwhelmingly results in interpersonal collapse.

From this vantage point, Baumbach's filmography appears to collectively present a nuanced picture of a creative class in crisis: a group of artists for whom the promises of Richard Florida's new dominant social stratum are found wanting.²² Florida writes that

creativity has come to be the most highly prized commodity in our economy—and yet it is not a “commodity.” Creativity comes from people. And it annihilates the social categories we have imposed on ourselves ... [T]hough people can be hired and fired, their creative capacity cannot be bought and sold, or turned on and off at will ... Capitalism has expanded its reach to capture the talents of heretofore excluded groups of eccentrics and nonconformists. In doing so, it has pulled off yet another astonishing mutation: taking people who would once have been viewed as bizarre mavericks operating at the bohemian fringe and placing them at the very heart of the process of innovation and economic growth. These changes in the economy and in the workplace have in turn helped to propagate and legitimize similar changes in society at large. The creative individual is no longer viewed as an iconoclast. He—or she—is the new mainstream.²³

If, following Florida's delineation, mavericks and bohemians are the centre-piece of a creative economy that celebrates their individuality and creativity, then Baumbach's characters should be revered individuals driving social and economic activity. Indeed, as members of the super-creative core, Baumbach's artist and intellectual set should be among the highest beneficiaries of the creative turn. Yet, although Baumbach's characters are overwhelmingly moneyed – they own old idyllic houses on the New England coast, Park Slope brownstones, and employ personal assistants to manage their large homes in the Hollywood Hills – their wealth tends to be inherited. As such, their privileged financial status is framed as the product of an earlier time that, like their identities as single medium artists or intellectuals, appears anachronistic in a neoliberal climate that celebrates entrepreneurial creativity. Moreover, in keeping with Florida's idealistic conceptualisation of the super creative core, these characters should be inherently inspired and intellectually, if not emotionally, sustained by their work. And yet, as the likes of authors such as Margot and Bernard demonstrate, they are professionally unproductive and socially destructive. Bernard's career, marriage, and parenting has all failed, while Margot's is failing. In the midst of separating from her husband, she fixates, both professionally and romantically, on an upcoming screenplay collaboration with her lover, Dick (Ciarán Hinds), on one of his novels. Yet Dick is cold toward Margot. He rebuffs her advances, and during an interview at a literary event, suggests that a loathsome father in her story 'could be a portrait of [her].' His assertions are founded as, without provocation, Margot frequently chastises her son. Margot responds with a nonsensical, racist, anecdote about a refrigerator repairman – an anecdote that she abruptly ends by absconding from the event. Even for Baumbach's successful artists, there is no safeguard against failure.

Although Florida has vehemently denied allegiance to neoliberal ideologies, the promotion of the creative class as a fuzzy demographic propelled by shared values of meritocracy, individualism, difference, and creativity certainly sounds a lot like a neoliberal formulation, where neoliberalism is understood in David Harvey's conceptualisation as an ideology that '[proposes] that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.'²⁴ In fact, Florida aligns creative work of the highest order with neoliberal conceptions of entrepreneurialism. To him, high-order creativity is that which

[produces] new forms or designs that are readily transferable and widely useful – such as designing a consumer product that can be manufactured and sold; coming up with a theorem or strategy that can be applied in many cases; or composing music that can be performed again and again.²⁵

As Brouillette pithily surmises, Florida ‘imagines that true creativity is indivisible from marketability’.²⁶ That is to say, high-order creative work is that which can be commercialised and marketed for mass consumption. As such, Florida, and those of his ilk present

the creative economy as a model of [the] harmonization of social and economic goals. Its approach to culture [is] consistently constructed as the way of the future: Given the inevitability of an increasingly immaterial capitalism, creativity [will become] an ever more important skill. Thus, synonymous with a welcome embrace of ceaseless change, creativity [will] also be the privileged marker of one’s personal evolution toward a reflexive capitalist modernity.²⁷

While this framework clearly benefits Baumbach as an auteurist filmmaker, it is generally portrayed as anathema to the single medium artist characters within his films – and it is them with whom he is most biographically associated in criticism and interviews. As such, Baumbach imbricates the critique of neoliberal creativity put forth across his oeuvre into his strategic participation in the creative economy.

Baumbach’s self-reflexive projection of the Romantic artist masquerading as neoliberal critique engages with Brouillette’s incisive diagnosis of neoliberal creativity. Where Florida’s model – and the policy and management documents such thinking has informed – celebrates the new creative class for their supposed enterprising individualism in an expanding market increasingly amenable to their work practices, Brouillette identifies the historically produced dominant conception of the autonomous artist as an ‘asocial or antisocial flexible individualist’ as fundamental to neoliberal work ideals.²⁸ She explains that:

for decades influential psychologists and management theorists have tended to present study of artists as straightforward evidence that the social is a form of constraint to be transcended by the effective working self. Their work has had implications for how art is perceived and for how work is organized. They have depended upon and reinforced the notion that making art is the fundamentally insular expression of one’s personally directed passionate devotion to “the task itself,” “the materials at hand,” or simply “the work”; and they have formed and circulated models of good work as a flexible and self-sufficient enterprise averse to social responsibility, human interdependence, and collective politics.²⁹

Read in this light, Baumbach’s single medium autonomous artists are not – as they appear to perceive themselves – the holdouts of true creativity in the face of its adulterated commodification but rather intrinsic to neoliberal creativity. Indeed, as Brouillette contends ‘the artists’ social function has been constituted in such a way that they “appear to capital as the antithesis of labor-power, antagonistic to incorporation.” The artist has to appear as that person who is not quite amenable to her own participation in “the

process of valorization”, while her resistance to it is precisely what makes her work valuable’.³⁰

The contrast between Florida’s celebratory rhetoric and Brouillette’s critical conceptions of neoliberal creativity are most appositely illustrated in *While We’re Young*, which follows a childless couple in their forties, Josh (Ben Stiller), a purist documentarian, and Cornelia (Naomi Watts), a film producer working for her father Leslie Breitbart (Charles Grodin), a celebrated veteran documentarian in the vein of Frederick Wiseman. Josh and Cornelia are at a creative impasse – they are neither artistically productive nor biologically reproductive – until they meet a young creative couple, Jamie (Adam Driver) and Darby (Amanda Seyfried), and are roused by their *joie de vivre*.³¹ Jamie and Darby’s lifestyle embodies the celebrated characteristics of Florida’s creative class. The couple appear, initially, to be perennially cheerful and intrinsically motivated despite the fact that Jamie appears to have no source of income and Darby’s artisan ice-cream venture is a labour of love. Where Josh, aspiring to the status of his great documentarian father-in-law, struggles with an unfinished decade-long documentary project in which he ‘tries to solve the problem that Eisenstein never solved: that is, how to make a film that is both intellectual and materialist at the same time’ for which the finance has long evaporated, Jamie feverishly acts on his impulses, casting imperfection and incompleteness as part of his authorial approach. Josh is enamoured with Jamie’s ardent rejection of older generations’ ‘results-driven’ and ‘success oriented’ work ethic, yet despite the seductive freedom he enviously observes in Jamie’s fluid creative work-life, he is unable to replicate it. Josh is trapped between his ideal of the true artist – the artist documentarian personified by the critically revered and wealthy Leslie – and the carefree, ‘always-moving’ ingenuity of younger generation of creatives – epitomised by the hip Jamie, who proclaims personal wealth as not measurable in financial terms.

At the film’s climax, Jamie’s ‘authentic’ persona is revealed as a contrivance and his documentary a fabrication: revelations are manufactured for narrative purposes; his own emotional backstory is taken from Darby’s traumas (in characteristic male auteur style, without attribution) for affective appeal and as an authorial trademark. Yet, to Josh’s dismay, this performance and its falsehoods are dismissed by the very veteran documentarians he aspires to emulate as an essential component of Jamie’s personal creativity. In the film’s final act, Baumbach – echoing Brouillette – reveals the romantic artist and Floridean new creative as not only both entirely compatible with, and equally embraced by, neoliberal conceptions of creativity, but asserts that the entrepreneurial new is built on the scaffold of the outwardly market-resistant old. Josh’s adherence to an epistemophilic documentary imperative, upholding the need to ‘figure out the truth’ as his idealistic guiding principle, regardless of expense, time-frame, or labour

expenditure, should classify him as an auteur in the traditional Romanticized sense.³² However, his inability to complete his documentary and thereby circulate his work as a product of his distinct artistic vision denies him access to such standing. Instead, it is Jamie, the self-admitted fabricator, who is rewarded with auteur status. As Cornelia explains, 'It doesn't matter that it was faked, because the movie isn't about Afghanistan, or Kent, or anyone. It's all about Jamie.' Josh's crisis of creativity is thus the revelation that the coveted auteur figure is a construction: the artist as a marketable product whose sale value is heightened by the creative turn.

Noah Baumbach, indie auteur

Perhaps Josh's crushing revelation is a wry acknowledgement – a self-criticizing and self-reflective articulation – of the contradictions at the heart of Baumbach's own indie auteur status. As Corrigan explains, the influence of commercial, institutional, and industry imperatives has meant that auteurism was a fraught concept from its inception; it has nonetheless been ardently upheld in the American context as a heuristic for artistic elevation.³³ The critical and theoretical tensions inherent in contemporary auteurism are particularly pertinent to American indie film culture, which, by definition, positions itself in counterpoint to the perceived mundanity of Hollywood's mainstream commercial fare.³⁴ Indeed, indie discourses can be understood as a particular set of sensibilities that culturally align with niche audiences assumed to possess a high level of cultural capital competency as markers of distinction, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms. This formulation inevitably highlights the elitist social implications bound with indie film culture. As Geoff King writes:

The bottom line ... is that acts of cultural consumption and expressions of taste and preference are structured in a manner strongly related to the social position of the consumer, those with greater accumulations of cultural capital (a product of upbringing and education) generally being more equipped not just to consume but to derive pleasure from the consumption of products marked out as distinct from the mainstream; a process through which they mark their own belonging to groups to which particular kinds of cultural cachet are attached.³⁵

Following King's work, Andrew Stubbs succinctly defines the indie auteur as a '[discursively constructed figure] around [whom] ideas of creative autonomy, artistic integrity, individual talent, innovation and quality coalesce.'³⁶ Taken literally, these are precisely the values upheld by Josh, and adulterated by Jamie. Yet, aren't Baumbach's statements regarding his literary influences, coupled with the romantic notion that he '[thinks] in terms of films', also a discursive act in line with indie-auteurist imperatives? And as such, how might his hallmark literary filmmaking function as an auteurist distinction within this framework?

Baumbach's literary intertexts overwhelmingly reflect cultural capital acquired through formal tertiary education. Indeed, the majority of his films take place in, or adjacent to, elite institutes of higher learning and centre on characters who are either academics, or creatives with a high degree of formal education. Unlike the campus setting in Hollywood cinema, such as fraternity and sorority films where characters negotiate personal, social, and occasionally cultural, issues within a sheltered environment before entering into true adult life, in Baumbach's films the college setting is rarely associated with such rites of passage. Instead, college represents the world of academia where coming-of-age is possible, but bound largely to scholarly and creative, rather than social, pursuits. Baumbach's films recall the literary tradition of the campus novel commonly associated with authors such as Kingsley Amis, Malcolm Bradbury, and David Lodge, where the eccentricities and scholarly pursuits of academics and the (often absurd) systems and environments they inhabit feature both as narrative foci and satirical targets.³⁷ Thus, it is generally assumed that the genre's readership has first-hand experience in academic environments, if such readers are not academics themselves.³⁸ Baumbach's films similarly request audiences expend cultural capital gained through college education in order to 'get the reference', even if the elitist nature of 'getting the reference' functions as a point of satire, or derision.

A scene in *Kicking and Screaming* neatly illustrates this strategy. At the conclusion of Kate (Cara Buono) and Max's first date, she casually informs him the following day is her birthday. In response, the endlessly intellectualising Max delivers a blathering speech on the tragedy of his new situation in light of this knowledge, the impossibility of gift-giving proportionate to expectations, and complications of signal-sending in a fledgling relationship. Bemused by his self-indulgent monologue, Kate responds, 'I don't know why everything is always so glum with ya at first ... I like birthdays. I'm gonna be seventeen tomorrow, and I like that.' With a slight smile, Max recognises her matter-of-fact optimism, yet is incapable of reciprocating. Instead, he replies, 'Seventeen. Wow. So, now you can read *Seventeen Magazine* and finally get all the references.' This sequence is revealing as, despite Max's intellectualism, it does not cast Kate as less knowing. It is not Kate that Baumbach suggests would benefit from '[getting] all the references', but the audience. If, for instance, the audience is aware of theories of reciprocity and gift exchange – or better still, has read Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* – the sequence will not only make more sense, but perhaps take on a humorous edge. At the same time, Kate's response to Max suggests that this sort of detail is completely unnecessary, and is in fact, ultimately socially and emotionally stifling. The audience is asked to recognise that although Kate is undeniably right, Max is not incorrect – just irritating. He may have a high degree of cultural capital, but he lacks the skills to understand when, where, and how to use it.

Requesting that audiences expend a high degree of cultural capital, while simultaneously acknowledging the elitism of this act, is a tactic that recurs across Baumbach's oeuvre, often deployed in order to satirise the self-importance of the characters for whom academic knowledge is considered an indication of worth. This is most obvious in *The Squid and the Whale*, when Bernard openly labels those with interests outside the arts 'philistines', considers literature that is 'very dense' inherently praiseworthy, and declares *A Tale of Two Cities* to be 'minor Dickens' without explicating any rationale. Rather than showcasing his expertise as a literary scholar these opinions feature as refrains that signal expertise without substance. Each iteration of Bernard's plaudit – 'very dense, very interesting' – further emphasises its emptiness until the line is hollowed out entirely when recited by his son, Walt, in reference to novels he has never read. The men's self-important attitudes are thrust against their own deficiencies – Bernard is a failing novelist and middling academic, Walt is an unrepentant plagiarist – and as such, their arrogance is certainly designed as significant character flaws. Yet, as in Max's monologue, to recognise precisely how these characters co-opt academic judgement as a false marker of distinction, the audience is required to have, and expend, more cultural capital than the characters possess. Baumbach's audience is not only requested to know more than Bernard and Walt, but also to know better.

Baumbach's request, or assumption, that his audience 'know more' corresponds to the classist demarcations inherent in indie cinema discourse. His literary allusions and inflections are overwhelmingly drawn from the 'greats' of the Western literary canon that traditionally occupy liberal arts college curricula, precisely the institutes that his characters populate, and with which his audience is expected to be familiar. This narrow demographic reflects King's designation of American indie cinema as a bourgeois taste culture, and as Claire Perkins asserts, these very taste cultures are simultaneously highlighted as 'alienated, absurd, narcissistic, or outright monstrous' within indie films themselves.³⁹ Yet, more than a bourgeois cinema culture, Baumbach's films lay bare the racial and gendered dimensions that uphold the hierarchies of American indie culture: not only are all his intellectual, highly educated characters homogenously white and upper-middle class, but his literary references are almost uniformly authored by white men. This demographic and the prevalence of white male authors mirrors American indie cinema as a profoundly white culture buttressed by auteurist narratives.

Since the late 90s the 'indie auteur' demarcation has been perceived as the sovereign domain of white, male intellectual filmmakers like Baumbach, Wes Anderson, Charlie Kaufman, the Coen Brothers, and Spike Jonze, to such an extent that their thematic and narrative focus on largely male white, upper-middle class protagonists, overt stylisation, and moderate liberal politics

have become synonymous with indie culture. Deviating – rather than divorcing – from mainstream Hollywood stylistic and narrative conventions allows these indie films to appeal to broader markets than their avant-garde or independent art-cinema counterparts, while the discursive positioning of American indie as an auteurist cinema facilitates and perpetuates its demarcation as higher-end, specialty culture.⁴⁰ I am not suggesting, in any moralising sense, that white male indie filmmakers should make films about other demographics or experiences (although making room for those who do is another matter), rather, that their market dominance, coupled with persistent claims to superiority and elitism in indie culture, inadvertently or otherwise, alleges that white, male, overtly educated filmmaking is more sophisticated than other forms. Baumbach’s literary filmmaking, both in practice and criticism, is a clear entry in this discursive positioning.

In line with Brouillette’s assessment of neoliberal creativity, Claire Molloy identifies the prominence of white male indie auteurist filmmaking as part of the ‘neoliberal commodification of creative labor.’⁴¹ Molloy argues that indie auteurs are

a type of idealized neoliberal subject ... that have been celebrated by the dominant neoliberal discourse as members of a creative elite. They have been positioned as part of the hypermobile creative class of independent, autonomous artisans whose labor has been in demand by the mainstream sector ... they are in effect the neoliberal entrepreneurs of a creative class. Their value thus resides in the commodification of their labor as “artists” who can “create” products that work across mainstream and niche sectors.⁴²

By courting his films’ negative portrayal of the neoliberal commodification of art embodied by creative class rhetoric as inextricable from his personal artistic sensibility, Baumbach’s own auteur brand packages his image as an artist impervious to social pressures or market imperatives. As a consecrated indie auteur in Stubb’s configuration, Baumbach is precisely a neoliberal elite who, as an artist, has successfully commodified his creative labour.

Conclusion

So, what does it really mean to state one ‘[thinks]in terms of movies’, if indie auteurism is implicated in the very commercial imperatives that Baumbach seemingly resists in his films? And, how should we read such statements if we understand indie auteurism as a coveted label that facilitates commerciality through performing its avid disavowal? I suggest that Baumbach’s insistence on filmmaking to the exclusion of other creative outlets seeks to discursively update the romantic fantasy of the autonomous artist in the face of commercialism in the neoliberal context, while, as an indie auteur, profiting from the individualist artist’s heightened status in the creative economy. His indie

auteurism mirrors Martha Shearer's summation of *Frances Ha*, where 'creativity is presented as the resolution of crisis, as in public policy.'⁴³ With an abundance of textual allusions to the *nouvelle vague*, *Frances Ha* visually asserts Baumbach's fealty to auteur traditions while narrativistically suggesting that creativity in the neoliberal moment is always compromised. Frances must realise that she cannot afford the lifestyle that could enable her to endlessly pursue her dream to become a dancer; however, she can finance a career as a choreographer if she takes on administrative work. For Frances, the creative economy is both the genesis of, and answer to, the crisis of creative identity. Baumbach's indie auteur demarcation, predicated on the consistency of his literary filmmaking style and artist-in-crisis narratives, embodies a similar tension. As an indie auteur, Baumbach is both the benefactor and beneficiary of the neoliberal creative economy, and its strategic opponent.

Notes

1. Jordana Horn 'Noah Baumbach discusses Greenberg' *Vulture*, (26.03.2010). https://www.vulture.com/2010/03/noah_baumbach_on_greenberg.html [Date accessed: 2 August 2020].
2. Ibid.
3. François Truffaut, 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods: an Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 228.
4. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. 66–67.
5. Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 40.
6. Stephen Vassallo, *Neoliberal Selfhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 106–7.
7. Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (California: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 4.
8. Richard L. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, Revisited* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), p. 69.
9. Claire Molloy, 'Indie Cinema and the Neoliberal Commodification of Creative Labor: Rethinking the Indie Sensibility of Christopher Nolan', in Geoff King (ed.), *A Companion to American Indie Film* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), pp. 368–88. Claire Perkins, 'Life During Wartime: Emotionalism, Capitalist Realism, and Middle-Class Indie Identity', in *A Companion to American Indie Film*, pp. 347–367.
10. Warren Buckland, 'La Politique des Auteurs in British Film Studies: Traditional versus Structural Approaches', *Mise au point*, 8 (2016), n.p.
11. Jeff Jaeckle, 'The Shared Verbal Stylistics of Preston Sturges and Wes Anderson', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 11.3 (2012), p. 156.
12. Thomas Leitch, 'You Talk Like a Character in a Book: Dialogue and Film Adaptation', in Jeff Jaeckle (ed.), *Film Dialogue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 85.

13. Steven Price, 'Character in the Screenplay Text', Chap. 12 in J. Nelmes (ed.), *Analyzing the Screenplay* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2010), p. 204; 201–16. For debates on the literary status of the screenplay see Ted Nannicelli, 'Why Can't Screenplays Be Artworks?', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69.4 (2011), pp. 405–14, 'The Ontology and Literary Status of the Screenplay: The Case of "Scriptfic"', *Journal of Literary Theory*, 7.1 (2013), pp. 135–53.
14. Claire Perkins, *American Smart Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 60. Jennifer O'Meara, *Engaging Dialogue: Cinematic Verbalism in American Independent Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 43.
15. O'Meara, *Engaging Dialogue*, p. 2.
16. Roland Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1964) in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 44–45 and André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image' (1945) in *What is Cinema? Vol.1.*, trans. Hugh Gray (Los Angeles: California UP, 1967), pp. 9–16.
17. Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation', in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2000), p. 56.
18. John Alberti, 'The Director as Facilitator: Collaboration, Cooperation and the Gender Politics of the Set', in Linda Badley, Claire Perkins, and Michele Schreiber (eds), *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 288–303. Rosanne Welch, *When Women Wrote Hollywood: Essays on Female Screenwriters in the Early Film Industry* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2018), Aaron Hunter, *Polly Platt: Hollywood Production Design and Creative Authorship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).
19. Regge Ugwu, 'Marriage Story: Autobiographical or Personal? Noah Baumbach Explains', *The New York Times* (10.12.2019), Ian Parker, 'Happiness: Noah Baumbach's New Wave', *The New Yorker* (23.04.2013) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/04/29/happiness>, Kevin Mattson, 'Young Intellectuals Making Movies', *Dissent*, 53.3 (2006), pp. 113–16. Claire Perkins, 'Kicking and Screaming: Altmanesque Cynicism and Energy in the Work of Paul Thomas Anderson and Noah Baumbach', in Adrian Danks (ed.), *A Companion to Robert Altman* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), pp. 493–7.
20. A. O. Scott, 'Growing Up Bohemian and Absurd in Brooklyn', *New York Times* (5.10.2005) and Regge Ugwu, 'Marriage Story' (27.07.2020).
21. Timothy Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteurism', in Virginia Wright Wexman (ed.), *Film and Authorship* (N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), pp. 98–99.
22. Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, p. vii.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
24. *Ibid.*, p. xi. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.
25. Florida, 38–9.
26. Brouillette, p. 6.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

31. Gina Marich, 'Hallucinate and Vomit up Your Demons', *The Lifted Brow*, 28 (2015), p. 99.
32. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 109–11, pp. 178–80.
33. Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 101–36.
34. Geoff King, 'Introduction: What Indie Isn't ... Mapping the Indie Field' and 'Indie as Organic: Tracing Discursive Roots', in *A Companion to American Indie Film*, pp. 1–21, pp. 58–79. Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: an American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Michael Z. Newman, 'Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative', *Cinema Journal*, 48.3 (2009), pp. 16–34.
35. King, *Indie 2.0*, p. 4.
36. Andrew Stubbs, 'Packaging House of Cards and The Knick: How Talent Intermediaries Manage the Indie-Auteur Brand to Sell Premium Television', *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies*, 15.2 (June 2020), p. 131. See also Geoff King, *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 248.
37. Kenneth Womak, 'Academic Satire: The Campus Novel in Context', in *A Companion to the British and Irish Novel 1945–2000* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2008), p. 326.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
39. Perkins, 'Life During Wartime', p. 351.
40. See Claire Perkins, 'Beyond Indiewood: The Everyday Ethics of Nicole Holofcener', *Camera Obscura*, 29.1 no. 85 (January 1, 2014), pp. 136–59.
41. Molloy, 'Indie Cinema and the Neoliberal Commodification of Creative Labor', p. 368.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 374–5.
43. Martha Shearer, 'Frances Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Gender, Crisis, and the Creative City in *Frances Ha* and *The Giant Mechanical Man*', in Johan Andersson and Lawrence Webb (eds), *The City in American Cinema: Film and Post-industrial Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 361.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).