DENATURALISING THE BILDUNGSROMAN:

Narrative, Cinematography, and Choreography in

FRANCES HA

by **Ellie Sutherland**

This essay examines how Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* denaturalises and queers the literary coming-of-age genre by rejecting chrononormative models of adulthood in favour of non-linear, affective, and relational modes of living. Utilising queer theory – particularly Elizabeth Freeman's concept of chrononormativity and Jack Halberstam's continuation of queer time – the essay argues that *Frances Ha* subverts the conventions of the Bildungsroman, a genre historically invested in linear progression, heterosexual coupling, and economic productivity as markers of maturity. To come to this conclusion, this essay conducts an interrelated close reading of the film's narrative, cinematography, and choreography. Together, they evidence that meaning is not defined by chrononormativity, but rather can emerge through typically underrepresented bonds, improvisation, and temporal moments of joy. The film ultimately reimagines the natural not as a fixed destination governed by institutional milestones, but as an ongoing, improvisational process shaped by intimacy, affect, and alternative temporalities.

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Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* (2012) interrogates the false binary between natural and unnatural, heterosexual and queer (Butler 2011), evident in the Bildungsroman genre and chrononormative notions of adulthood through its narrative, cinematography, and choreography. Instead of portraying the linear, 'natural' progression from adolescence into adulthood, Baumbach affirms alternative, queer modes of development and living. As Elizabeth Freeman defines it, "chrononormativity is a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (3). This involves regulating time-life schedules, milestones, and narratives for maximum economic productivity. Jack Halberstam identifies queer time as an "opposition to the chrononormative systems of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (12). Through a queer examination of the film's genre and narrative, cinematography, choreography, and privilege, this essay examines how the film rejects naturalised notions of development and adulthood – signalled by marriage, reproduction, and economic productivity – and reconceptualises understandings of the natural in favour of a non-linear, affective mode of queer living.

1) Narrative and the Queering of the Bildungsroman

Before analysing how *Frances Ha* subverts the Bildungsroman, it is important to briefly evaluate the genre's motivations. The Bildungsroman is a literary genre characterised by the dramatisation of the passage from adolescence to adulthood. For women, this transition is deemed successful through marriage (Fraiman). Correspondingly, at the time of the genre's legitimisation, "women can rarely have been held in lower esteem" (Dockrell, 339). Women's roles were centred on marriage and motherhood, as they were unable to transgress against sex, gender, and class expectations. The Bildungsroman found cinematic translation in the early nineteenth century, and over time, it evolved into the coming-of-age genre (Schmidt, 2000). The genre is identified by the dramatisation of events that, according to Matthew Schmidt, "relate to the child's initiation into new realms of psychological experiences and the adolescent's encounters with the joys and challenges of modern life" (Ibid, 1). However, in doing so, the coming-of-age genre concurrently depends upon and reasserts chrononormative notions of ageing: the coherence of childhood into adolescence, and then into adulthood. Alternatively, Baumbach constructs a distinctly queer narrative that subverts the conventions of the Bildungsroman: "the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death" (Dinshaw et al. 2007, 182).

Frances Ha immediately subverts chrononormative notions of development by centring its narrative on the initiative experiences of twenty-seven-year-old Frances. Past adolescence, Frances nonetheless exists in the transitory space between adolescence and adulthood. As some reviewers argue, she acts "in the manner of an overgrown toddler" and "fluctuates between the desire for growth and the fear of the demands of adulthood" (Martin, 32). Such reviews highlight the perceived 'arrested development' of Frances, who struggles to fulfil societal expectations. Yet, despite this so-called 'arrested development', Frances does face – and yes, fear – but ultimately overcomes heartbreak, unemployment, and thereby economic precariousness. In spite of these obstacles, Frances avoids the marriage pattern typical of her gender, class, and the Bildungsroman more generally. Indeed, the heartbreak that propels her story does not stem from the end of a romantic heterosexual relationship, but rather from the gradual loss of a close female friendship. In this way, Frances does not fail at

the 'adult' experience: rather, she fails to conform to chrononormative expectations for her gender, class, and age. Friendship – or to use Eve Sedgwick's (1985) term, 'homosociality' – is for women connected to childhood; in turn, heterosexuality is connected to adulthood (Schadewaldt 2019). By centring Frances' homosociality and refusing to provide narrative resolution through the heterosexual systems of family, reproduction, and economic efficiency, Baumbach resists the capitalist temporality Freeman describes; the measurement of success according to one's attainment of heterosexual life narratives and milestones.

Baumbach's subversion of chrononormative structures, such as heterosexuality and marriage, is evident in Frances' monologue (47:26-49:02). In the scene, Frances drunkenly describes her 'far-fetched' hopes for her future relationships. The dialogue by Greta Gerwig – who stars in and co-wrote the film – appears completely improvised as she stumbles and stutters through her delivery. However, Gerwig told *IndieWire* in 2013, "There was no improv. We did lots and lots of takes, and most of what you see is, like, take 38". This deception is a hallmark of the 'mumblecore' style and genre, characterised by a low-budget, unpolished aesthetic and speech (Filippo, 2). Gerwig, considered a founder of the genre, states that mumblecore exists only in response to "people feeling like movies didn't actually show how their lives were actually being lived" (Ibid 4). Paradoxically, the more misrepresented everyday lives are, the more they take on a faraway, unnatural quality, becoming queer. Indeed, in a contemporary culture more receptive to alternative life paths – singlehood, found-family, and delayed or rejected parenthood – *Frances Ha* resonates as audiences seek representations of their own non-linear, non-chrononormative lives. This is reflected in Frances' monologue:

> I want this one moment. It's – it's what I want in a relationship… it's that thing when you're with someone… and you love them and they know it… and they love you and you know it… but it's a party… and you're both talking to other people… and you're laughing and shining… and you look across the room… and catch each other's eyes… And it's funny and sad, but only because this life will end, and it's this secret world… that exists right there… in public, unnoticed, that no one else knows about. It's sort of like how they say that other dimensions exist all around us, but we don't have the ability to perceive them. That's – That's what I want out of a relationship. Or just life, I guess. Love (49:14-50:37)

For some reviewers, Frances exhibits "a huge capacity for denial [and being] touchingly quixotic" (Taubin 2013, 27). However, her 'secret world' keenly expresses the faraway, imaginative aspects of female life in a heteronormative society. Even more, Baumbach and Gerwig depict Frances' world as entirely valid. By the end of the film, Frances finds love as she looks across the room and meets her lover's gaze: "Who are you making eyes at? That… that's Sophie. She's my best friend" (1:17:55). Baumbach and Gerwig told *Flavorwire* in 2013 that they never intended to make a love story between the two friends. Only after numerous readings of the script did they realise the importance of female friendship to the story; they went back and "beat it out like a romcom: she has the girl, she loses the girl, she tries to make the girl jealous. It's like there's a will-they-won't-they tension to the story". Though love is not an uncommon theme in the coming-of-age genre, *Frances Ha* reinterprets its gendering by showing it played out between two women, thereby platforming non-chrononormative experiences and resisting the naturalised, heterosexual resolutions conventional of the Bildungsroman, such as marriage.

2) Cinematography and Temporal Drifting

Of the many features of *Frances Ha*, one that immediately stands out is the black-and-white cinematography. This technique allows Baumbach to validate Frances' journey, however subversive of the coming-of-age genre. Contemporarily, films are seldom shot in black-

Fig. 1. Still from Baumbach, *Frances Ha* (34:20)

and-white; as black-and-white film stock becomes harder to purchase and film moves towards digitisation, colour has taken precedence. Baumbach's and cinematographer Sam Levy's decision to go black-and-white initially seems inexplicable. Unlike other contemporary period films, such as *Cold War* (2018), *The Lighthouse* (2019), and *Mank* (2020), there is no clear reason for *Frances Ha* to lack colour: it is set in the modern day and was even shot in colour. Therefore, this choice involved a deliberate reinterpretation and stylisation of reality. As Wheeler Dixon states, "the very act of making a black-and-white film transmutes the original source material, for life, as we know, takes place in colour" (2). Talking to *Collider* in 2013, Baumbach touches upon this reinterpretation of normative life: "It was the inherent romance of the character and her romantic view of the world. It felt like she should have a cinematic document of her life. I mean, it's a kind of an *ordinary life*, but I wanted it *to feel beautiful and joyful*". Here, through the use (or lack thereof) of colour, Baumbach affirms Frances' coming-of-age narrative – however contrary to chrononormative frameworks – as equally deserving of representation, beauty, and joy.

Using camera work and framing, Baumbach underpins Frances' initiation into adulthood – despite her perceived childishness – as she experiences her first heartbreak. One of the reasons *Frances Ha* resonates is because of how the cinematography supports and expands upon Frances' and Sophie's homosocial relationship. Indeed, in the early parts of the film, Frances and Sophie are almost always in the same frame, side by side. Most of these shots take place in domestic settings, such as in bed together – a space typically reserved for heterosexual partners and sexual activity in the heterosexual romcom genre (Smyth 2014). The companionship captured in these scenes undermines the "enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring the male right of physical, economic, and emotional access" (Rich 1980, 648). However, while this subverts the normative representations for the audience, the characters are unable to upset the system structurally in their individual resolutions: Sophie ends up in a conventional heterosexual relationship, getting married and living a suburban life, which continually attempts to destroy Frances and Sophie's queer friendship. Indeed, as the narrative unfolds, Frances and Sophie are seldom in the same shot. Even in scenes together, we can see Frances' increasing isolation from Sophie. In one example, Frances becomes upset as she realises she is now the 'third wheel' after Sophie starts dating her boyfriend. Baumbach chooses not to frame the two women together: instead, the camera alternates between shots of Sophie and her boyfriend and shots of Frances. During these shots, Sophie is depicted as a blurred, peripheral figure (34:20), highlighting their growing distance and Frances' isolating experience of heartbreak. This is heightened following Sophie's engagement, whereafter we see her

and Frances in complete isolation. By doing so, the film visually represents the dissonance between Frances and Sophie and their response to what it means to grow up chronormatively, making clear the realities of the heteronormative construction of relationships, which privileges the heterosexual couple, causing Frances and Sophie's relationship to wither in comparison. These expectations continually impose themselves on Frances and Sophie's friendship, threatening to destroy their queer alternative of female fulfilment.

3) Choreography and Queer Time

Frances' spontaneous sprint through New York City embodies her resistance to chrononormative expectations: she moves purely for the joy of movement itself. Emboldened by her new friends and apartment, she sprints through the streets of New York City as David Bowie's 'Modern Love' plays (21:50-22:40). The scene is similar to Leos Carax's *Mauvais Sang* (1986): the film's protagonist also runs through the streets as 'Modern Love' plays.

Fig. 2. Still from Baumbach, *Frances Ha* (21:50-22:40)

As Calum Marsh finds, "The act of running [in *Mauvais Sang*] has never before looked so expressive, either – he makes it look like a physical necessity, the only way to deal with some inner turmoil, a release as much for him as it is for us watching" (2013). Inspired by this scene, Baumbach frames Frances as a continuation of a lineage of queer characters who use movement to liberate (even momentarily) themselves from oppression. *Mauvais Sang* takes place in an imagined, future society that is infected by AIDS, suggesting that bodilyimprovisation is itself an inherently queer form of resistance. Baumbach and his team evoke a similar feeling as Frances runs. The camera swoops in on her as she dashes and dances, surpassing passers-by and cars on the road as if she is untouchable. Her speed and relief reflect the same necessity as Carax's work: Frances runs because, for the first time in a long time, she feels good, unconstrained, and free to be her natural self. In this way, Frances' run through New York City functions as a physical embodiment of queer temporality. As José Esteban Muñoz argues: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality… We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world" (1). Frances' movement underscores Muñoz's argument that queerness is always performative and always anticipatory. Her dance becomes a rebuttal against the naturalised structures of heteronormative society; it is a kinetic enactment of possibility, an insistence that queer living is not only imaginable, but already being embodied in everyday acts of joy and disobedience. It is these acts of freedom that are truly natural. By running and dancing through New York City's streets, ecstatically and absent of any obligation, Frances reclaims her space and time, not marked by social or economic productivity, prioritising affect over the demands of institutional forces. Through her running, Frances temporarily inhabits a queer, utopian space where she is untethered from the demands of adulthood.

4) Privilege and the Limits of Subversion

When discussing Baumbach's subversion of the Bildungsroman and naturalised socioeconomic structures, it is important to recognise Frances' privileged experience of such structures. Frances' capacity to pursue a non-linear, affect-driven life is enabled by her proximity to wealth. From the outset, Frances is enabled by her family's financial support – indeed, even if we do not see them, we know she received sufficient funding to attend Vassar College in New York. Further, she repeatedly falls back on the comfort of her trust-fund friends, Benji and Lev, a writer for *Saturday Night Live* and a visual artist, respectively. A turning point in the film, Frances travels to France and stays in her acquaintance's loft, free of charge. Frances

moves through upper-class, rich spaces. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, this is one of the primary determinants of class preservation: individuals tend to meet *in* rather than *between* social classes (Jenkins 2002). Indeed, similar to Baumbach's career, the narrative is propelled by a sense of proximity and shared privilege: "the right upbringing in the right place with the right parents (a cinephile professor and a film critic), the right schools, right connections and right friends" (Cheshire 2013). This complicates the film's subversion of the Bildungsroman and chrononormative tropes, showing that the freedom to resist their impositions is, in part, dependent on privileged access to resources. Thus, while *Frances Ha* effectively imagines new, natural modes of living and belonging, it does not do so indiscriminately but is implicated in the material realities that inform whose nonconformity is allowed and celebrated.

Frances Ha effectively queers the coming-of-age genre by resisting chrononormative structures through its narrative, cinematography, and choreography. These aspects of the film are characterised by affect, movement, and relationality rather than normalised, naturalised notions of productivity. Frances' narrative is marked by her experience of homosociality rather than marriage and reproduction that are typical of the Bildungsroman; Baumbach and his cinematography team's framing and colour grading reaffirm Frances' atypical transition from adolescence to adulthood; and Frances' rapturous movement in the 'Modern Love' scene embodies queer temporality, where affect and pleasure are prioritised over productivity. However, these modes of subversion are undoubtedly informed by socioeconomic privilege. As highlighted by the work of theorists such as Freeman, Halberstam, and Muñoz, Frances' coming-of-age arc serves as a replacement model of capitalist chrononormativity. Her narrative reveals that marriage, reproduction, and economic wealth are not evidence of a meaningful life; one can emerge through typically underrepresented bonds, improvisation, and temporal moments of joy. Contrary to many reviews, Frances Ha does not tell a story of arrested development; rather, it offers the possibility of not only queer living, but queer flourishing. Just like Frances' dance through New York City, queer living is not about arrival, but affective becoming.

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