

Frances Ha (2013)

“I’m so embarrassed. I’m not a real person yet.”

Major Credits:

Director: Noah Baumbach

Screenplay: Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig

Cast: Greta Gerwig (Frances), Mickey Sumner (Sophie), Michael Esper (Dan), Adam Driver (Lev), Michael Zegen (Benji), Patrick Heusinger (Patch)

Production Background:

Frances Ha extends the personal and professional collaboration between Baumbach and Gerwig, who had previously co-starred in his *Greenberg* (2010) and would subsequently co-write and star in his *Mistress America* (2015). She appears in every scene in *Frances Ha* and won widespread critical acclaim for her performance. Baumbach is sometimes compared to a fellow New York Jewish filmmaker, Woody Allen, and his choice to shoot this film in black-and-white drew comparisons to Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979), particularly for his close-ups of Gerwig, which may remind viewers of Allen’s muse in the earlier film, Mariel Hemingway. Despite the improvisational feel of *Frances Ha*, the film was tightly scripted and required multiple takes during shooting. Along with Sam Levy’s black-and-white cinematography, the compressed storytelling, thematic emphasis on freedom and aspiration, and soundtrack (often sampling the music of Georges Delerue) harkens back to François Truffaut and the French New Wave. More specifically, the jousting between Frances and Sophie in the opening montage recalls a similar moment of play-fighting at the beginning of Truffaut’s *Jules and Jim*.

Frances’s parents are played by Greta Gerwig’s real-life parents. The role of Sophie is played by Mickey Sumner, Sting’s daughter, and Grace Gummer, who plays Rachel, is the daughter of Meryl Streep.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Black-and-white cinematography: Baumbach has said he chose b&w for his story “to boil it down to its barest bones.” What is the effect of this unusual choice? How might *Frances Ha* seem different if shot in color?
2. Narrative structure: The film takes Frances on three excursions outside New York, sojourns that serve both to provide a shape to the story and to amplify certain aspects of her character. What do we learn about her from these abortive escapes to Sacramento, Paris, and Poughkeepsie (!), and how do they affect our understanding of, or frustration with, her arrested development?
3. Title Cards: Baumbach uses another old-fashioned technique (dating to the silent era) to reinforce his conception of the film as “a road movie with apartments.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. Like Greenberg, the protagonist of Baumbach's previous film, Frances is floundering; unlike him, however, she remains mostly endearing despite her rootlessness. Nevertheless, her charms might become tiresome and frustrating over time. What are the values and conditions of her life that she must come to terms with in order to progress to becoming "a real person"? Does the film suggest that she will?
2. Frances describes her friendship with her BFF Sophie this way: "We're like a lesbian couple that doesn't have sex anymore." How does the film characterize female friendship, a topic that has been largely missing from American cinema until very recently?
3. The "money shot" of the movie might be the long tracking shot of Frances running on the New York streets in search of an ATM machine, accompanied on the soundtrack by David Bowie's "Modern Love". This shot could be an *homage* to the haunting scene of Catherine (Jeanne Moreau) racing across the bridge in *Jules and Jim*. What ideas are being expressed in this sustained image from *Frances Ha*?
4. The film's closing shot is tremendously appealing in a way similar to the revelatory tracking shot leading to the sled at the end of *Citizen Kane*, which provides a satisfying answer to a lingering question throughout the narrative. In both cases, *seeing* leads to *thinking*. How does the final image in *Frances Ha* reward our patience and attention?