MUMBLECORE’S

Maestro

by SOPHIA NGUYEN
If this interview with Andrew Bujalski—in a chichi Manhattan hotel, the morning of the theatrical release of his latest movie, Results—were a scene in one of his films, it might go something like this.

The camera would measure every inch of awkward distance between the interlocutors, each seated on the edge of a high-backed leather chair. With an amused eye, it would take in the wall of blown-glass sculptures along the stairway, and the elevators showing black and white movies on tiny screens to keep guests entertained between floors. But the essential locus would be the conversation’s turns and tics: how the journalist tries and fails to talk around the “m-word”—“Well, no one uses the term *mumblecore* anymore”—and how the filmmaker equably interjects: “And yet I’ve been asked about it in every interview.”

Writer and director Bujalski ’98 acted in his first two features, as the guy who couldn’t get the girl in *Funny Ha Ha* (2002), and the one who couldn’t keep her in *Mutual Appreciation* (2005)—meek types, congenitally unable or unwilling to say what they meant. In person, and 10 years older, he comes across as soft-spoken but forthright; the habit of pushing up his glasses at the bridge, or wiping the lenses on his shirt, carries over into real life.

In Esquire, essayist Chuck Klosterman once described Bujalski’s work as “the films that make 10 percent of America annoyed and 90 percent of America bored,” adding, “These are the films that are always my favorites.” Made deftly, on the cheap, and without marquee actors or discernible plots, they are seismographs for tracking emotional fits and starts. The audience for such fare has been narrow—mostly made up of festivalgoers and film journalists—but what that viewership lacks in size, it makes up for in the intensity of its scrutiny. In the years when his work circulated on press screeners and DVDs sold on his website, those who sought it out rarely came away neutral, dividing into avid supporters and scathing detractors. His debut feature, *Funny Ha Ha*, was the first of a wave of talky, naturalistic cinema made by and about young people in the early aughts. Zooming in on microclimates of emotion, films in this vein captured the feel of postgrad, pre-adult existence. In their cheap digs, the characters drifted through daily life, chatting and canoodling on crummy couches. If these white, straight, middle-class, twenty-something seemed a little too sanguine about their sporadic employability, it was pre-recession America. No one knew how to panic.

There’s another, more literal sense in which Bujalski helped to define a subgenre. In 2005, his sound mixer Eric Masunaga coined the term “mumblecore” over drinks at a bar in Austin, Texas. Off the cuff and on the record, the director repeated it to the film site Indiewire, and ever since, “mumblecore” has followed him like a bad penny. (Even as the buzzword has become passé among critics, it reliably resurfaces. Last May, none other than Indiewire ran an editorial, self-defeatingly headlined: “The Word Mumblecore Turns 10 Years Old This Year. Can We Stop Using It Now?”)

Over the years, other filmmakers tagged with the label, like Joe Swanberg and Mark and Jay Duplass, have gained more mainstream attention. They have expanded their ambitions to producing, while racking up nearly twice as many acting, writing, and directing credits. They’ve been quicker to bring Hollywood names on board their projects; they’ve got TV shows on premium cable. While consistently championed by critics, Bujalski has remained less known, less visible, than these peers.

*Results* visibly departs from his previous work, and at first glance seems crafted to have an appeal that’s less cult, more commercial. It’s a romantic comedy, and has a concrete plot. It’s his first film shot on digital video, and the images feel distinctly contemporary, the colors brighter and sharper. *Results* also has two bona fide action stars for leads, Guy Pearce and Cobie Smulders, both of whom have shown up in the Marvel franchise. But even the presence of more obscure talents, like Kevin Corrigan, Giovanni Ribisi, and Constance Zimmer, is a change.

“If I’m not mistaken, *Results* is the first movie I ever made in which no one in the cast is someone I’ve lived with,” Bujalski affirms. Then he reconsiders. “I’ll tell you what, actually, my dad is in *Results*. He’s a roommate! Roommates in all of them.”

Edmund Bujalski ’74, M.B.A. ’76, appears on a TV playing in the background of a scene: he’s a talking head discussing healthcare. Along with some two dozen of the film’s cast and crew, he attended its premiere at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival in January; that night, his son called everyone involved in *Results* onto the stage, naming and thanking each of them personally. Not long after that celebratory moment, the director confided to his father that he worried people would think he’d sold out.

Months later, in May, Bujalski is a little easier on himself. He terms aspects of the film his “olive branches” to a wider audience: “Okay, I’ve got your movie stars now, I’ve got a happy ending.” Of all his projects, it’s had the widest theatrical release, and the most funding. While on the press junket for *Results*, orchestrated by a professional public-relations firm, Bujalski notes, bemused, that this is the nicest hotel he’s ever been put up in. “Maybe they’re blowing the whole publicity budget on it,” he speculates, gesturing behind him: “They’re playing *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard’s sci-fi dystopia, which begins in a hotel) “in the elevators.”

Yet some things about his filmmaking may never change. Bujalski says, “I think I have the same experience over and over again.” He gets deep into a project, directing it according to what feels most natural and exciting to him, and by the end, “it’s just not—conventional. I’m always surprised by that. I’m always rather shocked that what I’m doing is not mainstream.” He goes on, “I’m not a provocateur. Everything I’ve done is quite—gentle. I’ve never made a movie that walks up to you and slaps you.” Still, Bujalski and a wide popular audience may always find each other a little befuddling.

Bujalski grew up in Newton, Massachusetts. His parents weren’t big film buffs, but they consented to be dragged to theaters on the weekends, and sat with him as he watched up to three features,
back to back. His mother, a visual artist, mostly stopped drawing and painting when he was born; Bujalski vividly remembers her work hanging around the house. “I was always, as a child and now, so envious of that talent,” he recalls, “and so angry that I hadn’t inherited it.” (In a required drawing course for his concentration at Harvard, he ended up with a B-minus.) Nor did he inherit the business acumen of his father, a healthcare executive: “I don’t know if they dropped me on my head when I was baby or something, but I have an extraordinary mental block about business.” As early as age six, though, Bujalski announced that he wanted to make movies when he grew up. Soon after, he got a Sony camcorder as a Christmas present, and with it, made little movies with his friends in the backyard—a precursor, perhaps, to his way of working as an adult.

Bujalski’s approach has been to make everything as natural as possible. Everyone should feel as though they’re living the scene, rather than acting in it. The director always had a written script, revised several times over, but the actors rarely did. Instead, he’d outline the scene for them, laying out key dramatic beats and lines of dialogue, and they rehearsed until they got the feeling they wanted. The actors had no assigned marks to guide their movements; the lighting equipment on set was minimal; and—in part because they had limited film stock to work with—there were only a few takes. Myles Paige ’98, who played a love interest named Dave in Funny Ha Ha, remembers the shoot feeling as if “All the parties we had gone to, all throughout college, built up to this filmed party. People didn’t really pay too much attention to the camera.”

Matthias Grunsky, the cinematographer on all Bujalski’s films, and his closest collaborator, remembers that when they first met in Los Angeles in 2000, they watched the raucous and bruising John Cassavetes drama, Faces (1968), as a reference for Funny Ha Ha, which they hoped would showcase performances with a documentary approach. On set, even in tight spaces, Grunsky tried to keep a decorous distance—to capture the delicate interplay among the actors without intruding. His guiding principle when working with Bujalski has always been that “The intimacy and sensitivity of what was going on in front of the lens was a very precious thing that needed to be protected.” This was especially key for working with nonprofessional actors, some of whom were nervous about participating. Tilly Hatchter, M.U.P. ’12, was reluctant to take the lead in Beeswax (2009)—“It was a scary thought, really”—and remembers feeling relief after shooting wrapped each day; she agreed to the project mostly to have an excuse to spend five weeks with her sister, Maggie Hatchter ’97, who’d played a small role in Bujalski’s thesis film. In Tilly’s favorite scene, her sister gave her a piggyback ride, and the camera hung back: “It just felt like me and Maggie,” she says. In a couple of takes, they accidentally called each other by their real names.

Until Results (“a much larger military operation”), most of Bujalski’s productions were what he calls “guerilla filmmaking,” a strategy that involved reaching out to everyone he knew in the area—Boston for Funny Ha Ha, New York City for Mutual Appreciation—and asking favors of friends and family. Everyone was a volunteer: they acted as extras; they let members of the cast and crew stay in their homes; they lent their cars for errands, or scouted locations. Bujalski paid the bills with a part-time job teaching high school, and then with temp work.

Marshaling resources for Beeswax, in 2007, he called up an acquaintance, a novelist and Texas Monthly editor who’d graduated from Harvard in 1993: “She was a few years older than me. She had great posture. She was smarter than me, and—intimidating.” There hadn’t been even a hint of romance when they’d first met a few years ago in Austin, and so, “I distinctly remember having a beer with her and being very surprised to think, Am I flirting with Karen Olson?” They began dating shortly afterward, were married in 2009, and have lived there ever since.

Funny Ha Ha, Mutual Appreciation, and Beeswax can be viewed as exemplary of the genre that dare not speak its name. They have shambolic narratives, befitting lives in transition; the characters fumble (and yes, mumble) through their temporary relationships and jobs. Yet Bujalski has always approached his subject matter with a mor
dant sensibility. He’s a master at navigating the middle depths of feeling, where most people swim day-to-day: doubt and embarrassment, surges of attraction, tenderness, and aggression. His movies map the tiny eddies and unspoken undercurrents. The neorealism is low-key and up-tempo.

The interpersonal dynamics of any given scene have such specificity and clarity that they’re nearly impossible to describe. This paradox is at the heart of his work. A single, quiet interaction requires many more words to unpack than are ever uttered on-screen, by, say, the radio DJ in Mutual Appreciation who invites the alt-rocker into her bed by handing him a beer and the flimsy excuse that she doesn’t have any chairs. Bujalski has perfect pitch: an instinct for how language meanders, and the lacunae it circles around. His scenes find meaning in each awkward pause, every dilatory “like.” A character says, “you know,” and weirdly, you do.

Writer and show-runner Lena Dunham is arguably Bujalski’s most famous admirer. One of the characters on Girls is named Marnie, after the heroine of his movie Funny Ha Ha. After seeing that movie at age 18, Dunham peppered the director with e-mails asking about film equipment, and he responded to all of them. When, in 2012, they co-introduced a new 35-mm print of the film at the Anthology Film Archives in New York, Dunham called it the “tenth anniversary of my awakening to the idea that our own developing lives are worth examining.” Nevertheless, in her work, exuberant ego always has always come with a self-lacerating edge, even cruelty.

There’s no hint of that in Bujalski’s work. “I’ve never made a movie where I didn’t basically love the characters, and the actors,” he says. “I don’t know how to write characters that I don’t essentially like, even if they’re doing nasty things once in a while.”

His movies have often been designed with particular friends in mind. Bujalski wrote Funny Ha Ha with Kate Dollemayer ’97 as the lovelorn Marnie; Mutual Appreciation had to have Justin Rice ’99 as Alan, a singer newly arrived in New York; and Beeswax couldn’t proceed without the Hatcher sisters, as a tense, controlling boutique owner and her free-spirited twin. Myles Paige says he cried out in mock indignation, “What do you think of me, Andrew?” when offered the part of a sleazy, visionary programmer in Bujalski’s fourth movie, Computer Chess (2013). But he describes himself as feeling a bit “frayed” at that time in his life, and brought that energy to the character of Michael Papageorge and his disconsolate wanderings through motel corridors.

“With nonprofessionals, you’re starting with this kind of raw honesty—if it’s there, and it isn’t always—and shaping it into something that tells a story,” explains Bujalski. Ordinary people are often opaque in their intentions. “With actors, you really kind of go in the opposite direction. They’re very, very well-conditioned to make sure that every story point comes across crystal clear, and it’s a kind of clarity that I’m always trying to muddy up.”

His approach to directing actors has been informed by his own acting in friends’ movies—Joe Swanberg’s Hannah Takes the Stairs (2007) and David Zellner’s Goliath (2008), among others—and he likens the process to the dance lessons he took for his wedding: “When you’re dancing with somebody who knows what they’re doing, and can lead you, it’s kind of an amazing feeling, to get carried by somebody’s vision and confidence.” He still thinks that his best acting work was for his own movies, where he was too concerned with other aspects of the shoot to get anxious. “There’s a lot of downtime for actors, and usually they’re treated nicely. So you kinda sit around and somebody brings you coffee. I think they have to learn to really contain or focus their energy in those moments, because what I end up doing is just sit around and think, aw, jeez, I’m really fat. And I’m really stinking in this movie, I’m really messing this up. And then you get up and do your thing and feel very self-conscious about it.”

Bujalski quipped to the Austin Chronicle, in 2009, “There was a time in which I thought that half my friends were mad at me for putting them in a film, and half my friends were mad at me for not putting them in a film.” His movies are populated by Harvard alumni, and for many of them, his project is their sole film credit, a blip in their careers. Christian Rudder ’97, who plays Alex, the main love interest in Funny Ha Ha, is far better known as the co-founder of OkCupid (his band with Rice, Bishop Allen, has provided music for several of Bujalski’s movies); Keith Gessen ’97, a founding editor of n+1, briefly appears in Mutual Appreciation. Paige, a roofer, recently got his Realtor’s license in Washington state. Tilly Hatcher is a real-estate developer and urban planner.

Maggie Hatcher, an emergency-room doctor, was in the middle of her residency when Beeswax was released. The medical and indie-movie spheres of her life had little overlap, but when The New York Times gives a rave review, acquaintances notice. Laughing, she reports, “I remember people teasing me, ‘Oh, A.O. Scott thinks you have nice arms!’ and me telling them, ‘Oh, shut up.’” Unlike with professional actors, when Bujalski’s stars claim to feel embarrassed about seeing themselves onscreen, you believe them.

Harvard also shaped Bujalski’s craft in other ways. The strong documentary leanings of the visual and environmental studies department trained him to begin from an interest in observing the world. He learned to work with what was available,
and be alert to what was out of his control. In nonfiction filmmaking, “There needs to be intention, but then your intention gets thwarted at every turn.” By the end, he says, the experience proves invaluable for filming fictional narratives, too: “You’ve tried to learn to make chaos your friend.”

For a course taught by Robb Moss (now professor of visual and environmental studies [VES] and chair of the department), students had to collaborate on a documentary group. Bujalski’s cohort made a movie about the various restaurants and karaoke bars along Route 1 in Massachusetts. The assignment posed the inherent challenge of uniting everyone’s aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. Moss remembers that “Andrew always fell on the side of, ‘It’s fine.’ Yes, maybe it pushes a little bit against the polite—but he was always so delighted by what the world can do, and what was possible in front of a camera. He really helped to get the class to enjoy themselves, to enjoy the things they were filming, and to think they were interesting and delightful.”

A white line running up his right pinky is the closest Bujalski comes to having a tattoo (or so he writes, in his notes for the Harvard Film Archive’s collection of his work)—an honorable scar from an accident in senior year, when he reached too quickly over a film splicer’s razor blade. He made and cut his first three movies on film, and with nowhere safe to put the boxes of negative and other physical materials, began depositing his work with the HFA in 2005. In addition to his features, the collection includes two shorts he made as a student: My Life as a Clipé, from a freshman-year class with Richard Rogers (then associate director of the Film Studies Center), and his thesis, Close for Comfort.

The latter tracks the evasive maneuvers of Caitlin, who impulsively abandons her boyfriend to get engaged to a mutual friend, Mike, and then hides out in the suburbs while her new fiancé waits, forlorn, in their apartment. In it, Bujalski seems to be working out his ideas about how people speak to each other. Even as they imagine themselves the tempestuous dramatis personae of a grown-up affair, the characters suspect that the words sound stilted in their voices. Cruising up to Caitlin in his car, Mike tells her, “Get in.” She’s skeptical, amused: “Are you kidding me?” He shrugs, half-apologetic, “I thought it sounded good.” The story is funny and tender; projected onto the big screen in the Carpenter Center, its little hilarities and heartbreaks somehow expand to fill the auditorium.

When at last Bujalski capitulated to video for his fourth feature, it was with a retrofitted Sony AVC 3260, a rare and unstable black-and-white tube camera that required two backups and an engineer on standby. “The camera would just have its own life,” says Grunsky. “We never had to stop the shoot, but we were close. There were moments where I didn’t know what to do anymore.” The glitches and light smears produced by the set-up had a conceptual appeal, but the cinematographer worried about testing viewers’ tolerance: “Is this going too far? If people will see this on a big screen, is this too much to ask?”

Ironically, Bujalski had first planned to make something more conventionally appealing. When he and Olsson had their first child, Alexander, in 2010, he decided he’d need to shift out of the guerrilla mode; a subsistence paycheck wouldn’t cover the mortgage. But when financing for that project failed to come through, he opted to develop what then seemed like his least lucrative idea: an eight-page treatment for a sweetly loony 1980s period piece about the early days of artificial intelligence.

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Computer Chess follows a tournament in which techies vie over who’s designed the smartest chess program. Bujalski filled his cast with actual experts: film editors, software experts, and two professors (one in cinema studies, and the other in computer science). In the movie, it feels natural when the characters speak in jargon, smoke pot, and sneak into the rooms of rival teams to tinker with their machines—on breaks, says Paige, people really did play chess together—but the surreal story only grows stranger, with episodes involving a New Age cult, an abortive threesome, a room full of cats, and a computer displaying signs of consciousness.

The 92-minute slice of deepdish nerdery was his first feature accepted by the Sundance Film Festival, and somehow, his biggest critical and commercial success. At its premiere, Bujalski’s mentor Rob Moss gushed to his former student, “This is so weird and so funny, and so great—I just hope you can continue to make this.”

“I have a family,” Bujalski replied. “I hope I can, too.”

“Mumblecore” always had a ring of intergenerational grievance about it—like parents, indulgent and irritated, wondering aloud about when their beloved offspring will move out of the basement. To critics as well as fans, Computer Chess demonstrated its director’s creative range, hinting at the stranger depths of imagination not plumbed in his early work. And in it appears a type previously absent from Bujalski’s filmed worlds: a young father who, at nights between competition, has to attend to his crying infant.

Results also arose out of a kind of panic, Bujalski confesses. As he got ready for his first Sundance in 2013, “People kept telling me, ‘Oh, you’ve got to have your next thing ready.’ That seems to be industry

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lore. I got nervous. I thought, ‘I have nothing to pitch, I haven't even really finished Computer Chess yet.’ So I was sitting there, panicking—but also, for all kinds of practical reasons, I wanted to get my head around what it would be like to go do something that was really designed for professional actors. At a molecular level, I wanted to do something that worked differently."

In a city conscripted into self-improvement culture—the Austin of Whole Foods, where restaurants have gone paleo (or extinct) and residents are relentlessly CrossFitted—Bujalski finds a natural showcase for Hollywood talent. Guy Pearce plays Trevor, a gym owner who dreams of starting his own wellness franchise called Power 4 Life. He has an undisclosed, complicated history with his abrasive employee, Kat (played by Cobie Smulders), a personal trainer so intense she will sprint after the minivan of a client who hasn't paid up.

"It kind of makes me nuts when you see movies where these gorgeous people play down-on-their-luck schlubs," Bujalski says. "Because I know down-on-their-luck schlubs, and that's not right." He was intrigued by the overlap between the unpredictable careers of actors and personal trainers: "For both those jobs, there's pressure to look terrific all the time," he comments, though for the latter group, "it's very hard to string together any kind of reasonable living. You are in the service industry, and you're putting your schedule together hour to hour," with clients moving sessions or canceling altogether.

Stumbling into the midst of this lean and hungry lot is Kevin Corrigan as Danny, a transplanted, freshly divorced New Yorker who's come into more money than he knows what to do with. He spends his days alone in his rented McMansion, getting high and eating pizza. Upon starting an exercise regime, Danny develops an ill-fated crush on Kat, and forms the other side of the love triangle.

In old Hollywood flicks, vocal resonance was a sure sign of true love: the loud patter between Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant in His Girl Friday; the low purr of Bogart and Bacall in, well, anything. In Results, the characters have a lot to learn from each other's language. A taut body has suave words to match: Trevor draws on a vocabulary cobbled together from sports metaphors and life-coaching mantras. But it's too inflexible for the gymnastics of difficult emotions. "I think you have no idea what's going on in your own brain," Kat accuses him. "You know optimal, and you know suboptimal, and clearly I'm suboptimal for you." Danny, on the other hand, is blunt by nature, but loneliness has made him taciturn. He and Trevor, both hobbyist musicians, can only find true expression nonverbally, through late-night noodling on electric guitars and sleepless drum solos—and Bujalski edits them into a duet, suggesting the men's deep kinship. (In a running visual gag, each cares for a hilariously fat pet, a furry demon that embodies—and can't quite fulfill—a buried need for affection.) Eventually, Trevor finds Danny a weight-lifting gym, and encourages him to start dating again; Danny pushes Trevor into a business partnership with Kat, to make them realize that they want a romantic one to go with it.

Moss says that Bujalski's proven talents as a writer and director mean that "He has marketable skills." He adds, "And I hope he can survive having marketable skills." What would an Andrew Bujalski film look like if he didn't write it, Moss asks, or if he were directing someone else's scripts? (Bujalski has written scripts-for-hire—an adaptation of Indecision, the modish novel by Benjamin Kunkel '96, as well a couple of romantic comedies—but the projects never went forward.)

"What I want is just for Andrew to have the chance to make more movies. I think he's earned the right to make a lot more movies, and to make them the way he wants to," Moss says emphatically. "But I don't think it's simple, and the pressures of a certain kind of success..." He pauses, then concludes: "It's hard to maintain one's own identity:"

Bujalski, whose second child, Irina, was born just as Results wrapped, sees his position a little differently, but not by much. "If there was such a thing as middle-class filmmaking, where you could do work like this, and get by okay, that would be great, and I've been trying to carve that out. It's easy to get yourself into a panic state thinking, 'Oh my God, the only way I will ever make a living is to do Marvel.'" He continues, "The two worst things that can happen to an artist, I think, are failure, which is bad, and success, which is much worse." He hopes to carve out a career in which he can maneuver between them, and which affords the freedom to experiment. "It's daunting now that I keep trying to rewire myself, because I do have a mortgage and I do have children. And so, like—maybe just a little bit of conventional success. I could use it." Then he trails off: "But—I don't know."

At the midpoint of Results, Trevor says, "It's not about the money, brother," making Danny nearly double over with laughter, the sound ringing through his huge, empty house as he wheezes, in disbelief, "It's not about the money, brother!" It is, and it isn't. Power 4 Life may be Trevor's sincerely held dream—but as Bujalski knows, nothing runs on love alone.

Sophia Nguyen is associate editor of this magazine.