



Passing Time
in
Frances Ha

Frances Ha (Noah Baumbach, 2012) is a purposely episodic film, showing moments from the life of Frances Halladay (Greta Gerwig) as she moves between apartments in New York City and struggles to establish a dancing (or at least dancing-related) career. However, one important thread that runs through the film is Frances's relationship with her best friend Sophie (Mickey Sumner). We witness a series of responses by Frances to the growing distance between her and Sophie, a distance which first opens up when Sophie moves out of the apartment she shares with Frances because she wants to move from Brooklyn to Tribeca (an area Frances cannot afford). Sophie's departure occurs less than fifteen minutes into the film. In order for Frances and Sophie's initial, prelapsarian relationship to carry the weight the rest of the film places upon it, the special qualities of this relationship have to be established

quickly. Much of the necessary work is done in the film's frequently-wordless opening two minutes (whose status as a prologue is suggested by their being followed by the presentation of the film's title). The qualities of time and of intimacy as captured and conveyed by the texture of this montage sequence become a means of measuring those same dimensions of experience in Frances's various interactions throughout the rest of the film.

The film begins by showing us Frances and Sophie spending time together in a range of ways, in a two-minute montage which typically devotes one shot to each activity captured. Shots 1 and 2: Frances and Sophie play-fight in a park. 3. Still in the park, Frances dances in front of an upturned hat, while Sophie perches on a rail behind her strumming a miniature banjo (introduced at this point is an up-tempo musical theme, also featuring a banjo, which





contributes to the cohesion of the rest of the montage, as well as its sense of fun).¹ 4. We see Frances and Sophie running past a group of street percussionists; Frances deposits her hat (and presumably, the money that passersby have given) in front of them, and carries on running. 5. Frances and Sophie are still running – across a street and then down a subway staircase. 6. We see them waiting at the platform, and then on the train. We are then shown Frances and Sophie at home. 7. Frances cooks (and Sophie lays the table). 8. On the sofa, Frances reads a passage of literary criticism aloud to Sophie while the latter knits. 9. Sophie follows an exercise class on her laptop while Frances reads and snacks. 10-12. The pair lean out of adjacent windows, smoking and chatting (about whether each of them would eat a ‘domesticated dog’). 13. Sophie plays a good move in a board game and Frances violently scrubs the pieces from their positions in a performance of rage. 14. The pair load their clothes into separate washing machines at the laundrette. 15. They talk on a fire escape (but we cannot hear what they say). Finally, we draw out of the montage and get a more sustained moment – of the pair lying in bed watching something on a laptop computer. Frances, seeing that Sophie’s eyes are closed, makes to leave, but Sophie tells her to stay (on the condition that she remove her socks).

This opening montage sequence is the principal example of the film’s creation of passages where action and time *flow*. Such passages have their opposite in the many scenes where *awkwardness* predominates. Often, these two types of

sequence are brought into close proximity. After the opening sequence, which is punctuated by a single, white-on-black title card – ‘FRANCES HA’ – we cut to a two-shot of Frances and her boyfriend (Michael Esper) sitting and silently regarding a photograph for several seconds. A cut to a reverse angle reveals this to be a photograph of a cat: he wants them to buy two cats and move in together. At first, Frances fails to grasp fully what is being proposed, and at the same time articulates a series of obstacles (she is allergic to cats, she was planning to extend her lease with Sophie); next, she apologises, and her boyfriend withdraws emotionally. These exchanges are captured initially in one static long take, then largely in reverse-field cutting between each member of the couple. The four-minute scene ends with the pair breaking up. In terms of pacing and tone, then, this marks an eloquent contrast with the previous sequence and the relationship it depicts. Indeed, the idea that pacing and tone themselves are partly what differentiate these relationships is suggested in another awkward moment in the scene, when Frances breaks off from her cagey, withholding exchange with her boyfriend in order to take a call from Sophie, which begins with an extravagantly, and loudly, delivered exclamation of ‘Yo girl what’s up!’, quickly followed by ‘Are you drunk? *I love you!*’. A further, deeper distinction can be made between the intimacy that the boyfriend is attempting to negotiate, and the intimacy effortlessly inhabited by Frances and Sophie.



The opening montage of Frances and Sophie captures a relationship in which the tacit shared understanding is that vast expanses of unbounded time will be spent together. Part of the meaning of the play-fighting and impromptu street performing is that Frances and Sophie enjoy performing their intimacy to others (later in the film Frances occasionally offers to others slightly arch, and therefore evidently pre-constructed, phrases designed to distil something of the flavour of the relationship: ‘Sophie makes fun of me ‘cause I can’t account for my bruises’); but these activities, as well as being entirely un-purposive (the money ‘earned’ is given away), are (unlike, say, going to the cinema, or for a meal, or even playing a board game) also ones whose durations are determined entirely by those participating. Frances’s and Sophie’s running does not suggest commuter-style hurry (immediately after the running we see them waiting at the subway platform), but rather exuberant expenditure of energy. In contrast to the agonised negotiation about whether to buy cats and move in together that we witness between Frances and her soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend, in Frances and Sophie’s domestic life, it is implied that any need for negotiation is minimal. The single line of dialogue included in the shot where Frances cooks and Sophie takes plates from the cupboard tells us that the meal has not been pre-agreed: ‘I tried to make a frittata, but it’s really more of a scramble.’ When we see Frances reading literary criticism and Sophie knitting, and Sophie exercising and Frances snacking, we see a couple who spend time together even when they are doing different things.



The rest of the film makes repeated use of montage and compression (for example, when Frances cooks at Lev and Benji’s apartment, when she goes to Paris, when she works at her old college in Poughkeepsie), but the only other sequence that matches the sense of time and events flowing happily thanks to intimacy and a shared understanding of routines and rituals is the one where Frances spends Christmas at her family home in Sacramento. In this sequence, lasting around three minutes, we are given glimpses of convivial, gregarious gatherings of family and



friends, and snatches of amiable conversation between Frances and her parents about minor domestic decorations and decisions. While Frances lives with Lev and Benji (in the apartment that she moves to after living with Sophie), what is emphasised instead is Frances’s disappointment and frustration with how she spends her time. This changing orientation towards time is also due in part to the film’s dramatisation of the transition of its protagonist from a late adolescence of irregular and precarious work, and therefore of extensive leisure time, towards a more structured, albeit still precarious, routine. Time becomes more rigid – and more oppressive in other ways too, as Frances measures her achievements against her aspirations, and her age. During one morning scene, Frances is offered a bagel, but she declines, and lists her itinerary (‘A whole Sunday planned’). Jump cut to Frances sitting at the table, eating a bagel hurriedly and apparently without enjoyment. A few minutes of screen time later (and later that same day), when Benji suggests a ‘movie afternoon’, Frances responds: ‘I already wasted the whole day. I already feel bad about the day.’ After an exchange during which Benji notes ‘It’s after three; I can drink’, and Frances asks whether she looks old, we jump cut to the pair on the sofa, illuminated by the offscreen television. Frances is eating takeaway, again too quickly, and again without pleasure.



The unboundedness of the time of intimacy, which the opening montage captures and expresses so effectively in both its general form and its specific content, becomes something against which Frances will later repeatedly measure the loss of that intimacy. Frances bristles when she perceives Sophie to be allotting her a predefined and measly amount of time in her schedule: she does not respond well when Sophie’s first answer to the question ‘What are we doing with *our* day?’ is ‘I gotta get going around five’ (emphases added). A similar moment occurs later when Sophie’s boyfriend ‘Patch’ (Patrick Heusinger) suggests that the three of them go for ‘a quick drink’, a phrase that Frances repeats, with a question mark, and an edge. The ‘quick drink’ culminates in Frances taking a reluctant



Sophie away from Patch to the bathroom ('Really? We're still doing this?' Sophie asks) and shouting at her 'Don't treat me like a three-hour brunch friend!'

A little over halfway through the film, Frances talks movingly about what she 'want[s] in a relationship'. The sustainedness of her speech and the fact that the camera holds her in a medium close-up without cutting for much of it encourages us to register it as a key moment. And it is 'this one moment' that Frances explains she wants:

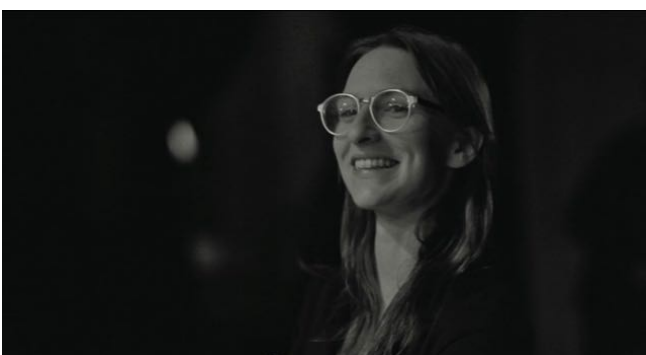
... you're with someone and you love them and they know it and they love you and you know it, but it's a party, and you're both talking to other people, and you're laughing and shining, and you look across the room and catch each other's eyes, but, but not because you're possessive or it's precisely sexual. But because that is your person in this life. 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.

The film's penultimate scene ends with Frances achieving a moment with Sophie (during the mingling that follows the performance of a piece of contemporary dance choreographed by Frances) that we are encouraged to invest with the significance of the speech quoted above. The moment, however, does not pass 'unnoticed': Frances's colleague and mentor Colleen (Charlotte d'Ambroise) asks Frances who she is 'making eyes at'. The moment also

gains poignancy (underlined by the score) due to the sense that another thing that is being achieved in this moment is Frances, after having spent the rest of the film either lamenting the loss of or trying to cling onto or recreate her relationship with Sophie, making her peace with the new (and much-diminished) degree of intimacy she can now expect from that relationship.

The film's opening montage is made up of a flow of moments that bespeak an intimate relationship built upon an unspoken assumption that time is, first and foremost, a thing to be shared and enjoyed in company of the other half of the couple. This is not achieved by showing us moments which we are encouraged to spread across many weeks or months (the events of the park and the subway are the events of a single day, as the continuity implies and the costumes confirm; likewise, Frances and Sophie wear the same clothes from the food preparation shot through to the laundrette one), or by showing us similar activities repeatedly. Rather, the types of things that the couple do together (or alongside one another) and the ways in which they do them open a window onto their easy intimacy. The beauty of Frances and Sophie's initial relationship and the way it is presented is not that single, perfect moments are achieved or articulated, but that the couple so lavishly bestow upon one another lengthy, unbounded passages of time.

James Zborowski



James Zborowski is Lecturer in Film and Television Studies in the School of Drama, Music and Screen at the University of Hull. His book *Classical Hollywood Cinema: Point of View and Communication* has just been published by Manchester University Press.

© James Zborowski, 2015

[*Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*](#), 6

¹ The piece is the theme from François Truffaut's *Une belle fille comme moi / Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me* (1972), composed by Georges Delerue.