

“I’m Not a Real Person Yet”: Queering Coming of Age in *Frances Ha*

Annika M. Schadewaldt
Leipzig, Germany

Abstract: The 2012 film *Frances Ha*, portraying twenty-seven-year-old Frances Halladay’s everyday struggles in New York City, poses a problem of genre classification: No critical consensus exists on whether *Frances Ha*’s portrayal of Frances should be called critical or affirmative. Yet even the sympathetic descriptions of what is perceived as Frances’s arrested development suggest that Frances as a character continually fails at being a ‘proper adult.’ This essay, however, posits that this alleged indecisiveness of the film’s central message should be understood as a conscious strategy insofar as *Frances Ha* ‘queers’ the genre of coming of age. That is, I suggest that understanding the film in terms of conventional notions of coming of age based on a bildungsroman tradition must necessarily prove insufficient. Drawing on the work of, among others, Susan Fraiman and Jack Halberstam, this essay argues that *Frances Ha* can be read as an interrogation of heteronormative concepts of maturity by queering notions of matrimony, development, and mastery. In doing this, the film opens up spaces for imagining alternative ‘modes of life.’ Treating Frances’s perceived immaturity as consciously made ‘mistakes’ instead allows us to unpack the film’s subversive intervention into what it means to be a ‘grown up’ in twenty-first-century America.

The 2012 film *Frances Ha*, directed by Noah Baumbach and written by him and Greta Gerwig, depicts the struggles of twenty-seven-year-old Frances Halladay to both find a new permanent home and make a career as a dancer. After being unable to renew the lease of her shared apartment in Brooklyn due to her best friend Sophie deciding to move to Tribeca instead, the film follows, in the form of short self-encompassed episodes, Frances’s meandering journey through a variety of interim homes and jobs—each episode starting with her new address—before finally showing her moving into her own apartment as well as starting to work as a choreographer. While the film received wide critical acclaim

upon its release, it poses what could be called a problem of genre classification. As an overview of the media coverage suggests,¹ *Frances Ha* seems to create some interpretative confusion: There is a surprising amount of uncertainty regarding the central message of the film generally and how to evaluate Frances's journey specifically.²

By and large, the film is read as the story of a female Peter Pan figure, unable or unwilling to grow up. Frances, in these reviews, is seen as “fluctuat[ing] between the desire for growth and the fear of the demands of adulthood” (Martin 32), having “a huge capacity for denial [and being] touchingly quixotic” (Taubin 27), “kidding herself that she is going to be a dancer” (Thomson 65), and “smiling on the brink of collapse” (Weisberg). That is, Frances appears to be somewhat of an infantile antihero, an issue that becomes clearest in phrasings linking Frances to “a smarter, human version of a stubborn golden retriever” (Puig) or describing her as acting “in the manner of an overgrown toddler” (Scott). Both these phrasings utilize ciphers for innocence, gesturing toward a perceived arrested development of Frances, who—as also becomes clear from the exemplary quotes above—is seen as continually failing at being a ‘proper adult.’ Yet instead of either mapping Frances's eventual rite of passage and initiation into adulthood or pathologizing her supposed stagnation,³ the film seems to make “an argument for the dreamy beauty of being untethered” (Weisberg).

This radical acceptance of and holding onto the very thing conventional coming-of-age narratives generically present as something to overcome—the liminal stage between childhood and adulthood—shows the film as at odds with the ways in which growing up is usually conceptualized. The narrative form of coming of age can be traced back to the German bildungsroman of the

1 Except for Zborowski's article and a chapter in Radner's *The New Woman's Film*, *Frances Ha* has up to date not received any significant scholarly attention.

2 When using the term ‘genre’ in this paper, I do not mean to mobilize an understanding of the term of the like of Northrop Frye, in which genre is always already in the artwork waiting to be discovered by the critic, but rather as a much more fluid category that nevertheless structures our understanding of a text in important ways. For a useful overview of current debates in genre theory, see Frow.

3 This absence of pathologizing Frances's refusal to act like a ‘proper adult’ is especially noteworthy due to the film's overt allusions to the black-and-white cinematography of Woody Allen's *Manhattan* and the scores of the French Nouvelle Vague. These referenced films call up a canon of difficult men struggling to settle down and grow up—such as Allen's neurotic Isaak Davis or Carax's Alex in *Mauvais Sang*, whose half-run, half-dance Frances imitates—in contrast to which Frances's “optimistic sensibility” (Radner 136) becomes even more striking.

Enlightenment period—most famously Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (Buckley 12). Both certainly cannot be understood as completely synonymous.⁴ Yet given the shared ideological underpinnings, engaging with the cultural work of the bildungsroman allows us to understand in more nuance the specific intervention *Frances Ha* stages. Roughly speaking, the bildungsroman dramatizes the development in an individual’s life from childhood to being a fully matured adult along the lines of a journey from apprenticeship to mastery, one that for the traditional female protagonist is mainly substituted by a journey toward matrimony (Fraiman 5). Yet as Susan Fraiman, among others, has pointed out, this form “define[s] development in emphatically masculine terms” (5), portraying “the hero ‘choosing his friends, his wife, and his life work’ and chronicl[ing] his educative wrong choices en route to right ones” (5). It is against this teleological backdrop that the perceived ambiguity regarding the film’s central message becomes clear.

In contrast to critics who frame the film as an affirmation of the bildungsroman, such as Brian Eggert or Alice Tollaksen, I posit that *Frances Ha* effectively queers—i.e., subverts—the genre of coming of age and its underlying conventions rooted in the bildungsroman. Interpreting the film against the background of a traditional, heteronormative understanding of coming of age and maturity, as the previously quoted critics have attempted, must, therefore, necessarily prove insufficient. Drawing, among others, on the work of queer theorist Jack Halberstam, I argue that *Frances Ha* should be read as deconstructing the bildungsroman’s heteronormative concepts of maturity by effectively queering notions of matrimony, development, and mastery underlying the traditional trajectory of coming-of-age narratives. In doing so, the film opens up spaces for imagining alternative ‘modes of life.’⁵

4 For an in-depth discussion of the historical and cultural situatedness of the term bildungsroman, cf. Hardin x-xii.

5 I am borrowing this phrase from Michel Foucault’s assertion in “Friendship as a Way of Life” that “what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’ [is] the homosexual *mode of life*, much more than the sexual act itself” (136, emphasis mine), that is “that individuals are beginning to love one another” (137). In this, I understand Foucault to locate the ‘threatening’ aspect of homosexuality in its undermining of heteronormativity’s naturalization of equating heterosexual marriage aimed at reproduction with the good life. Reading *Frances Ha* as queer is, then, not meant to suggest that Frances is ‘actually’ homosexual (or, in fact, making any claim about the character’s sexual object choice) but rather to understand the film as interrogating possibilities of achieving the good life outside of this heteronormative equation. As Lee Edelman puts it, “queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (17; for a thorough discussion of this, cf., for example, Doty xviii, 3-16).

PLATONIC PILLOW TALK—QUEERING MATRIMONY

In an interview with the magazine *Sight and Sound*, Greta Gerwig remarks on *Frances Ha*'s basic plotline that they “never started out saying [they] were going to make a love story between these two friends but it just emerged in the writing of the scenes” (qtd. in “Deconstructing”). Yet after Gerwig and Baumbach noticed the importance of the relationship between Frances and Sophie for the film as a whole, they “went back and actually 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 but you’re never quite sure what they will or won’t do” (Gerwig qtd. in “Deconstructing”). Whereas audiences are quite familiar with this narrative pattern, *Frances Ha* changes its specific gendering by showing it played out between two women: ‘Boy meets girl’ becomes ‘girl meets girl.’ What is more, the usual resolution of this pattern—marriage or at least implied future marriage—is almost entirely taken out of the equation for the protagonist Frances. Instead, *Frances Ha* unwaveringly holds on to the central importance of female friendship.

Frances Ha's commitment to platonic friendship herein stands in sharp contrast to a shift from the homosocial world of childhood to the heterosexual world of maturity conventionally found in female coming-of-age narratives.⁶ While (implied) matrimony as such remains one of many outcomes for the traditional male hero of the bildungsroman—among which mastery remains central—in narratives of female development, matrimony conventionally becomes the single most important outcome. Due to this, as Susan Fraiman highlights, the female protagonist's choices are usually “subsumed by the single, all-determining ‘choice’ of a husband” (6), substituting her male counterparts' additional “finding of friends” and “picking of work” (5-6). While the importance of matrimony has diminished since, stories of female development, coming of age, and other kinds of stories of “willful self-making” (6) continue to be tightly connected to (implied) matrimony.⁷

6 One canonical example for this topos would be the breakdown of Hermia and Helena's friendship due to the expectation of marriage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: “Is all the counsel that we two have shared / The sisters' vows, the hours that we have spent / When we have chid the hasty-footed time / For parting us—O, is all quite forgot? / All schooldays' friendship, childhood innocence?” (Shakespeare 839; III.ii, l. 199-203).

7 A recent, well-known example for this would be Ryan Murphy's 2010 adaptation of Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir *Eat Pray Love*, in which a woman's journey of self-discovery is rendered successful by having her find true love as an outcome.

Yet while, traditionally, friendship—or, to use Eve Sedgwick’s term, homosociality—for women is connected to childhood, and maturity is, in turn, connected to heterosexual romance, *Frances Ha* subverts the status of the latter and this trajectory. In this chapter, I will show how the film achieves this by, first, blurring from the onset the distinction between platonic friendship and romantic relationships and, second, portraying heterosexual romance as, at best, circumstantial—as is the case for Frances—or, at worst, detrimental to a good life, as in Sophie’s case. The movie thereby calls into question both the societal prioritization of romance as the true space of intimacy and the desirability of heterosexual matrimony for women in general. While *Frances Ha*’s blatant exclusion of any actual homosexual pairing—the possibility of this only ever comes up in the form of jokes⁸—could be read as a political blind spot of the film, I posit in contrast that this can also be understood as criticizing the status of romantic relationships and sexuality per se as central markers of maturity and personal fulfillment.

Already the opening scenes exemplify the film’s general depiction of romantic and platonic relationships by pitting Frances’s main platonic and romantic relationships against each other. In what could be called, according to James Zborowski, the ‘prologue’ of the movie given its placement before the actual title frame (46), the audience is introduced to the centrality of the two young women’s relationship for each other (0:00:30–0:02:08). In the following scene, Frances is, in contrast, shown interacting with a man, her then boyfriend Dan (0:02:10–0:06:02). The opening montage—showing Frances and her best friend Sophie spending time together doing a variety of everyday activities—herein “become[s] a means of measuring [...] Frances’s various interactions throughout the rest of the film” (Zborowski 46) and, I would add, the quality of intimacy per se. In contrast to the kind of relationship Sophie and Frances are shown to have in the opening sequence—a relationship portrayed as light and playful, as suggested by the quick series of shots showing quotidian activities underlined by playful extradiegetic music⁹—Frances and Dan’s relationship is marked by Dan’s strenuous “attempt to negotiate [...] intimacy” (47) with Frances. Here, viewers observe an awkward back-and-forth

8 Sophie, for example, tells Frances “the coffee people are right. We are like a lesbian couple that doesn’t have sex anymore” (0:07:19–25).

9 The song playing is Georges Delerue’s “Une Belle Fille Comme Moi,” drawing attention to Frances’ status as a person who has “yet to be incorporated into society, to achieve a stable identity as an adult” (Radner 145).

that is emphasized by the abrupt end of the music and the perceived halting of motion by the comparatively much longer duration and slower pace of the single shot,¹⁰ thereby marking the two women's friendship as the more natural, fitting connection of the two relationships shown (cf. 47). This point is further underlined by showing Frances and Sophie in the same frame, while Frances and Dan's conversation is mainly conveyed via shot reverse shots, highlighting a fundamental division between the two.

This reframing of friendship as the actual realm of intimacy is, furthermore, shown by the portrayal of Sophie and Frances's relationship as the realization of Frances's definition of love. In a scene much later in the movie, Frances bursts out during a dinner with acquaintances, trying to capture what she pictures as the utopic ideal of love:

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. 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 [...]. That's what I want out of a relationship. Or just life, I guess. (0:49:47-0:50:49)

While nothing in the scene indicates that this description is about anything else than romantic love, the second to last scene of the movie shows Sophie and Frances's relationship as the very realization of this desire. During a reception after Frances's debut as a choreographer, Frances's imagined silent understanding is dramatized by a shot reverse shot that shows Frances and Sophie making eye contact, although both are in different conversations, hence enacting the very scene Frances had envisioned (1:20:57-1:21:30). To Frances's boss Colleen's question whom she is 'making eyes at,' Frances lovingly replies, "This is Sophie. She is my best friend!" underlining the merging of concepts of friendship and love in the movie, thus reclaiming the exclusivity of someone being 'your person in this life' usually ascribed to sexual, romantic relationships for friendship.¹¹

10 As Zborowski highlights, this impression is intensified by repeating the same juxtaposition in the second scene itself by having Sophie interrupt Frances and Dan's conversation with a phone call "which begins with an extravagantly, and loudly, delivered exclamation of 'Yo girl what's up!,' quickly followed by 'Are you drunk? I love you!'" (47), creating a stark contrast to the stagnant conversation of the couple deciding whether to move in together or to break up.

11 For a different reading of these two scenes, cf. Radner 141-42.

In addition, the merging of love and friendship can also be observed on the level of the language and habits they use for showing affection, where a similar reattribution takes place. Throughout the movie, Frances describes her relationship to Sophie in terms usually tightly linked to romance. For example, she tells Benji and Lev, who would later become her roommates, after hanging out that “[t]his is the best night [she has] had since Sophie dumped [her]” (0:22:00–04), thus putting her separation from Sophie on par with the end of a romantic relationship. This impression is reaffirmed several times, such as when Benji aligns Frances’s jealousy of Sophie’s new roommate Lisa with Lev’s jealousy of his new girlfriend’s past romances (0:25:25), or by the sheer frequency of saying “I love you” to each other throughout the movie (e.g., 0:08:54, 0:59:47, 1:15:25). Similarly, Frances asks Sophie whether she would “wanna see [her] room” (0:30:39), mimicking verbatim Lev’s earlier attempt for a hookup with Frances (0:20:06). Moreover, Sophie and Frances are shown to share important, future-oriented conversations while snuggling in the same bed and dream up their lives together by telling each other their “story,” the habitual nature of this being implied by Sophie answering “again?” when Frances is requesting to hear it (0:09:47–0:10:18). This story, which is told alternately by the two of them, strikingly consists of the two spending their lives together, co-owning a vacation home in Paris, and being successful in their respective careers. In contrast, romance only enters this story temporarily in the form of unnamed “lovers,” a positioning that is reaffirmed when Frances later suggests that the two of them “gonna end up spinsters” (0:31:00–01),¹² suggesting the possibility of a life well spent outside of matrimony.

This portrayal of female friendship is juxtaposed with a depiction of romance as temporary, peripheral, and mainly focused on physical desires. This can be seen, for example, when Sophie and Frances talk about their respective relationships. Both women talk about their boyfriends primarily in terms of the two men’s sexual preferences, which also become the butt of a joke during these conversations (0:07:45–0:08:15). Additionally, romantic relationships are shown to be temporary—Sophie speaks of her boyfriend Patch as “for today” (0:08:17) and later as “not engaged engaged” (1:09:23)—and ultimately unfulfilling, an element introduced by having Sophie end up marrying Patch, with whom she admits to not be happy

12 This reclaiming of spinsterhood as an aspiration is further highlighted by Frances’s boyfriend Dan effectively ending up after their breakup as “a single guy with two cats” (0:05:10), leaving him instead of her with the traditional entourage of spinsterhood.

(1:14:17-21). As critic Sophie Mayer points out, Sophie's storyline tracks "the shift from a rich homosocial lifestyle, associated with artistic freedom and hedonism, to unsatisfactory, exclusory heterosexual pair bonding, associated with loss and compromise," thereby casting doubt on the desirability of matrimony for women.

Frances, in contrast, choosing to opt out of these conventional ideas of maturity tied to heterosexual romance and matrimony, succeeds in finding happiness by staying exactly where she had always been. While Frances might start to date her former roommate Benji at the end of the movie—he asks her whether she is still "undateable" (1:20:48)—this does not lead to a typical happy ending, 'straightening out' the queerness of the depicted relationships. In contrast, their emerging romantic relationship seems merely like a variation of their former friendship, which they defined as a "marriage" (0:52:05-09) based on their constant talking without having sex and which is, most importantly, not "disrupt[ing] [Frances's] relationship with Sophie" (Baumbach qtd. in "Deconstructing"), rendering the question "if Frances and Benji will ever get together [...] actually irrelevant in the romance that is this movie" (Baker).¹³ In addition, Frances's portrayal does not map her development into a performance of conventional femininity, mimicking an ugly-duckling storyline. Instead, Frances, who is, for example, described by Benji as having "a weird man-walk" (0:51:57-0:52:00), remains her somewhat clumsy tomboy self, escaping the assimilation into a much more policed version of femininity usually dramatized in female coming-of-age stories.¹⁴ Thus, in contrast to conventional narratives of female coming of age, *Frances Ha* portrays friendship—especially female friendship—as the realm of authentic, effortless intimacy, whereas heterosexual romantic relationships seem neither as fulfilling nor as meaningful as the platonic relationships in one's life. In this way, the movie effectively blurs the boundary between these two concepts as well as calling into question the status of romantic relationships as a desirable marker of maturity.

13 While it surely could be argued that *Frances Ha*'s resolution nevertheless does reinscribe the status quo, it is important to point out that in the movie, this particular ending becomes one contingent option out of many instead of the single correct one, a seemingly small yet powerful reconfiguration that displaces the relation of romance and the good life from causation to correlation.

14 As Halberstam notes in *Female Masculinity*, while female 'tomboyishness' is usually socially accepted during childhood, this changes drastically during adolescence: "Female adolescence represents the crisis of coming of age as a girl in male-dominated society. If adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage (much celebrated in Western literature in the form of the bildungsroman), and an ascension to some version (however attenuated) of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression" (6).

A TIMELINE OF ONE'S OWN—QUEERING DEVELOPMENT

As Zborowski highlights in his article “Passing Time in *Frances Ha*,” Sophie and Frances’s relationship rests on “the tacit shared understanding [...] that vast expanses of unbounded time will be spent together” (48; Radner 141). The willingness of both partners to “lavishly bestow upon one another lengthy, unbounded passages of time” (49) herein becomes the measurement for their dedication to and intimacy with each other. While his analysis makes clear that time is one if not the crucial category in which *Frances Ha* measures intimacy, Zborowski fails to acknowledge the larger implications of different conceptualizations of time for notions of development and their gendered implications in the movie. According to G. B. Tennyson’s translation of Dilthey’s influential definition, the bildungsroman “examines a regular course of development in the life of the individual,” in which “each of its stages has its own value and each is at the same time the basis of a higher stage” (qtd. in Fraiman 147)—a definition that, by focusing on “a vocational practice and chronology,” suggests a “straightforward sequence” (Fraiman 4). This linear progression of subsequent stages, as Fraiman points out, is “an inherently optimistic form” (4), that is, it can be called quintessentially future-oriented, assuming a resolution of conflict at the end of a journey that merges movement through both time and space (cf. Fraiman 149).

Whereas in “that teleological process which is the proper focus of the coming-of-age narrative” (Millard 5), time is conceptualized in terms of a linear progress and therefore diminishing resource, Frances throughout the film treats time as an unlimited resource, opting for a lifestyle without serious considerations of efficiency, seemingly inhabiting a different temporality than her surroundings. This approach to time is best exemplified in the opening montage of the movie showing Frances and Sophie doing an array of idiosyncratic activities that refuse logics of effectivity: The two are shown earning money in the park by dancing and playing music, yet afterwards giving it to the next musicians they come across or, in a subsequent shot, running through the city only to stand around moments later (Zborowski 48). Treating time this way, Frances refuses to succumb to ‘proper adult’ behavior—a fact the film draws attention to by calling out her ‘wasting’ of time (0:26:34-56)—by remaining in the childhood framework of ‘passing time’ instead of adapting the cost-benefit logic of ‘spending’ time.

This perspective on time and how to spend it, however, is shown to be in constant confrontation with Frances's surroundings. This becomes clearest when Frances is told by one of her roommate's one-night stands that she looks old, or at least older than Sophie "but less grown up" (0:25:32-40). While the gendered implications of this remark are quite obvious, further unpacking it unveils a much more complex problem in relation to normative perspectives on time. Whereas most obviously "you look older" can be understood as a sexist insult given Western society's linking of female beauty and youth, the statement also more subtly voices a criticism of how Frances spends her life in contrast to a societal expectation of time that assigns certain periods of time to certain behaviors and lifestyles. As Halberstam points out, "in Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; and we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life [...], and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity" (*In a Queer Time* 4). Frances being twenty-seven—an age that not only, as Benji points out, is "old though" (0:28:03) but is also highly charged in popular culture as a point when people refusing processes of maturation are punished by death—is thus linked to modes of life that "show little or no concern for longevity" (Halberstam, *In A Queer Time* 4). Frances, however, neither seems willing to leave this unruly period any time soon nor is there any indication for this being a problem: when Frances decides to not 'waste' her day, she understands this as going to the Met (0:24:20-22).

Moreover, instead of steadily moving toward a future, Frances seems to jump backwards and forwards in time. As the film progresses, we watch Frances not only going back to her parents but also working at her former college while moving back into a dorm room. Strikingly, neither situation is portrayed as problematic in terms of a failure of reaching a certain status at age twenty-seven. Instead, when she talks to Sophie during her stay in the dorms, Frances mentions that living in a different dorm now than when she was a student is like living "the life I never had" (1:11:24-26), framing her going back to college therefore as trying out a different option in another possible world instead of a step back in her development. Similarly, when Frances visits her parents in California for Christmas, she is shown lying in a bathtub—an image brimming with ideas linked to rebirth—not answering her mother's knocks and her question of how much longer she needs, remaining strictly in the present (0:42:30-45). While none of these scenes are void of

hardness—Frances is well aware of the demands of her surroundings—they nevertheless underline the film’s celebration of wiggle rooms outside of normative conceptions of time that frame maturity as a linear progress.¹⁵ This rejection of linearity is further underlined by mirroring shots: When Frances leaves her parents, she is shown as riding the escalator up facing her parents, creating the impression that the final shot of the scene is merely the first shot that shows her coming down the escalator toward her parents in reverse (0:40:10–14, 0:43:34–50). Thus, Frances is depicted, to use Kathryn Bond Stockton’s term, as ‘growing sideways’ instead of ‘up,’ successfully holding onto her own scheduling.

By having Frances jump back and forth in this way instead of adhering to a linear development continuously progressing forward, the film additionally disrupts coming of age and the bildungsroman’s emphasis on the journey conventionally used to symbolize the protagonist’s development. Remarkably, Frances’s zigzag journey herein inverts the typical topography of US American quest narratives, which track a journey from the east to the west, by instead having her grow up in the west and move east in her attempt of self-making and fulfilling her dreams. Additionally, the traditional linear movement is also disrupted by showing her going back and forth between the coasts as stages of nevertheless continuing development. This, furthermore, turns similar journeys in American coming-of-age narratives topsy-turvy: While figures like Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield experience urban spaces in general (and in Holden’s case even New York specifically) as the realm of adulthood, and hence want to go to the mythologized rural west as the realm of continuing innocence and liberty trying to escape growing up, *Frances Ha* draws up an urban northeast that is able to accommodate Frances to remain in her liminal space of adolescence.¹⁶ What is more, the one time Frances decides, in her words, “to do what [she is] supposed to do when [she is] supposed to do it” (0:52:55–58)—in this case going to Paris to find herself—marks, in fact, the nadir of the film: Frances is shown to be completely lost, rotating between trying to reach a

15 To name just a few scholars who have theorized queerness as opposing linearity, see Judith Butler’s focus on repetition, José Esteban Muñoz’s work on utopia, Lee Edelman’s concept of “heterofuturity,” or more recently Alison Kafer’s “crip time” (cf. Halberstam, *The Queer Art* 72–74). All these draw upon Deleuze’s reception and continuation of Bergson’s attempt to distinguish two conceptions of time, one quantitative and one qualitative.

16 While an exploration of this would go beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that, as Kenneth Millard points out, questions of innocence and maturity seem to have special traction in popular culture due to their “particular resonance in the context of American national mythology” (5).

friend on the phone and wandering the city (0:55:58-1:00:25).¹⁷ Thus, adhering to preconceived timelines, here, is shown neither to lead to the promised self-discovery nor to happiness.

A remarkable aspect of the Paris episode is that the apathy Frances experiences is measured by a juxtaposition of Frances lying in her bed and children playing outside of her window (0:55:58-1:00:25). While this detail easily goes unnoticed, the disruptive presence of children serves as a reminder of the very development and structuring of time Frances's choices reject. As Halberstam points out, many ideas of "scheduling of daily life (early to bed, early to rise) [...] [are] governed by an imagined set of children's needs, and [relate] to beliefs about children's health and healthful environments for child rearing" (*In a Queer Time* 5), unveiling the gendered implications of timelines. An understanding of queerness as positioned against a hegemonic concept of maturity, which links successful adulthood with the adherence to a reproductive timeline, then allows for both an interrogation of this form of life schedule and gesturing toward the possibility of "leav[ing] the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). *Frances Ha* actively negates reproduction as a desirable goal for women throughout the movie: Neither Sophie's nor Frances's future plans as mapped in their 'story' involve having children; to the contrary, they specifically exclude wanting to have children, instead opting for "honorary degrees, lots of honorary degrees" (0:10:10-18). This decision against reproduction is reaffirmed in a scene toward the end of the movie in which Sophie confesses drunkenly to Frances that she had been pregnant and has been happy to have lost it (1:12:58-1:13:14). Instead, as already foreshadowed by the wish for 'honorary degrees,' *Frances Ha* introduces the possibility of choosing production over reproduction for its female protagonist as a desirable goal and conceptualization of fulfillment.

"I LIKE THINGS THAT LOOK LIKE MISTAKES"—QUEERING MASTERY

In a scene midway through the movie, Frances is invited to a dinner party by a former coworker attended by a variety of more or less successful professionals (0:44:44-0:51:45). During the dinner Frances is asked by the man sitting next to her what she is doing for work. When Frances replies that this is a hard question for her

17 Cleverly, Frances is planning on reading Proust in Paris, the title of whose central work reflects the film's concern with the idea of 'lost time.'

to answer, he wonders whether this is the case because what she is doing is hard. To this Frances replies that it is mainly hard to explain “because [she does not] really do it,” adding reluctantly: “I’m a dancer I guess” (0:45:53–0:46:07). Similarly, she later repeatedly corrects people that she is “not a waitress” but merely “pours” (1:05:36–38), refusing to equate what she does with her identity. This perceived discrepancy between what Frances’s life looks like and her self-definition is exemplary of how the film as a whole speaks to spaces situated in between a clear-cut binary opposition of success and failure. Yet whereas traditional coming-of-age narratives structure storylines around the overcoming of obstacles, letting “dissonances and conflicts [...] appear as the necessary transit points of the individual on his way to maturity and harmony” (Tennyson qtd. in Fraiman 147–48), *Frances Ha*, in contrast, interrogates these unspoken assumptions of success and failure.

Similarly to the category of time, the categories of success and failure are not usually seen as being linked to hegemonic heteronormativity. However, as Halberstam argues in his 2011 monograph *The Queer Art of Failure*, “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (2), highlighting the interaction of these concepts. While the second chapter already discussed *Frances Ha*’s interrogation of normative concepts of reproductive time and teleological development, this chapter will look at how the film frames success and failure in contrast to a normative understanding of these concepts as sketched out by Halberstam, focusing on the emphasis of mastery in both this definition as well as in the bildungsroman. While failure in contemporary Western society is oftentimes understood as a lack of a specific capability, Halberstam reframes failure “as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (*The Queer Art* 11–12). In this, queering notions of success and failure not only allows us to theorize and inhabit a space between “cynical resignation on the one hand and naïve optimism on the other” (1) but also provides us with a definition that speaks powerfully to the conventions of the bildungsroman as a genre that—although focusing on apprenticeship—always already carries with it the implicit resolution in achieving mastery (Fraiman 5).

As outlined above, Frances is “marginally employed and romantically unmoored” (Johnston) until the very end of the movie. Yet while this situation has critic Zach Baron describe Frances as “closer to actual failure,” it is worthwhile to

take into consideration another often raised observation about the unfolding of the film: In *Frances Ha*, “[t]here is little arc to the plot” (Weisberg). In fact, while it is possible to pinpoint several low points for Frances, such as her weekend trip to Paris, it is more difficult to tell exactly when and how the tables turn. Toward the end, the film cuts to a montage showing Frances back at the dance studio and taking the subway (1:16:44–51). However, given that the montage merely repeats what has been shown before—we see Frances taking the subway several times throughout the movie (e.g., 0:13:05, 0:53:30–32)—there is no real indication of change. Instead, the audience is simply subsequently presented with the result: the performance of a dance piece Frances has choreographed, suggesting a successful transition from her previous dream of becoming a dancer to being a choreographer, a transition that has been proposed to her much earlier by her boss Colleen.¹⁸ However, as film critic Richard Brody underlines, “the movie glosses over all that goes into the making of the show—the working, the casting, the exigencies of the day job she holds meanwhile.” In accordance with Frances’s tight connection to the present here and now, her success is shown as well to be merely there, thus rejecting a progress narrative placing mastery as the outcome of Frances “finding [the right] path, climb[ing] predictably from stage to higher stage” (Fraiman 5).

Yet not only does the movie remain silent about Frances’s many decisions and steps to become a choreographer, thereby withholding a reinscribing of a teleological narrative, it also undermines openly a basic tenet of the traditional conventions of coming-of-age narratives along the way. While Frances is working at Colleen’s dance studio, she is referred to as an ‘apprentice’ (e.g., 0:11:30), hoping to become a permanent dancer of the company to fulfill her dream. While, in the tradition of the bildungsroman, apprenticeship becomes the crucial stage by which the protagonist transitions from childhood to adulthood, Frances does not succeed in serving her apprenticeship. Instead, Frances quits her apprenticeship, a step that allows her to become a choreographer. Success, then, in *Frances Ha* is not depicted as a linear progression in which hard work, dedication, and stamina is eventually rewarded but instead can be considered another form of Stockton’s ‘growing

¹⁸ While Buckley insists on the centrality of the mentor figure for the development of the bildungsroman protagonist (19), Fraiman notes that “[t]he typical girl [...] has trouble with mentors,” often “spend[ing] the whole novel in search of positive maternal figures” (6). It is hence noteworthy that, although quite subdued, Frances starts out already equipped with an adequate mentor in Colleen, who somewhat paradoxically helps Frances’s development by refusing to employ her as a dancer.

sideways.’ Seen this way, success and failure stop being a binary opposition and give way to a more complex understanding, in which failure of a sort allows a reconfiguring of success in other spaces, not entirely different from Frances’s giving up on her chair (0:40:00-06) as it does not fit in her storage to accommodate and make possible her interim homelessness necessary for her development.

What does, however, change over the course of the movie is Frances’s relationship to movement more generally. As Ryan Gilbey asserts, one way to understand *Frances Ha* is in terms of moving: “Frances’s motion and optimism drive the film in the absence of an actual plot; it’s more an extended fiat hunt.” She is always “being moved on and not only from apartments. She can’t stop for a cigarette, use a communal computer terminal or take a dance class without being shooed away” (82). While Frances can primarily be watched being moved throughout the movie—be it in terms of someone literally telling her to move on or, more abstractly, by her inability to find a permanent place to stay—this changes in two fundamental ways at the end of the film. First, as already described, the second to last scene shows Frances as the choreographer of a dance show, thus portraying her as someone who coordinates other people’s movement for a living. Secondly, the last scene has Frances move into her own apartment, effectively ending her pilgrimage starting with her involuntary moving out at the beginning of the movie. However, this step, similar to her becoming a choreographer, is not shown in the film itself, adding to the film’s tendency to present these achievements as mere happenstances and not results of Frances’s making the right choices.

Keeping in mind this trajectory from being moved to moving and, hence, a shift from passivity to activity, Frances arguably obtains a qualified form of agency at the end of the film. This is noteworthy insofar as agency—“an individual’s capability to reach a decision about themselves and implement it” (Bast 27)—is an ability coming-of-age narratives generally and the bildungsroman specifically presuppose protagonists to always already possess. The bildungsroman’s emphasis of apprenticeship puts choice front and center, “participat[ing] in a mythology of vocational choice, of the worker as free individual” (Fraiman 5). Yet, as Bast highlights, agency should be seen as “an ability realized in a specific cultural and historical context and within a dialectic of enablement and constraint” (28). Considering the gendered nature of the choice-based model of mastery found in

the bildungsroman, *Frances Ha* unveils these implications, showing agency itself as part of development and not its axiomatic prerequisite.¹⁹

What, then, can be seen as *Frances Ha*'s reframing of notions of success and failure is a blurring of these two categories, the unearthing of their premises, and a newfound easiness for remaining in a space of being in-between. The film itself ends with Frances trying to put her name on her new letterbox. Yet due to Frances having written down her name on a piece of paper before going down to the letterbox, the sizing of the nameplate is off, hiding the second part of her last name Halladay. This scene, which primarily serves as an explanation for the movie's title, can also be read as "a neat joke about someone reinventing themselves, taking life lightly, and only halfway there" (Mayer). Nevertheless, as Frances herself reminds the audience when talking to Benji about her choreography, she "likes things that look like mistakes" (1:20:06-08). Hence, Frances's 'mistake' of writing her name on a too-large piece of paper can also be seen as symptomatic for Frances's newfound agency and not merely coincidental: Cutting her name in half allows her to own the process of renaming herself. Similarly to finally possessing a Woolfian 'room of her own,' instead of changing her name by marriage, Frances "settles down [...] with herself" (Rothman), inhabiting a queer space between mistake and choice, activity and passivity.²⁰ Thus, as the film leaves Frances, she, to quote another woman queering the status quo, "dwell[s] in possibility [...] spreading wide [her] narrow Hands / To gather Paradise -" (Dickinson 483-84).

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have argued that the film *Frances Ha* can be understood as an intervention into the genre conventions of the bildungsroman that underlie coming-of-age narratives. It hereby calls into question heteronormative

19 Insofar as Frances's agency is in the end centered on moving others, she is ironically and consequently closer to the transcendent element of the ominous 'Tower Society' of *Wilhelm Meister* that preordains his journey toward mastery and success than to the protagonist himself.

20 Joseph Litvak mentions in a conversation with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick that he assumes "that the importance of 'mistakes' in queer reading and writing . . . has a lot to do with loosening the traumatic, inevitable-seeming connection between mistakes and humiliation. What I mean is that, if a lot of queer energy, say around adolescence, goes into what Barthes calls 'le vouloir-être-intelligent' [...], a lot of queer energy, later on, goes into . . . practices aimed at taking the terror out of error, at making the making of mistakes sexy, creative, even cognitively powerful. Doesn't reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises?" (qtd. in Sedgwick 147).

conceptualizations of maturity by queering hegemonic concepts of romance, time, and success. While traditional coming-of-age narratives dramatize the (male) protagonist's transition from childhood/innocence to adulthood/maturity, *Frances Ha* disturbs this underlying teleological narrative in several crucial ways. Maturity in these narratives is conventionally conceptualized along the central markers of matrimony, development, and eventual mastery, all of which *Frances Ha* subverts. First of all, the film calls into question the desirability to leave behind the realm of childhood's homosociality for the supposedly mature world of heterosexual romance. Instead, the movie not only continually blurs the distinction between platonic friendships and romantic relationships but also casts doubt on the promise of fulfillment and happiness in matrimony for women. Second, whereas the transition to adulthood in traditional coming-of-age narratives is portrayed as a linear process conventionally dramatized as a journey, Frances is shown to both temporarily and spatially move back and forth, subverting linear concepts of time linked to heteronormative reproduction. While Frances does, in fact, experience growth in the course of the movie, growth happens in a radical presence instead of in a linear time frame, showing Frances as growing 'sideways' instead of 'up.' Finally, *Frances Ha* destabilizes a fixed notion of mastery by undermining the binary opposition of success and failure, instead shifting the emphasis to the achieving of a qualified agency. While traditional coming-of-age narratives always already presuppose the protagonist's possession of agency, *Frances Ha* creates an in-between realm by framing success as the shift to a different here instead of the telos of a progress narrative, focusing on more subtle changes such as the shift from being moved to being able to move oneself.

It may very well be in this holding onto subtlety that *Frances Ha* succeeds in telling a queer story of growing up in the US of the twenty-first century, interrogating both the necessity and desirability of an "evolution of a coherent self" (Abel et al. 13). Instead, as the title quote suggests, the film shows that it might, after all, be okay to 'not [be] a real person yet.' While this subtlety has so far been read as an indecisiveness on the side of the movie, i.e., which message it sets out to send and what project it embarks on, I have argued that it is, in fact, the reclaiming of the transitory, liminal space of adolescence as a stable and enduring habitat that lies at the heart of *Frances Ha*'s queer project. By having Frances hold onto homosocial relationships, a radical presence with non-teleological forms of development, and an understanding of success that is, similarly to her style of dancing, a mixture of

tumbling and pirouetting, the film undermines a heteronormative equation of the good life with the bourgeois focus on matrimony, reproduction, and mastery. Instead of reading Frances as failing at being a ‘proper’ adult, it portrays Frances as consciously choosing to opt out of this understanding of being a successful grown-up, conceptualizing her rite of passage as continual pratfalls instead of a single fall from innocence. In this, *Frances Ha* thus opens up imaginative spaces to explore other forms of being in the world, other ‘modes of life.’

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