

Knocked Up and a certain generation's “family values”

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Knocked Up, written and directed by Judd Apatow

Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up*, about an unlikely young couple who decide to go through with having a baby, is not a good film, or even consistently an amusing one. The storm of praise it has received is one more indication of how little most critics and far too many audience members demand of contemporary films.

The unemployed, disheveled Ben (Seth Rogen) meets Alison (Katherine Heigl), who is celebrating a promotion, at a club, and the pair drunkenly spend the night together. The next morning, he is so unappealingly and ostentatiously boorish that she has no interest in seeing him again. Some weeks later, however, when Alison believes herself to be pregnant, she contacts Ben, and the remainder of the film concerns itself with whether they will find their way to a relationship and a life together.

He, on his side, has a house full of roommates who do little besides smoke dope and plan a mildly pornographic Internet site. The scenes set in this household alternate between the genuinely comic and, more often, the distastefully crude. Alison lives with her demonically driven sister Debbie (Leslie Mann), brother-in-law Pete (Paul Rudd) and her two nieces. This couple's quarreling and discontent, unconvincingly done for the most part, is presumably meant to remind the unwary that emotional “commitment” and marriage are not necessarily one and the same thing.

Everything about Debbie and Pete's lives—employment, income, children, house, looks—is conventional, yet they are fairly miserable. Ben and Alison, on the other hand, are entirely ill suited, their relations are unplanned, accidental, he at least has no job and hers is threatened by the pregnancy, and yet...

Apatow (*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*), 39, is currently enjoying great success, with many projects, as writer, producer or director, on his hands. He has obvious talent and energy, and a certain flair, but his concerns are too narrow. He speaks for a suburban, middle class generation that grew up in the Reagan years and beyond. The past quarter-century in the US, with its emphasis on wealth and individualism, has refashioned the elemental liberalism of this milieu.

Whereas the concerns remain, at least in the minds of the individuals involved, essentially “humanistic,” their content

has changed dramatically over the concerns of an earlier period. Recent history has convinced such people, either already well-to-do or in the process of becoming so, that protest against the general conditions of life is futile or counter-productive, or simply too demanding. Everything in their work is reduced to the small change of personal relations, “life choices” and “individual responsibility.”

Imperceptibly to themselves, perhaps, they have adapted their way of thinking to—or have even been molded by—the rightward lurch in official American opinion. It is not for nothing that Stephen Rodrick in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, in a feature story on the filmmaker, could write, “Both of the films Apatow has directed offer up the kind of conservative morals the Family Research Council [a right-wing Christian outfit] might embrace—if the humor weren't so filthy.” The protagonists, Rodrick notes, resist various temptations and are steered “toward doing the right thing.” There is something essentially conformist, despite the self-conscious lewdness and frenetic goings-on, about Apatow's work.

The worst aspect of all this is that filmmakers like Apatow and others, no doubt sensitive to certain aspects of life and capable of insight, are blocked from bringing into their work more complex and interesting phenomena. The results are terribly limited. They think they are advanced, with their lack of shyness about various bodily functions, but a film like *Knocked Up* hardly speaks to contemporary American life in an important or enlightening way. Possessing the arid “timelessness” of works that bring to bear secondary questions (worries about “relationships,” feelings of inadequacy, fears of rejection) that have troubled the given artist since adolescence, it could have been filmed a decade ago or more.

Hardly anything of the tension, the volatility, the nervous influx quality of American life in 2006 or 2007 enters into the film. At a juncture when it's difficult in everyday life to avoid complaints about (or curses aimed at) the Iraq war, George Bush, gas prices, multimillion-dollar salaries for corporate executives, falling house prices or other sources of public anger or anxiety; conspiracy theories, plausible or otherwise; rage of an increasingly social or anti-social character; and varying, often infuriating, manifestations of the generally dysfunctional character of American society, none of this appears or is hinted

at in Apatow's work. It is consciously oriented in another direction, a kind of comic, chaotic self-help book, a more knowing, grosser version of the afternoon television talk (advice) show. ("Take responsibility for your life," "Behave your way to success," "You choose your behavior; you chose the consequences," "The only person you control is *you*," etc.)

A good many elements of *Knocked Up* do not hold up well under close scrutiny. Little or no chemistry exists between Ben and Alison throughout. There are couples that are unlikely, and there are couples that are simply not couples at all. Critics assert that Seth Rogen is "funny," "sweet" and "charming." Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but I found him singularly unappealing—and his cohorts, amusing and eccentric rather than merely unpleasant, perhaps one tenth of their screen time, even less so.

Works like this are unconsciously, and opportunistically, constructed. What is Apatow's attitude toward the crude housemates? On the one hand, their persistent nastiness and one-upmanship toward one another and everyone who comes into their orbit are milked as a source of fashionably misanthropic comedy. The turn for the worse in American life over the past decades, the diminished and diminishing expectations for considerable layers of the population, has helped generate sour, sullen, spiteful humor (along with an audience for it) that specializes in picking on others, particularly those who are weaker. There's something unhealthy about this trend.

(Bullying can also be the result of other processes, including the sort of militaristic and jingoistic atmosphere deliberately being whipped up in the US. The housemates' passing references to Spielberg's *Munich*, where the "Jews kicked ass," besides being an obvious misreading of the film, has disturbing overtones.)

On the other hand, Apatow wants to have it both ways and extols the virtues of "family values." The scene in which Debbie, with Ben and Alison in tow, tracks down Pete, suspecting him of having an affair, and discovers instead that he has secretly been involved in a fantasy baseball league, rings utterly false. Apatow, who the *Times*'s Rodrick makes out to be fanatical about marital fidelity, apparently couldn't permit one of his lead characters to be guilty of straying. Such moral templates are inimical to serious art and the best forms of comedy.

Apatow stacks the deck, in any event. He creates a situation in which there are only two possibilities for Ben—carrying on with his vaguely bohemian, hedonistic, idle lifestyle or "growing up" and becoming a respectable, money-making petty bourgeois. The possibility of maturing and accepting certain personal responsibilities as well as doing something substantial and challenging, not necessarily financially well-rewarded, with one's life is excluded.

A word should be said as well in this regard about Apatow's attitude toward abortion. While he describes himself as solidly "pro-choice" in interviews, the film clearly steers clear of

challenging the right-wing attack on abortion. The word is never even uttered. Alison apparently dismisses the possibility out of hand. How likely is that? Since she is a seemingly perfect candidate for such a procedure—she's reached a critical moment in her career, she hardly knows or likes the father of the child, she has no apparent desire to start a family, she has the financial means to pay for an abortion—it's *dramatically* peculiar that she offers no serious explanation for her decision. If there are other issues, moral or quasi-religious ones, then the filmmaker should have her say so.

The relationship between Pete and Debbie is poorly or schematically drawn. Rudd, a gifted performer, tries his best to give some depth to his character, but the various elements don't add up. Pete is often cold, withdrawn, sarcastic, and it's never clear why—especially as it doesn't appear to tax him, at other moments, to be generous and warm. Mann, also gifted, strains to be difficult and demanding, but one generally has the sense that these are two intelligent and reasonable people laboring mightily to represent marital strife.

The artificiality of the approach is connected to the other issues mentioned above, the inward turning and lack of interest in broader currents of American life. According to the film's logic, economic strains and stresses have no consequences for emotional life. Pete and Debbie are well-off, and almost nothing is made of job or other kinds of pressures in their lives. Alison has concerns about her career, but they disappear for most of the film, except for a few jokes about her expanding waistline, and play no substantial role in how events unfold. Penniless, more or less, Ben feels no apparent urgency about his condition, until Alison breaks up with him. Even then, it's less a matter of economics than of "taking responsibility."

There are comic moments and some freshness in certain scenes, likeable bits, even satiric touches (Alison's bosses at the dreadful television network where she works are nicely done), but overall, this is a weak effort.



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