The family as the root of all evil: Noah Baumbach's Margot at the Wedding

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American filmmaker Noah Baumbach got his start as a filmmaker in 1995 with *Kicking and Screaming*, a film considered by many critics one of the classic or most representative works of the so-called "independent" film movement of the 1990s. Both the film and the movement have been considerably overrated.

Baumbach continued to work in film after his praised debut and also as a writer, appearing most notably in the *New Yorker*, but did not gain the same level of attention again until 2005's *The Squid and the Whale*, for which he was nominated in the best original screenplay category at the Academy Awards.

All of Baumbach's films trace, to one extent or another, the troubled family histories and failed relationships of certain petty-bourgeois intellectuals and their children. *Kicking and Screaming* dealt with well-to-do college graduates who remained on and around campus after graduation, unable to move forward with their lives. *Mr. Jealousy* (1997) gave us an insecure writer who joined the group therapy sessions in which his girlfriend's ex-lover participated in order to put his jealous mind at ease, only to destroy the very relationship he was trying to protect. *The Squid and the Whale*, perhaps Baumbach's most popular and best-known work, detailed the ugly divorce of two writers and the effect it had on their children.

All of these films, like those of the French New Wave directors Baumbach admires, tend to be filled with references to other works of art; a copy of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* showing up here, a poster for Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore* popping up there. His characters are frequently writers or aspiring writers or people who simply claim to be writers.

Adults behave like adolescents in his films while children are obliged to behave prematurely like adults, not infrequently being spoken to as if they were their parents' therapists. People who presumably should know better often begin reckless affairs with other people much younger than themselves.

There is a kind of self-conscious auteurism running through Baumbach's work as well, just as in the films of his friend Wes Anderson (*Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*), with whom Baumbach co-wrote the script directed by Anderson in 2004 as *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. One gets a sense that their "style" is primarily the product of the very pursuit of a "style." In any case, it is a style that is largely imposed on all of their stories and not a style that has organically developed over time in connection with the material in their works. It's as though a painter had placed a very large signature in the corner of a very small painting.

For *Margot at the Wedding*, Baumbach has adopted many of the methods used by New Wave director Eric Rohmer. *Margot*, in fact, was reportedly given the title *Nicole at the Beach* in earlier drafts, a tribute to Rohmer's *Pauline at the Beach*. The characters in Baumbach's *Margot*, just as in most of Rohmer's films, talk at great length and almost always about themselves. One learns about the characters by listening to what they say they believe and observing them as they behave in ways that contradict those beliefs. In Rohmer's films this technique has sometimes yielded interesting results, though certainly not always and ultimately not often enough.

The story of Baumbach's latest surrounds Margot (Nicole Kidman), a moderately successful writer, and her young son Claude (Zane Pais). They are staying at the home of Margot's estranged sister Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh), in preparation for the latter's marriage to Malcolm (Jack Black), a failed artist whom Margot despises and describes as "not ugly, just completely unattractive." As this suggests, Margot's talent for cruelty is remarkable and will have many more opportunities to show itself. In one scene she will tell her son Claude, as the young boy cries silently, "You're so stupid now, so blasé."

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Pauline and Malcolm are in the midst of a feud with their neighbors involving a large tree in Pauline's yard. The tree is dear to Pauline because she and Margot grew up with it and Pauline intends to be married under it. The tree is very much a part of their family. The neighbors, however, complain because its roots are growing into their property and rotting. They want the tree removed.

Clearly, the tree is being used by Baumbach to symbolize Margot's family, with all its painful history, all its decayed roots. Margot, attempting to climb it at one point, becomes stuck and has to be rescued by the local fire department. In another scene, Pauline, having heard a disturbing confession from Malcolm, pushes furiously against the tree as if to bring it down with her bare hands. Later, when the tree is felled with a chainsaw, Pauline will race to save her daughter from being caught under it as it falls. When it finally does collapse, the tree will crash through the tent in which Pauline and Malcolm were to be married.

The symbolism is very clear indeed and perhaps heavy-handed. The painful history that has produced all sorts of neuroses plaguing the family makes happy and meaningful relationships for Pauline and Margot all but impossible. Margot, we are led to surmise, is cruel because her father was cruel. She is becoming her father. All of this is the essential substance of the film and also its essential weakness.

An unhappy childhood, and child abuse in particular, is the stock explanation for a host of social problems and behavior in art and film these days. Baumbach has not given us anything terribly insightful or unique here. His treatment not only of Margot's family in this latest work, but of virtually all the families or groups of friends found throughout his entire career have been treated in the narrowest ways.

Baumbach observes a great deal of anxiety, aimlessness and emotional wreckage among the rather wealthy layers of society he has chosen to address in his work, and this is thoroughly valid territory to explore artistically.

But the trials and tribulations of his characters—which are most certainly real and numerous—are time and again shown to be, above all, the product of personal histories and individual psychology, the troubled childhood and so forth. There is no hint whatsoever that these characters are social beings living under particular social conditions and responding to particular social pressures in a given period.

Baumbach has avoided the more difficult questions, especially those involving the fate of a generation of leftists disappointed or made conservative by several decades of stagnation and reaction. He alludes to this reality, but abstains from any broader commentary on the course of American social life and its implications, although he knows better—or ought to. His portraits consequently remain incomplete and unsatisfying, even pallid.

It must also be said, however, that this writer-director, whatever his limitations, has certain talents. One can find honest moments and interesting characters in all his films. There is Grover in *Kicking and Screaming*, who makes a clumsy and passionate speech to an airline worker as he tries to arrange a flight to his girlfriend in Prague. He knows that if he doesn't go at that very moment he never will. There is Walt in *The Squid and the Whale*, who decides after a long period of self-deception to begin to look at things clearly and directly.

Those are characters and moments in otherwise slight or disappointing works. *Mr. Jealousy* is probably Baumbach's warmest and most entertaining film overall, being far more interesting than his more acclaimed contributions, though it suffers from many of the same problems.

Finally, after all of those films, one gets a sense with *Margot at the Wedding* that Baumbach is now repeating himself. He has gone over the same general territory treated in his previous films without offering much more in the way of insight. His failure, until now, to work through some of the most essential questions has played no small part in this. One is curious to see, given his very real talent and intelligence, where the director will go from here.

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