

# Greenberg: Not the most important problems in life

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American filmmaker Noah Baumbach (*The Squid and the Whale*, *Margot at the Wedding*) has written and directed a new film, *Greenberg*. Its lead character, Roger Greenberg (Ben Stiller), has come out to Los Angeles from New York, after apparently experiencing some kind of a nervous breakdown. While his brother Phillip and family spend six weeks in Vietnam on holiday, Roger stays at their spacious house in the Hollywood Hills—complete, of course, with pool.

Asked by his more successful sibling to mind the house and dog, Roger becomes involved, more or less, with his brother's assistant, Florence Marr (Greta Gerwig), fifteen years younger than himself. Their troubled and troubling relations are at the center of the film. Florence, who has just left a long-term relationship, is somewhat at sea in her own life, not earning enough money and vaguely pursuing a career as a singer.

Greenberg, once a musician (and now working as a carpenter), is originally from Los Angeles and retains various connections there. More than a decade before, we learn, he urged his fellow band-mates to turn down a recording contract with a major label, on the grounds of artistic principle, which helped lead to the group's eventual dissolution and a good deal of personal disappointment for everyone involved. Some of that still hovers in the air, especially in Roger's relations with Ivan Schrank (Rhys Ifans), one of the old band members who guardedly remains his friend.

One can only be 'guardedly' associated to Roger, because he is so guarded and defensive himself. His obvious, bristling unhappiness makes him unpleasant and even cruel on occasion, in his relations with Ivan, and especially with Florence. At each point he resists his own obvious interest in the open and appealing younger woman. The more his interest deepens, the

more he resists it, even turning on and accusing her angrily at a critical juncture of "pursuing" him, the opposite of the truth. In the end, Greenberg shows some signs of a change in heart.

A theme here is that "hurt people hurt people." How do psychologically damaged individuals stop damaging others (and themselves), or can they?

Baumbach and his collaborators (including wife Jennifer Jason Leigh, who helped develop the story, co-produced the film and effectively plays a small role in it—as a former girl-friend of Roger's who firmly rejects his tentative effort to rekindle a relationship) depict certain social situations and types with accuracy and concreteness, presumably born of familiarity.

The glimpses we get of Roger's brother and neighbors suggest they belong to a complacent (and not especially appealing) upper middle class milieu. Roger himself, along with Ivan and their acquaintances, somewhere down the economic ladder, seem to inhabit a world of the quasi-artistic, quasi-intelligent, and quasi-serious. For their part, Florence and her friends, who now—as she points out—have been out of college as long as they were in it, drift along somewhat aimlessly, all too passively. These various characterizations and problems are plausible.

Accuracy is all to the good, but the spectator also needs to be genuinely intrigued and compelled by the characters and their dilemmas. A filmmaker has the obligation to impress upon the spectator the importance, the human centrality, of the situations he or she represents. That can be accomplished in any artistic manner one chooses, but the significance of the problems needs to emerge.

Roger Greenberg's difficulties are perfectly real and even dramatically believable (for the most part), but they are not especially interesting. Greenberg is often

unpleasant, and on more than one occasion one simply wishes he would go away. Again, the artist has every right to present us with an unattractive leading figure, but then that unattractiveness ought to have a broader meaning.

Where does that lie in this case? Greenberg is frustrated by life (one of his favorite pastimes is writing letters to large corporations and politicians complaining pointlessly about this or that real or imagined injury inflicted on him), aging, self-centered ... and so forth.

However, Baumbach's work offers us virtually no clue as to the source of Roger's specific anxiety, his particular sense of discomfort in the world. His mental state is taken as a given and treated as a purely individual matter, and a certain set of primarily awkward, painful circumstances follow from it. There are amusing moments and performances—one doesn't check one's watch—but the filmmakers abstain from the more difficult question, shedding light on the type of psychological or social condition that might make for Greenberg's difficulties.

Baumbach and Leigh (who co-directed *The Anniversary Party* [2001] with Alan Cumming, a film whose psychic atmosphere in certain scenes finds echoes here) have the capacity to criticize the self-absorption and narcissism of various social layers, especially in the entertainment industry, but they do it without an adequate distance from their subject. Their criticism of self-involvement is itself rather narrow and self-involved.

Unhappily, the concerns given expression in *Greenberg* are trivial ones for the most part. In all fairness, Baumbach and Leigh have given artistic life to Florence, who, in Greta Gerwig's performance, is considerably more compelling than the title character. But we receive only a partial view of her. We see her openness, her uncertainty, and her emotionally and intellectually unformed personality, and little more. Is this really all her generation faces: obstacles to satisfying relationships?

Look at the world, look concretely at the situation in the US, then look at this film. ... As we know, and are *constantly* reminded of, for the film industry, things are not quite so simple. When writers, directors and producers gaze at the world at present, they often gaze into a small, hand-held mirror. This is a problem.

Baumbach has skills and thoughts, but they are

applied rather self-consciously at the moment to secondary subjects. As the WSWS review of *Margot at the Wedding* (2007) aptly noted: "It's as though a painter had placed a very large signature in the corner of a very small painting."

Action needs to be taken to convince artists that some subjects and human beings are more important than others. The world itself presumably will do a good deal of that.

The author also recommends:

The family as the root of all evil: Noah Baumbach's *Margot at the Wedding*  
[11 January 2008]



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