Noah Baumbach's *Frances Ha* and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*: Incompleteness as a problem

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14 June 2013

Frances Ha, written by director Noah Baumbach (*The Squid and the Whale*, 2005, *Greenberg*, 2010) and the movie's lead performer Greta Gerwig, follows the adventures of Frances Ha—her last name as it's shortened to fit a letterbox name slot—as she flits through New York City in search of an undefined "something" ("I'm so sorry. I'm not a real person yet.").

The 27-year-old Frances first lives in Brooklyn with Sophie (Mickey Sumner), the platonic love of her life ("We're like a lesbian couple that doesn't have sex any more."). She finds herself left out in the cold, however, when Sophie decides to upgrade her living arrangements and becomes engaged to her boyfriend Patch (Patrick Heusinger). Unlike Frances, both Sophie and Patch have functioning, money-making jobs.

Frances, who aspires to be a dancer but is not gifted enough to advance beyond an internship in a troupe, then moves in with two friends, Benji and Lev (Michael Zegen and Adam Driver), in Chinatown. Benji and Lev are as feckless as Frances, albeit with a bit more family money in their pockets.

And so it goes. Frances takes off for a weekend in Paris financed by an unexpected tax refund, visits her parents in Sacramento and works for a college (Vassar) pouring wine at functions, before eventually finding her professional niche and reconnecting in a meaningful way with Sophie.

Gerwig as Frances is a delight, and her endearing, carefree quirkiness largely carries the film. Sumner and the rest of the supporting cast mesh well as beings at various early stages of maturity. The black-and-white cinematography is an attractive means of conveying the movie's relative formlessness, which has, in fact, been meticulously scripted.

There are problems. Baumbach and Gerwig have their social antennae up, but how much are they really receiving, or do they want to receive? *Frances Ha* seems a response in part to a serious condition, that a considerable portion of the generation in their late 20s face an unstable and insecure, if not precarious future. But in one-sidedly celebrating Frances' uncertainties, the filmmakers tend to make a lighthearted virtue out of an often dire reality. There are amusing aspects of any situation worth exploring, but, surely, young people having no steady jobs, no roots and no strong beliefs is not a purely comic development. Frances' unfinished name suggests lives that are (forcibly) stunted, shortened and incomplete.

The lead characters in *Frances Ha*, in any event, are also at one or two removes from the actual economic state of affairs. Baumbach and Gerwig have not looked so terribly hard as they could have at the circumstances of the generation in question. They avoid the more painful side of things by inventing characters who have safety nets, trust-fund types who manage to keep New York City's more brutal socially polarized reality at a distance.

(And, after all, doesn't the example of 29-year-old Edward Snowden serve as a reminder of some of the more earthshaking dilemmas confronting this generation?)

Frances Ha pays homage to the French New Wave, particularly the work of François Truffaut (1932-1984). The film's soundtrack is mostly borrowed from the French film composer Georges Delerue (1925-1992), a frequent Truffaut collaborator. The relationship between Frances and Sophie is intended to parallel that of the central characters in the French director's *Jules et Jim* (1962) . Missing in Baumbach's version, however, is any of the social or historical experience that Truffaut provided in his work, in the form of European history, including World War I and the rise of Hitler.

The whimsical and spontaneous element associated with the early New Wave might be worth emulating, but Baumbach and Gerwig seem to be forgetting that Truffaut, Godard and the others moved beyond that mood in fairly short order. Is it really reproducible in a convincing manner in our day? The makers of *Frances Ha* are reflecting on the present time, but through a too narrow and somewhat complacent prism. The need to stuff their story into the framework of a tribute to the New Wave becomes a way of avoiding a deeper examination of contemporary life. This weakens the film, which, though still enjoyable, because Baumbach and Gerwig have talent, is more insubstantial than it needs to be.

Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*

In her documentary, *Stories We Tell*, Canadian actress-director Sarah Polley uses a mixture of interviews with family and friends, fictional recreations and footage from home movies to explore the fate of her mother Diane Polley, an actress and casting director who died when Polley was 11. Anecdotes and footage of Diane reveal her to be a captivating, vivacious personality whose untimely death left a deep hole in the lives of those she had been close to.

Polley, 34, sets up her father, the British-born actor Michael Polley, in a recording studio to read his elegant, insightful account of the family's history. This is the core of the narrative, as Michael speaks movingly about what he considers to be the source of his gregarious wife's frustration and unhappiness.

What starts as a recurring family joke about how Sarah, the youngest of Diane's five children, does not resemble Michael, ends up in a startling DNA test result confirming that Sarah was the offspring of Harry Gulkin, a Montreal producer with whom Diane had an affair in 1978. Sarah and Harry become close, but not at Michael's expense.

Unfortunately, *Stories We Tell* lacks the historical sense, in keeping with most contemporary movies, that could have made it far more compelling. Polley's earnest, well-meaning outlook doesn't allow her to do anything more at this point than touch, sometimes inadvertently, on fascinating issues.

Diane's emotional malaise is reduced to a purely personal or *personality* issue. Hints of the stultifying character of respectable middle class life in postwar Toronto are provided by nasty, moralizing newspaper headlines about Diane's first marriage ending in divorce in the late 1960s (because she'd been "unfaithful," she lost custody of her two children), but nothing more is made of that.

Stories We Tell is another uncompleted work. No doubt, Diane found her circles in Toronto repressive. But the fault did not lie with her husband so much, one might suggest, as with the times and what they made of people. She was yearning perhaps for something more meaningful, life-changing than the humdrum of her everyday existence.

Remarkably, Polley, who has something of a left-wing reputation, leaves entirely untouched Harry Gulkin's history, which might help account for her mother's attraction to him. In a 2011 interview, Gulkin explained that his parents "were children of the Russian Revolution" who "had devoted their lives to the overthrow of the czar" and that his mother "was a great believer in the heroic leadership of Lenin." He described the conditions of the Depression, when "the capitalist system wasn't exactly shining" and how his mother "used to bring a pile of extra sandwiches to feed to the unemployed people who were sleeping and living on the mountain [in Montreal]."

Gulkin himself, obviously a Communist Party member by this time, became a union organizer in the Seamen's Union in the mid-1940s, later the associate editor of the union's newspaper and eventually the Quebec correspondent of the *Canadian Tribune*, the CP weekly at the time. He further told his interviewer that he "left the communist movement in about 1956 and pursued a business career."

Stories We Tell, in other words, becomes almost a classic illustration of the problems we face in cinema. It sidesteps, probably not out of malice or lack of interest per se, but due to a lack of understanding of their critical importance and *dramatic potential*, a number of burning issues staring the filmmaker in her face (the character of the postwar period, the fate of radicalism in those decades, Stalinism and its consequences, etc.) in favor of the relatively small change of family secrets and revelations.