

Noah Baumbach's *While We're Young*: No need to fight

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Written and directed by Noah Baumbach

While We're Young, the latest film from writer-director Noah Baumbach (*Frances Ha*, *Margot at the Wedding*, *The Squid and the Whale*), opens in the New York City apartment of new parents, forty-something Fletcher (Adam Horovitz, formerly of the Beastie Boys) and Marina (Maria Dizzia).

Josh (Ben Stiller) and Cornelia (Naomi Watts) Schrebnick are uncomfortably visiting the baby and, in fact, find themselves unable (which seems a little unlikely) to remember even the most common fairy tale or nursery rhyme. Afterward, they agree, unconvincingly, that not having children is a far better choice. Their previous attempts had resulted in two miscarriages--and besides, their careers are at the forefront of their lives.

Josh is a documentary film-maker, whose last film, though highly regarded at the time, was completed at least a decade ago. He has spent the intervening years—at the expense of the health of his marriage—working on a documentary involving Ira Mandelstam (Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul and Mary fame), a hazily defined “leftist intellectual.”

While teaching a class at the New School, Josh is hampered by technical difficulties, and fumbles through his presentation. He is clearly a man for whom frustration has become ingrained, and Stiller brings his desperate near-resignation to life. As the class breaks up, a young couple, Jamie (Adam Driver) and Darby (Amanda Seyfried) Massey, approach. Jamie declares himself a fan, and wheedles a dinner invitation from Josh. Over dinner, Jamie reacts with surprise and delight when it's revealed that Cornelia's father is legendary documentarian (*à la* Frederick Wiseman) Leslie Breitbart (Charles Grodin), who is about to be honored at Lincoln Center.

Cornelia has misgivings about Jamie, even joking that—as later turns out to be the case—he had orchestrated meeting Josh so as to get at her father. Nonetheless, the couple start spending a lot of time with the younger pair, to the chagrin of their old (“old”) friends. The young couple and their friends are depicted as little more than an amalgam of aggressively precious and “quirky” stereotypes about “free living” hipsters; Jamie and Darcy keep a pet chicken, play board games, type on manual typewriters, eschew Google, love commercial jingles and bad music from “previous generations,” and on and on. As is often the case in films, they live in a laughably spacious apartment while displaying no visible means of income.

Driver brings a deeply creepy eagerness to his portrayal of Jamie, who is filming almost constantly, and indeed invasively. His smooth encouragement of Josh's work sucks the older man in, feeding his fragile ego and blinding him to the motives that quickly become obvious to the audience. In time, Josh agrees to help Jamie out with his documentary.

Throughout *While We're Young*, Josh wistfully, if ineptly, chases the truth. Even though he struggles to actually define and pin it down, he regards his mission as a filmmaker to expose what is otherwise unseen; to bring the audience to a higher understanding of important things in the world. This is noble. However, *this* film not only does not share his vision, but is so removed from it that it cannot even give proper words for Stiller to utter in the script.

The sharpest example of this is the film's avoidance of setting out exactly why Mandelstam is so esteemed—and Yarrow is made to look alternately boring or half-insane. Surely, as the focus of over eight years' work for the main character there should be some substance to the project. Josh repeatedly declares

the old man to be deeply relevant, and makes frantic, yet vague references to economics, war, and suchlike, while his listeners smirk as if on the verge of patting him on the head. In the end, Mandelstam serves as little more than a plot device.

Given the ultimate outlook of *While We're Young*, that it doesn't matter how the truth is portrayed, whether or not all the facts are in order—or are actually facts—and that history itself is largely irrelevant, this is inadvertently appropriate.

Grodin's Breitbart is a cynical creature who is painful to watch. World-renowned documentarian that he is, he is comfortable in life, and displays a decided and surprising lack of interest in the truth. He comments to Cornelia that Josh “wants what I have but is not merciless enough to get it” and later sides with Jamie in regard to the latter’s dishonesty in making his “documentary,” even as he (Breitbart) is being lauded at Lincoln Center for bringing truth to the screen. The relationship that develops between he and Jamie over the course of the film seems inevitable and is depicted as the natural joining of jaded generations.

The wild rage of Josh, when confronting Jamie about his faking important elements of his film dissolves into a whimper in the face of a dual betrayal—Jamie’s calm admission to and dismissal of his lies and Breitbart’s nonchalant acceptance thereof. Josh finally accepts defeat, as he and Cornelia agree in a stilted and tiresome conversation (bizarrely intended to be a “feel good” moment) that the world has gotten away from truth. This is depicted as “growing up.”

Acceptance of the rottenness of things leads very rapidly to the older couple turning inward and the focus shifts to purely personal matters. Their conclusion about Jamie is, “He’s not evil, he’s just young,” as though a total lack of principles were merely a phase!

A discussion of different generations and the possible friction or misunderstandings between them might lead somewhere. One is certainly aware in the US that whether an individual grew up in the radicalized 1960s and 1970s, in the Reagan years or the Clinton-Bush era tends to produce distinct attitudes toward social and political phenomena. But one does not have the sense that Baumbach is interested in anything so historically concrete or precise, or urgent. He is reacting to supposed conflicts between the generations, of an entirely secondary character, in a superficial

journalistic manner.

The director is too complacent, too pleased with himself, too easy on his milieu. He has yet to demonstrate that he has anything truly compelling to say.



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