

# Noah Baumbach's *Mistress America* offers some hints of humanity

Christine Schofelt  
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*Directed by Noah Baumbach, written by Baumbach and Greta Gerwig*

American filmmakers Noah Baumbach and Greta Gerwig's *Mistress America* is the second film they have written together and that he has directed, following *Frances Ha*, about a young woman trying to make her way in New York City as a dancer. Gerwig first worked with Baumbach on *Greenberg* (2010). The new film, something of a companion piece to *Frances Ha*, is in limited release.

College freshman Tracy (Lola Kirk) is new to New York, and is trying to settle into university life—her goal is to join the elite Mobius literary club. She is initially rejected, and takes it hard that the briefcase-carrying, pipe-smoking writers won't let her in. Lonely in the big city, she takes up her mother's suggestion to contact her soon-to-be-stepsister, Brooke (Gerwig), though she notes that there's a large age difference and wonders what they could have in common. Brooke's response to her phone message is almost immediate, and they agree to get together.

Upon their meeting, the younger woman is fascinated by Brooke's frenetic energy. Her rapid-fire stream of ideas and pronouncements—the film is billed as a “screwball comedy”—is accompanied, however, by an emotional volatility. Any pause in the conversation is a potential landmine. Brooke snaps at any input from Tracy, and the younger woman then has to backtrack and soothe the feelings of her new acquaintance. As *Mistress America* proceeds, it is less and less a “screwball comedy.” The situations might be unusual, and the characters' reasoning quirky, but the work's overall tenor is anxious and desperate.

Brooke's situation is tenuous; she holds down several jobs (exercise trainer, inept math tutor, etc.), but is

trying to open a restaurant with her unseen fiancée, who is putting up the money. Though surrounded by people who fawn over her, she seems largely friendless, which helps account for her latching onto Tracy as firmly as the girl takes to her. In the latter, Brooke has found a confidante, coach and cheerleader. For Tracy, who is comfortable with family support and safely ensconced at Barnard College (Gerwig's alma mater), Brooke provides adventure and potential material for her writings.

Everything threatens to fall apart when Brooke's fiancée ends their relationship, and with it the funding for the restaurant they were to open. Now homeless and in sudden, serious debt, Brooke panics and, encouraged by Tracy, decides to call on her wealthy ex-boyfriend, Dylan (Michael Chernus) and his wife, Mamie-Claire (Heather Lind), who is also her former best friend.

Brooke is convinced that the couple “owe” her for their past misdeeds, including the thefts of a lucrative business idea and her two cats. Also, of course, Mamie-Claire has stolen her boyfriend. Brooke and Tracy, along with Tracy's friend Tony (Matthew Shear) and his over-the-top, jealous girlfriend Nicolette (Jasmine Cephas Jones), pile into Tony's car and head to Mamie-Claire and Dylan's house to demand restitution.

The interactions between the characters in *Mistress America*, each self-absorbed in his or her own way, make for a good deal of uncomfortable viewing. Various fights occur and alliances form, reform and dissolve, amid quips and observations meant to be humorous or observant. Everyone except Tracy, who is largely detached, seems about two steps away from a total meltdown.

Brooke's downward spiral, which she tries to conceal through constantly firing off ideas or advice, is revealed in the film with some humanity. Regarding her failed or

missed opportunities with increasing dread, she flails about desperately, looking for a way out. Her friends' success and her yearning to make a contribution to society pull at her and almost defeat her. She clearly feels left behind, in danger of being entirely lost.

At thirty, Brooke is smack-dab in the center of a particularly hard-hit middle-class generation. Too insular to see her connection to society at large, or even to *view* society at large, she considers her situation a series of personal slights and failings.

For Tracy, the trip, as with most of the time she spends with Brooke, provides fodder for intermittent voiceovers, snippets from what she is writing, parasitically, about those around her. The discovery by the group of her unflattering short story about Brooke turns them against her sharply. Even the two strangers introduced late in *Mistress America* recognize the story as unfair, and the viewer, however he or she may view Brooke and her annoying qualities, is forced to agree.

Recent social and ideological trends have blurred the distinction between serious writing, reporting and journalism, on the one hand, and tabloid sensationalism and scandal mongering, on the other. Postmodern subjectivism and relativism have a dirty hand in this somewhere. A new social type has appeared on the scene: the young, ambitious writer to whom everything is fair game. All conversations and details of life, no matter how private or trivial, are subject to jotting down and publication or exposure.

This sort of writer holds that it is his or her job to chronicle the sordid daily goings-on around him or her, whether via a blog or a short story. Lacking principles and integrity, this social type is happy to depict someone else's life with barely any alterations, to hold it up to ridicule, and never think twice. To use such writings as a means of gaining fame or acceptance for oneself—as is portrayed in HBO's *Girls* and in this film—is reprehensible. Such scribblings are more about the ability to turn a phrase and the cleverness of the author than they are about insight into the subject matter. It is to *Mistress America's* credit that this is rejected.

The repercussions for Tracy, whose transgression is roundly condemned by the others, regardless of their various previous disagreements, are real and deserved. Whether she learns anything of value from her own experience is left an open question.



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