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Film Discussion Group
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20th Century Women (dir. Mike Mills, 2016)

On Camera

Dorothea: Annette Bening: *American Beauty* (99); *The Kids Are All Right* (10)
Jamie: Lucas Jade Zumann: 14-year-old Chicago actor, getting his first big break
Abbie: Greta Gerwig: *Frances Ha* (12); recently the Social Secretary in *Jackie* (16)
William: Billy Crudup: *Almost Famous* (00); recently the interviewer in *Jackie* (16)
Julie: Elle Fanning: *Maleficent* (15); *Trumbo* (15); *The Neon Demon* (16)

Off Camera

Writer/Director: Mike Mills: based on loose versions of his mother (Bening) and sister (Gerwig)
Cinematography: Sean Porter: *It Felt Like Love* (13); *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* (14)
Art Direction: Chris Jones: hadn't worked in six years; doing Gerwig's second film as director
Costume Design: Jennifer Johnson: first worked with Mike Mills on his last film, *Beginners* (10)
Film Editing: Leslie Jones: *The Thin Red Line* (98), another "unstructured" masterpiece
Original Score: Roger Neill: also worked on *Beginners*, and *Mozart in the Jungle* (TV 14-15)

Also written and directed by Mike Mills ...

Thumbsucker (2005) – Quirky comedy-drama about a 17-year-old boy not quite growing into adulthood while still experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and hypnosis therapy

Beginners (2010) – Cartoonist (Ewan McGregor), based on Mills, discovers that his 70-something father (Oscar winner Christopher Plummer) has decided to come out after his wife has passed

If you liked *20th Century Women*, you might also enjoy...

Koyaanisqatsi (1982) – Experimental collage of many world locations, sampled at times in *20CW*

Tumbleweeds (1999) – Imagine *20CW* with a mother and daughter; one of my comfort movies!

Me and You and Everyone We Know (2005) – Offbeat suburban comedy-drama by Mills's wife

The Diary of a Teenage Girl (2015) – Funny, sexually bolder story of a San Francisco girl coming of age in the same era as Jamie, similarly inspired by a complex family and countercultural art

Aquarius (2016) – Magical Brazilian drama about a middle-aged woman who, like Dorothea, is full of contradictions; similarly combines intimate and grand-scale versions of history

Things to Come (2016) – My other favorite movie of last year, starring Isabelle Huppert as another woman at a series of turning points, personal and historical, whose family finds her puzzling

Facts about *20th Century Women* you may appreciate...

Mills's previous movie, *Beginners*, was inspired (with embellishments) by the story of his father, who came out as gay in his 70s, after his wife had died. *20th Century Women* is a similarly inexact but very deliberate portrait of Mills's mother Jan, who was Dorothea's exact age and shared her Depression-era childhood, her warmth and aloofness, her attachment to her son, her brief career in aviation and longer one in commercial drafting, her fascination with stocks, and several other traits. Many of Jamie's qualities are based closely on Mills's own growing-up years as a skateboarding, punk-loving kid, baffled by but extraordinarily close to his mom. A good deal of Abbie's character, including her artistry, her musical tastes, her spiritedness, and her early survival of cervical cancer, are based on Mills's older sister. All of the actors had extensive conversations with or about the real family members who served as the basis of their characters, but Mills was very clear that he wanted them to depart from these biographies, too.

Mills worked on the script for three years. Halfway through, he and his wife had their first child, at around the age when Dorothea has Jamie. The experience of new fatherhood directly inspired some scenes and lines, like Dorothea's realization that she will never get to know her child as a "person out in the world." This idea occurred to Mills the first day he took his son to school.

Originally, Mills wrote several scenes with Jamie's father, who had left the family by the time the script started but still showed back up in the characters' lives at occasional intervals. His wife, writer-director-performer Miranda July, urged against these scenes, feeling that they made Dorothea a much more conventional character, biding her time until a man popped back up.

Bening was born in 1958 and was thus a teenager throughout the 1970s. She grew up in San Diego, whose temperament and geography differ slightly from Santa Barbara's. Still, she has often said that this is the only script she ever read that converged with her own memories of California childhood. The role of Dorothea was not written for her but she was the first choice.

Unusually, Mills films scenes in the order they're scripted, even though the structure seems loose. He also likes to film for 10 or 15 minutes at a time, even if scene in question isn't that long. As a result, he says that what's in the movie is about 80% what he wrote and 20% improvised. He also likes to devise and film exploratory exercises that wind up in the film. For example, he asked Elle Fanning to improv a scene where she shares details of her character's childhood with Dorothea and Jamie that are not in the script, 50% of which she considered true and 50% of which were lies; Mills and the other characters should not be able to tell the difference. Similarly, he asked Gerwig (Abbie) to teach Zumann (Jamie) how to dance to punk in a way that was fluid and physically expressive, and interspersed many of these scenes in the movie.

Mills convened regular dance parties among his cast, where every actor had to bring a song that their character would love and feel inspired by. Everybody had to dance together to each song.

20th Century Women was distributed at Christmas by A24, the prestigious, director-focused, very small company that put *Moonlight* into theaters last fall. (They also sponsored *The Lobster* and *Room*.) Nobody expected *Moonlight* to be such a hit, or for these two movies to be out at the same time. Ongoing promotion for that movie cut into *20CW*'s bookings and ad budget a bit, maybe making it less well-marketed and less commercially successful than it might have been.

Broad conversation topics...

Beginnings and Endings: The movie's structure rambles, without obvious climaxes and with multiple flashbacks and flash-forwards, but it starts with a definitive statement of the father's absence (the first line is "That was my husband's Ford Galaxie," as it burns), and ends with an equally definitive statement of Dorothea's unknowability (the last line is Jamie's, about trying to explain to his future son "what his grandmother was like, but it will be impossible"). We could take this as a very pessimistic statement about whether anybody, even the people we are closest to, are ever knowable to us. Did you react that way? Or did you find the movie comforting in the complicated way it depicts families, personalities, and relationships?

The 1970s: Mills decided very early to set the film in 1979, for several specific reasons. These included post-Nixon disenchantment, with Watergate and Vietnam nonetheless in the past; the growing punk and experimental rock movements; and the audience's awareness, which the characters cannot share, that a very different world of Reagan, AIDS, and revived conservatism are just around the corner. He did not initially recall that Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech happened specifically in 1979 but was overjoyed at the discovery. Several characters in the film are strongly influenced by feminist literature, but the most prominent examples are almost a decade old by this point: *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971), "It Hurts to Be Alive and Obsolete" (1970), the *Sisterhood Is Powerful* anthology (1970). How did *20th Century Women* compare to your own memories of the late 1970s? Did the characters seem strongly *of* their time, *ahead* of their time, *behind* the times, or weirdly *outside* of time, from your perspective?

Narration: All five of the main characters narrate portions of the film, often in relation to their childhoods and upbringing. These are not strict delineations: Jamie narrates most of Julie's and Abbie's histories; Dorothea relates all of William's; Dorothea and Jamie describe each other's lives. By the end, and much earlier for Dorothea, all of the characters are able to speak about events in their lives that transpire long after the movie concludes. What did you make of the movie's multiple and shifting perspectives, and having so many voices steer the narrative?

"Modular" Editing: Somewhat like *Manchester by the Sea*, *20th Century Women* comprises a greater-than-usual number of scenes, many of them short, meaning we have less fixed context for individual moments than movies often give us, but we survey a much wider sweep of the characters' messy, sprawling, contradictory, and tonally varied experiences. *20th Century Women* complicates things even more with its many cutaways to historical stock footage, birds-eye views of Santa Barbara, photographs that Abbie takes, snapshots of era-appropriate musicians, visually embellished scenes of driving, and other "inserts." Though Mills filmed his major plot scenes in narrative sequence, and more or less as written, the movie unfolds as if it almost doesn't have an "order." Did you like the freedom of this, or wish it had more shape?

Parenting: I have so many favorite lines in *20th Century Women*, many of them attached to complex ideas. One is Dorothea's admission that she will never know her son "out in the world," though Jamie is even more conscious that he might never know Dorothea at all, despite being so close to her. Another is Julie's question to Dorothea, "Don't you need a man to raise a man?" which Dorothea immediately disputes. What ideas or questions about parenting resonated most with you, in your experience as parents or as other people's children?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Opening: The first three shots of the movie are an abstract overhead of ocean tides, approaching a beach and also pulling back; a helicopter shot over the Santa Barbara streets, headed toward the same ocean; and a shot of the burning car in the parking lot. Already we get a heavenly perspective on the planet, a particular town, and a very personal history. How does this series of shots set a tone for the whole movie? Which register of the film spoke to you the most?

Casablanca: We first see a shot of this iconic movie as part of the historical montage of images that accompany Dorothea's and Jamie's shared voiceover about the world being "very big and unknown," and then in a scene of the two of them watching *Casablanca* together on TV. The film will return a few times after that, as will its famous song "As Time Goes By," which also speaks to some of *20th Century Women*'s own thoughts about history and human relationships. Rudy Vallee's 1944 recording of "As Time Goes By" is the final song we hear in the movie before the credits start, after so much punk and Talking Heads and 70s rock. What does it mean that a film so devoted to a particular decade keeps being pulled back to WW2-era songs and images? What does this aspect of the movie tell us about Dorothea specifically?

Cinematography: The camera in *20th Century Women* is subtly moving an awful lot of the time, pushing slowly toward or pulling slowly away from the characters, even in otherwise-wordless scenes. How did it complement the movie's themes for the camera to relate to its characters this way, approaching but also retreating from them all the time? How did you react to this?

Film Editing: After the kitchen-sink conversation when Jamie asks his mom if she's happy, and Dorothea answers "Wondering if you're happy, it's just a great short cut to being depressed," the film cuts to Dorothea sitting alone at her table, trying to read the newspaper but looking clearly distracted; she's wearing the same blouse, so it's pretty clearly the same evening. We assume she is preoccupied by Jamie's question, still lingering from the previous scene. As the moment continues, it turns out she is hearing Abbie's and Jamie's music through the walls, and is perplexed as to why they like it. *20th Century Women* often does this: cut to scenes that seem to extend prior moments or conversations, only to reveal themselves as initiating totally new ones. It's not just a theme but a principle of style that experiences keep blurring together.

Contradiction: "Can't things just be pretty?" Dorothea asks, entering the room where Jamie and Abbie are listening to The Raincoats, an all-female punk band. "Pretty music is used to hide how unfair and corrupt society is," Jamie answers, before Abbie offers a more nuanced idea about the music exemplifying "what happens when your passion is bigger than the tools you have to deal with it." The camera holds not on Abbie as she speaks but on Dorothea here, with whom Abbie's message obviously resonates, though it looks like Dorothea wishes it didn't. Soon afterward, after the fainting-spell incident and hospital visit, Dorothea will be appalled that Jamie went along with a stupid stunt: "Why didn't you think?!" she yells. What does it mean that Dorothea wants to avoid thinking deeply at moments but insists on it at others?

Timing: In the scene where Jamie passes out, Dorothea's voiceover prepares us for the fact that he will be fine—but won't wake up for a scary half-hour—before we actually see him faint. This is an early case of the movie changing our relation to a scene by presaging things that happen afterward; compare it to all the shots of Dorothea smoking *after* we learn she'll die of cancer.

Roads: The movie brims with shots of Jamie skateboarding through neighborhood streets, or of cars driving down quiet roads or open freeways, sometimes limned with psychedelic colors. Characters also discuss cars all the time. There is such an emphasis on motion, driving, and escape—though often much less sense of where these cars and characters are going. What can we make of all this mobility, usually in the absence of clear directions or coordinated maps?

Lighting: Sean Porter’s cinematography is less elaborate than we’ve observed in recent movies like *Moonlight*, but one of its laudable facets is its constant evocation of unspoken character complexity. Porter goes out of his way to have pinpoints of bright white light at the center of Bening’s eyes at almost all times, which is part of why we relate to her as being so thoughtful and inwardly alive, even when she’s externally reserved. His lighting regularly pulls out all the gray in Billy Crudup’s fabulous head of dark hair, which you’d never detect from how he is lit in *Spotlight*, reminding us of William’s slow but steady aging. Abbie’s hair, dyed dark red in homage to David Bowie, makes a strong graphic impression, but sometimes Porter lights her so we see all the dishwater brown (the “real” Abbie?) still mixed into that fake, striking color.

Storytelling: Abbie gets some laughs from audiences for asking William to offer a “story” as part of their sexual encounter—a story which she nonetheless dictates in detail in advance, and then pretends to hear spontaneously. The relationship between storytelling and sexuality is one idea worth exploring further, but so is the notion of handing your intimates a script of how you would like to be approached, seduced, or thought about, and then expecting them to comply.

Mirror Images: After Abbie gets the good news that she is free of cancer but the bad news of her “incompetent cervix,” Dorothea winds up offering her as much comfort as she can for not being able to have children. This scene is ironic for two reasons. First, having asked Jamie to “be there” for Abbie during this episode, Dorothea still winds up being the primary caretaker. Later in life, it will turn out that Abbie *can* have children after all. In a third irony, during the much later scene when Jamie and Julie have disappeared together, Abbie winds up comforting Dorothea for the difficulties that come with *having* kids. No experience is categorically easy.

Everything Is Relative: Shortly after the “incompetent cervix” diagnosis, we learn more back story about Abbie’s relationship with her own mother, who feels so guilty about her unwitting role in her daughter’s illness (she took DES as a fertility aid, which later proved to cause cancer) that she withdraws further from intimacy with Abbie, who already found her distant at the best of times. Abbie moves to Dorothea’s house in search of a more emotionally available quasi-maternal figure—which must come as a shock to Jamie, who can’t get his mom to talk.

Feminist Ambivalence: Two scenes often singled out in reviews have strong relationships to feminism, and Dorothea’s uneasy relationship to it. The first, though it’s relatively late in the movie, features Jamie’s attempt to read an excerpt of Zoe Moss’s essay “It Hurts to Be Alive and Obsolete” to his mother as a way of demonstrating empathy with her, only to discover that she doesn’t “need a book to understand myself.” Still later comes the dinner-table scene where Dorothea is uncomfortable with Abbie’s open talk about her menstrual cycle, followed by Julie’s and even William’s discourse about female sexuality. What did it mean to you that Dorothea embodied so many feminist principles—independence, free-thinking, support for other women—but was so put off by feminist writing and feminist-inspired conversation?