

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
April 2015

While We're Young (dir. Noah Baumbach, 2014)

On Camera

Josh	Ben Stiller: previously starred in Baumbach's <i>Greenberg</i> (10)
Cornelia	Naomi Watts: <i>Mulholland Drive</i> (01), recently in <i>Birdman</i> (14)
Jamie	Adam Driver: HBO's <i>Girls</i> (12-), in Baumbach's <i>Frances Ha</i> (12)
Darby	Amanda Seyfried: <i>Mean Girls</i> (04), <i>Mamma Mia</i> (08), <i>Les Misérables</i> (12)
Tipper, the roommate	Dree Hemingway: Mariel's daughter; <i>Starlet</i> (12), <i>Listen Up Philip</i> (14)
Leslie, Cornelia's dad	Charles Grodin: <i>The Heartbreak Kid</i> (72), <i>Midnight Run</i> (88)
Marina, with the baby	Maria Dizzia: Tony-nominated on Broadway for <i>In the Next Room</i> (10)
Fletcher, her husband	Adam Horovitz: Member of the Beastie Boys, son of Israel Horovitz
Ira, Josh's subject	Peter Dinklage: Founding member of Peter, Paul, and Mary
Kent, Jamie's subject	Brady Corbet: <i>Force Majeure</i> (14), <i>Clouds of Sils Maria</i> (14)
Ayahuasca shaman	Dean Wareham: New Zealand-based member of Luna, other bands

Off Camera

Cinematography Sam Levy: *Wendy and Lucy* (08); shot *Frances Ha* (12) for Baumbach
Art Direction Adam Stockhausen: *12 Years a Slave* (13), *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (14)
Costume Design: Ann Roth: legend since *Midnight Cowboy* (69), Oscar for *English Patient* (96)

Previous features from writer-director Noah Baumbach

Kicking and Screaming (1995) – Ensemble comedy-drama about recent, driftless college grads
Mr. Jealousy (1997) – Jealous man joins a therapy group to spy on his girlfriend's ex-partner
The Squid and the Whale (2005) – Two NYC writers' kids come to grips with their divorce
Margot at the Wedding (2007) – A modest wedding is jeopardized by the bride's difficult sister
Greenberg (2010) – Fortysomething misanthrope falls in love with younger woman while in LA
Frances Ha (2012) – Greta Gerwig co-wrote and stars as a hapless wannabe-ballerina in NYC

Thwarted Project

The Corrections (2012) – Adapted from Jonathan Franzen's novel and intended to be HBO series

Co-Written with Wes Anderson

The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou (2004) – Surreal semi-comedy of eccentric deep-sea explorers
Fantastic Mr. Fox (2009) – Animated adaptation of Roald Dahl's book, starring Clooney, Streep

Facts about *While We're Young* you may appreciate...

While We're Young was written after the forthcoming Baumbach-Gerwig collaboration *Mistress America* (2015) but was made first. Casting changed many times. Jesse Eisenberg and James Franco were both slated for the Adam Driver part at different times. Naomi Watts' role was originally assigned to Cate Blanchett. Gerwig herself originally had Amanda Seyfried's part.

Baumbach said in introducing the film at the Music Box that, since he is now in his 40s, people usually assume that the Ben Stiller character is his surrogate in the film—but he identifies at least as much with the Adam Driver character, and he does not think either of them is necessarily “right” in the many debates about truth and happiness that arise between them.

The Ayahuasca ceremony was originally conceived in the script as a completely ludicrous case of New Yorkers appropriating other cultures' traditions for their own barely-understood uses, but by the time the film was finished, several were being conducted in and around Brooklyn.

Several members of the cast have been prominent in multiple capacities in the film world or in other arts altogether: Stiller has directed films in addition to starring in them; Horowitz is a famous rap artist and the son of a famous artist (just like Cornelia in the movie); Driver is still best known for work on TV; Dizzia is best known for work on Broadway; Yarrow is an icon of 60s-era folk music. To the extent the movie stages debates about self-reinvention, creativity, and artistic process, these actors have confronted these issues in many capacities.

While We're Young will persist as a historical footnote as the last movie ever processed on 35mm at NYC's Technicolor lab before it closed. Ironically, the film was shot on celluloid but on a digital camera, with the cinematographer trying as hard as possible to make it look like film. In this way, even the *material* of the film participates in themes of artifice and impersonation.

Broad conversation topics...

Comedies of Remarriage: This term was invented to describe famous 1930s and 1940s movies (*His Girl Friday*, *The Awful Truth*, *The Lady Eve*, etc.) in which a longterm couple split up and reunite, having learned some moral lesson as a couple—usually involving the man learning to be more like the woman. Does *While We're Young* remind you of these films?

Relations among Themes: Did the conflict between “younger” and “older” in the film concern the same issues as the conflict between “artificial” and “authentic”? When did the film seem to relate these issues most closely, and when did these two sets of oppositions not have much to do with each other? And how about having vs. not having children—when did the movie associate childlessness with immaturity or inauthenticity? When did it most avoid doing so?

Ibsen: How much did you think about the epigraph from *The Master Builder* during the film—about an older man shutting himself off from younger people and being shocked at the idea of opening up to them? What are the pros and cons of using this quote to read the film?

Tone and Feeling: High on ayahuasca, Josh confesses to Jamie that before they met, he felt reduced to basically two emotions, “wistful and disdainful.” Is it a coincidence that those two emotions characterize so much of this movie? What can we do with that close match?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Script: The opening close-up of a baby places particular stress on that figure or subplot as a key to the whole film. The confusion about the Goldilocks story introduces the whole idea of telling stories faithfully or improvising or embellishing on the details. And the first line of dialogue exchanged between Josh and Cornelia, “What the fuck do we do?” sets a tone.

Motif: Fletcher’s sonogram tattoo appears more or less as comic relief but is only the first of several tattoos that tell us something about the characters, including Jamie’s flamboyant array of them up his arm and Cornelia’s subtle chain tattooed around her wrist.

Politics: Ira’s anecdote about how many Americans mis-attribute the Marxist credo “From each according to his ability to each according to his need” to the U.S. Constitution suggest a subtle political valence to the film’s ideas about living inauthentically and not knowing where our ideas come from—a different critique than Josh explores in his endless movie.

Gender: Cornelia points out that Jamie and Darby asked her almost no questions while getting to know Josh. Darby later espouses that Jamie barely takes her into account and uses her as an accessory. Did the film seem simply guilty of ignoring its women while paying more attention to its men, or did you feel it was commenting purposefully on those discrepancies? (The problem is persistent: Leslie’s wife and Cornelia’s mother is barely mentioned.)

Tone: At several moments, jokes fall deliberately flat (the random *Rosemary’s Baby* allusions, Josh’s poor Cookie O’Puss impression), or characters force some cheer about jokes they don’t find genuinely funny (“Robert Downey Sr.” on Jamie’s first video). So, similar to the last question, does the film simply fail with some of its humor, or do so on purpose?

Music: Most of the classical music on the soundtrack is by Vivaldi, including the score over the montage contrasting Josh and Cornelia’s modern devices with Jamie and Darby’s low-fi VHS tapes, 33rpm albums, and antique typewriters. On the one hand, this music reminds us of artistic influences much older than the so-called “new” or “old” styles flaunted in this sequence. Vivaldi also introduces the idea of seasonal change, resonating with the film’s themes of time’s passage. And given Vivaldi’s legacy (recently more popular with listeners than critics, with some works rediscovered by 20th-century musicologists who falsely claimed his work as their own), he suits the film’s questions about truth and artistic value.

Casting: Charles Grodin, cast as the father-in-law Ben Stiller both admires and resents, was the star of Elaine May’s original *Heartbreak Kid*, remade in 2007 in a version starring Stiller, which almost everyone found vulgar and cheap. There is some charge to their pairing here.

Music: When Cornelia practices hip-hop dancing at home, she’s listening to the exact same song (“Hit ‘Em Up” by Tupac Shakur) that played during the class she attended. So *maybe* she’s really trying new things, but she’s so tentative about it she hasn’t even found a second tune.

Script: Sticking with the theme of Cornelia’s possibly limited imagination, even when she drinks the ayahuasca hallucinogen, she doesn’t fantasize about anything further away than a deli in Bensonhurst (a stone’s throw away in Brooklyn). What was your overall read on her?

Costumes: Cornelia voices more hesitations about Jamie and Darby than Josh does and she doesn't change her aesthetic as flagrantly as Josh does in buying a porkpie hat and pulling out his wing-tip shoes. But as the film continues, her jeans get slimmer and her ankle boots more trendy. Even when she has the lunch with Jamie where she voices her skepticisms, she is wearing a European-inspired "peasant blouse" unlike anything she wears in early scenes.

Joke: Jamie and Darby say plenty of things they seem hardly to mean, or that they offer mostly for counter-intuitive effect. But even Jamie has limits: at the ayahuasca gathering, he can't praise current film-funding structures or pretend to vote for Romney without throwing up.

Props: The playing of the *Blade Runner* soundtrack and the close-up on the CD at the ayahuasca ceremony is a nail in the coffin of the event's inauthenticity, using music from a 1982 sci-fi epic to accompany a faux-Peruvian ritual. The joke also seems aimed at the culturally non-specific music that made Greek composer Vangelis (who also wrote the *Chariots of Fire* theme) such a brief but strong sensation in Hollywood. Baumbach may even be lampooning *Blade Runner* itself, which has been re-cut and re-released so many times that it's not even clear which version is the "real" movie anymore, or if Ridley Scott will ever let it go—just as Josh has a hard time calling it a day as he continues to nip and tuck his documentary.

Allusion: Jamie's zooming in on his own face by remote control during his first interview with Kent, as he gets emotional over personal memories that aren't even his, recalls the sequence in *Broadcast News* when William Hurt's handsome but insincere anchor cuts together an interview sequence to imply that he was moved to tears by the story he was covering. Here and elsewhere the film "borrows" from others, in ways not unrelated to Jamie's own practice.

Props: The avocado ice-cream tub that later reveals the truth about Jamie, Darby, and Kent is actually *not* visible in the early shots when we first meet Kent, although it *does* appear in the later flashbacks by which Josh pieces together what's happened—a trick. This is not the kind of film where, had you been watching closely enough, you might have caught that clue.

Self-Critique: Leslie's criticisms of Josh's documentary mark another instance where the film's dialogue presages the audience's divided reactions or comments on the film itself. Many of Baumbach's fans insist that his films are purposefully uncomfortable, but when Josh attempts that defense of his own work, Leslie retorts, "I wasn't uncomfortable, I was just bored." *While We're Young* has also gone down poorly with some viewers who were hoping for more of the uncharacteristic optimism and good cheer of Baumbach's prior movie, *Frances Ha*. Here, too, Leslie cuts close to home by saying Josh's previous film was illuminating and entertaining, but "this one feels ungenerous, like you just took your ball and went home."

Image: At the moment Josh is most determined to expose Jamie's lies and stun everybody with his revelations, we see through his car window that he's being passed on the left by a faster vehicle—a visual clue that just when he thinks he's getting ahead, he's actually still behind.

Kinder? Gentler?: Grodin plays Leslie as a soft-spoken representative of a gentler, more honest generation of filmmakers, yet he describes himself as merciless, suggesting that neither the directors he recalls nor the era that produced them were as benign as we sometimes pretend.

The Next Generation: Just as it becomes clearer that Leslie is not some sweet, misunderstood role model the film also undoes any impression that the very young embody a hopeful future. The children at Kent's party repeatedly use profanity and seem to have no wonder in magic, just a desire to learn the tricks ("How did you fuckin' do that?"). This is even before the film's stinger image of a toddler in an airport gate using a phone to snap a photo of himself.

Race: At the Lincoln Center gala honoring Leslie's career, we finally see footage of his famous documentary *Arlo Takes a Bath*, which seems to involve the filmmakers staring at a black child in the tub. The scene entails actual footage that the Maysles Brothers (the legendary documentarians behind *Salesman* and *Grey Gardens*, among others) recorded but never used. Did you take this moment as neutral, or as a subtly barbed comment about how even revered "social" filmmakers were a mostly white group who equated impoverished people of color with symbols of "truth"? How does this image relate to Josh and Cornelia's later decision to adopt a baby from Haiti? Did that feel like a joke to you or an earnest gesture on their part? Even in the last shot of the film, a black woman hovers out of focus between Cornelia and Josh, sitting together at the gate—another image of non-white figures seen but not seen.

Editing: For minutes on end, *While We're Young* cross-cuts between Josh's bitter denunciation of Jamie in the lobby and Leslie giving his speech. This kind of editing implies a strong relation between the two lines of action, but can suggest either comparison or contrast. Did you understand Leslie's words as a further, less overt critique of Jamie's machinations? If so, how did you process Leslie's surprising defense of Jamie once seated at his table?

Script: "Not everything in my movie happened exactly as I said it did": this is word-for-word Jamie's description of what he's done. He is forced into a few extra gradations of confession but what did you think? Was he completely "guilty," in Josh's terms? Did Leslie's and Cornelia's defenses seem fair to you? Did your opinion change as his own account changed?

Greatest Generation?: Much of the movie plays out as a story of attraction and rivalry between aging Generation Xers and hipster millennials... but the end of the film suggests that either or both of these camps idolizes the reputation for "truth" and social critique they associate with Leslie's 60s generation, "with your sit-ins and protests and pack rats." What did you make of the characters' mutual, possibly deluded admiration for their image of their elders?

Gender: Technically, *While We're Young* ends with Josh and Cornelia more happily reunited, but they're still talking past each other a bit. For example, Josh assumes she finds the idea of renewing vows as silly as he does, but it turns out she doesn't. And even in this scene of reconciliation, Baumbach films them in separate over-the-shoulder close-ups rather than together. The closing shot finally groups them, but only from a dark and distant position.

Script: The renewed desire for a baby isn't the only thing that has changed in the one-year-later epilogue. "The evil is unleashed," Cornelia says as she opens the magazine to the interview with Jamie...even though, when we last saw her, she floated a qualified defense for Jamie's way of thinking and working. Has she shifted her view to accommodate her partner?

Music: The song over the end credits is David Bowie's "Golden Years," another resonant cut.