

Greenberg (2011)

“You like me so much more than you think you do.”

Major Credits:

Director: Noah Baumbach

Screenplay: Noah Baumbach, from a story by Baumbach and Jennifer Jason Leigh

Cinematography: Harris Savides

Music: James Murphy

Principal Cast: Ben Stiller (Roger Greenberg), Greta Gerwig (Florence), Rhys Ifans (Ivan), Jennifer Jason Leigh (Beth)

Production Background:

Baumbach, the son of two prominent New York writers whose divorce he chronicled in his earlier feature *The Squid and the Whale* (2005), co-wrote the screenplay with his then-wife, Jennifer Jason Leigh, who plays the role of Greenberg’s former girlfriend. His friend and sometime collaborator (they wrote *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* together), Wes Anderson, co-produced *Greenberg* with Leigh. Most of Baumbach’s films to date deal with characters who are disappointed in their lives, which do not conform to their ideal conceptions of themselves. At whatever age—a father in his 40s, his pretentious teenage son (*The Squid and the Whale*), a college graduate in her late twenties (*Frances Ha*, 2012)—they struggle to act like grownups.

The casting of Greta Gerwig developed into an enduring romantic and creative partnership: Gerwig co-wrote and starred in his next two films, *Frances Ha* and *Mistress America* (2015). You can read about Baumbach and Gerwig in Ian Parker’s fine article published in *New Yorker*, April 29, 2013.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. Screenplay: Like the work of one of his favorite filmmakers, Woody Allen, Baumbach’s dramedy combines literate observation (“All the men dress up as children and the children dress as superheroes”) and bitter commentary (“Life is wasted on... people”) with poignant confession (“It’s huge to finally embrace the life you never planned on”).
2. Cinematography/Editing: Beginning with the horizontal panning shot of Los Angeles’ smoggy skyline, Harris Savides’ camerawork captures the atmosphere of the city, usually basking in bright sunlight but also exposing the dust motes in the air. Note, too, the use of jump cutting and track-ins to reinforce the nervous intensity of certain dialogue scenes as well as the periodic montage sequences.
3. Music: Fittingly for a film whose protagonists are has-been or wanna-be musicians, music figures prominently both on the sound track and within the diegesis.
4. Acting: *Greenberg* is a “three-hander”: in order to overcome the repellent or simply frustrating behavior of the three main characters, the performances must be subtle, suggesting a moral and psychological complexity beneath surface acts.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Greenberg belongs to a significant American literary tradition of males experiencing an identity crisis that follows either financial or sexual failure. (It is a particularly *American* crisis because of capitalism's promise of rewarding individual opportunity). He is a bit like Theodore Dreiser's Hurstwood (*Sister Carrie*), cut off from the social standing that follows from a "career" or Saul Bellow's Herzog, compulsively writing elaborate letters of social critique to compensate for his isolation. Yet, fairly early in the film, Florence tells him she is "impressed" by his decision "to do nothing deliberately." What does she mean by this compliment? Is it misplaced? More to the point, Greenberg is an *antihero*—a "loser" in the eyes of his former friends (except Ivan). How does the film enable us to see something impressive and possibly "brave" (Beth's term) beyond his obnoxiousness?
2. Florence might well be the primary subject of this film—indeed, she *is* the protagonist of Baumbach's next film, *Frances Ha*, in which she plays a slightly older version of her character here. She seems at first glance to fit the tropes of pre-feminist cinema: casually promiscuous, slightly dim (as in her "stupid story" that drives Greenberg out of her house), passive in both her job and her relationships. Yet the only time she reacts angrily is when he tells her she "has value." "I already knew that," she says. "You didn't have to say that." Is she a suitable match for Greenberg?
3. Although one critic described him as "an aesthete without an art," Greenberg does, at least, have a *craft*: he is a carpenter. What is the significance of the doghouse he is building for Mahler throughout the narrative? What other symbols can you find in the film?
4. Like *Mistress America* (2015), this film seems interested in the conflict between near-generations (mid-20s vs. 40) rather than the usual generation gap between parents and children. The party scene thus serves as a set piece for Greenberg's Gen-X critique of the Internet millennials and, following the dialogue with Ivan, the emotional climax of the drama. Still, the question persists: what has Greenberg learned in these moments?