

Kids these days

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [May 13, 2015](#) issue



GENERATIONS: Josh (Ben Stiller, front left) and Cornelia (Naomi Watts, back center) have their lives turned upside down when they meet Jamie (Adam Driver, front right) and Darby (Amanda Seyfried, back left).

In the film *While We're Young*, Noah Baumbach probes the conflict between the Gen X and millennial generations while exploring the zeitgeist of the digital age.

The plot is a love story between two couples. Gen-Xers Josh (Ben Stiller) and Cornelia (Naomi Watts), in their forties, meet winsome millennials Jamie (Adam Driver) and Darby (Amanda Seyfried), who, like a lot of New Yorkers in their creative circle, are just starting to have babies. After struggling with infertility, Josh and Cornelia have accepted a childfree life. As their friends peel off into baby music classes and nighttime feeding schedules, Josh and Cornelia are left behind.

When they meet Jamie and Darby, they quickly fall in love, but not in the way we might expect. There's some mild flirtation, but no partner swapping or sexual tension. Instead, Josh and Cornelia, who feel trapped by their pursuit of success, are enamored of everything the younger couple does. While Josh and Cornelia have spent decades cultivating success and "good taste," Darby and Jamie are all about "process." They mix pop culture with high art and embrace hip-hop, old cartoons, Mozart, and slasher films in an alluring pastiche. For the younger couple, experience matters more than content or results.

The generational gap between 25 and 42 might not seem that great. But Baumbach, 45, has explored the subtle differences in many of his films. His characters express

disdain and frustration with younger hipsters in *Greenberg*; in *Frances Ha*, the characters relate tenderly to hipsters' earnest confusion. He has an expert eye for the small differences that signal profound changes.

Take marriage. When Josh and Cornelia tell their older friends that Jamie and Darby are only in their twenties but already married, the friends' response is a predictable "why?" For Gen-Xers, marriage is something you do only after great deliberation. You worry that you're reinforcing patriarchal or capitalist values that you meant to reject. For Jamie and Darby, marriage is like an old-fashioned typewriter: it's an object with an intrinsic value whose purpose they are discovering or reinventing for themselves.

The film focuses on the characters' differences in other values and virtues. Josh and Cornelia worry, for example, that they lack generosity in their preoccupation with success and critical evaluation, while Darby and Jamie seem to exude generosity. These differing mentalities come to a head in the profession that Josh and Jamie both pursue: documentary filmmaking. Josh begins to have second thoughts about what generosity is when he observes Jamie's documentary work and sees that Jamie is comfortable with stretching the truth and appropriating the experiences of others to create his version of reality. This isn't generosity, as Josh understands it. "That's not sharing," he says. "That's stealing."

Baumbach is too subtle to offer simple moral lessons. Instead he pushes us to see that there's more going on here. Josh doesn't know how to relate to Jamie's project because it's not documentary work as he knows it. Josh worries that making documentaries has become impossible in the digital age. When everyone is already filming everything all the time, what is a documentary? But he also knows that something new is emerging in Jamie's work, something too new to name.

The digital age has changed how we imagine our relationship to the world. Josh and Cornelia are more addicted to their smartphones than their younger friends are, but they think of Google and Facebook as "tools" in a life governed by older rules and ethics. Jamie and Darby, meanwhile, barely use Facebook and resist Googling at every encounter; they readily choose ignorance over instant gratification. But they think that the world is created in the free exchange of ideas, information, images, and relationships, and they're comfortable appropriating and rearranging whatever they find to create meaning. For Jamie and Darby, the Internet is far more than a tool; it has transformed their understanding of reality.

*While We're Young* suggests that none of us will be able to go back to a world where every idea is properly linked to its author, every song properly contained in an album. Generosity is no longer the act of giving from carefully guarded bounty. The digital age is recalibrating our notion of what it means to *have* something, to use it, to own it, and to share it.

If the digital natives don't yet understand the meaning and the ethical import of all of this, suggests Josh, it's not because they're evil. They're just young.