

Blu-Ray Review: 'Greenberg' Marks Noah Baumbach's Return to Form

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on July 15, 2010 - 7:47am

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CHICAGO – What has attracted Noah Baumbach to the mumblecore movement? Has he noticed similarities between the developmentally arrested misanthropes of his pictures and the ambling twentysomethings that populate micro-budget indies from filmmakers such as Joe Swanberg, Andrew Bujalski and the Duplass brothers? With "Greenberg," his third and best feature to date, Baumbach draws a link between two generations, uniting them in their shared angst.

While the Duplass brothers' "Cyrus" cast big-name actors in a mumblecore comedy, "Greenberg" casts mumblecore queen Greta Gerwig in a subversive star vehicle for one of the biggest names in Hollywood. Both films are among the year's most engaging and enjoyable character portraits, but they also share the same odd flaw: it's impossible to buy their central romances. Neither of the films' male leads seem at all deserving of the girl who falls for him. Yet while "Cyrus" loosely borrowed the structure of feel-good mainstream escapism, "Greenberg" depicts the pairing of neurotic outcasts with a less rose-colored lens.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

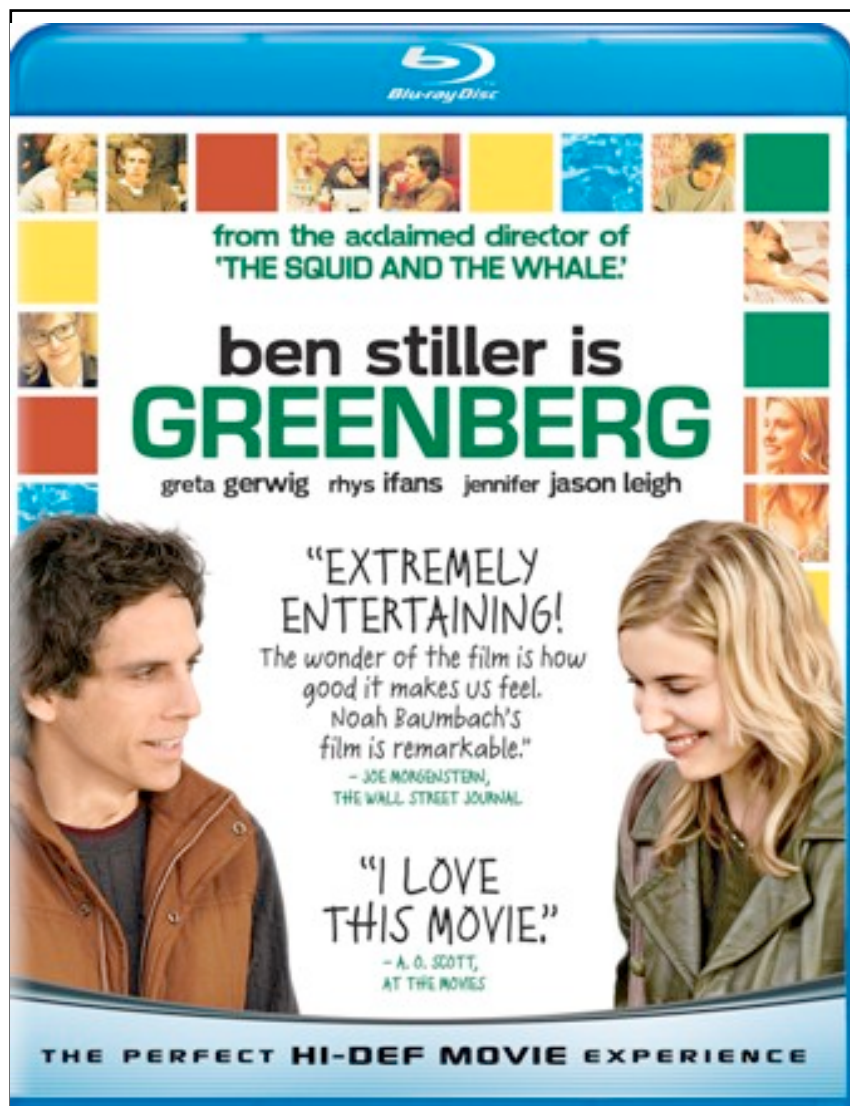
Baumbach is about the same age as his fortysomething protagonist, Roger Greenberg, who delivers a monologue about the current generation of mean, tech-savvy youngsters that may (or may not) mirror the filmmaker's own views. Ben Stiller delivers a restrained and brilliantly nuanced performance as Roger, the type of self-absorbed cynic who wouldn't know a social cue if it bit him in the behind. While housesitting for his brother in LA, he has resolved to do nothing more than write angry letters to every entity of stupidity on the planet (such as American Airlines). Thankfully, he has the number of his brother's personal assistant, Florence (Gerwig), in case he ever feels the need to do something, like make out. Their first anti-romantic interlude is like a master class in the art of awkward lovemaking, anchored by Gerwig, who's had a great deal of experience with scenes of raw, clumsy intimacy, especially in her collaborations with Swanberg (perhaps it's no coincidence that Baumbach co-produced Swanberg's latest picture, "Alexander the Last"). "Greenberg" reminds us that the joining of two lost souls is often messier than most films would like to believe (including "Cyrus").



Ben Stiller stars in Noah Baumbach's Greenberg.

Photo credit: Universal Home Entertainment

There's a great disorienting sequence that intercuts between three of Roger's conversations with different people at a party, accentuating the disconnect between his wavelength and that of the surrounding human race. He has a habit of earning temporary goodwill before abruptly sabotaging it. After inviting Florence to his birthday dinner, he immediately excuses himself upon her arrival, and calls an old flame (a superb Jennifer Jason Leigh) who wants nothing to do with him. Even Roger's most devoted friend, Ivan (Rhys Ifans), seems to tolerate his company merely out of the goodness of his heart. So why would Florence fall for such a sad sack? Perhaps the attraction can be somewhat explained by her role as a tireless caregiver. The opening eight minutes of "Greenberg" play like a great short film (as well as a spot-on reflection of mumblecore's key themes), which follows Florence into her latest aimless fling, which inspires her priceless line, "I've got to stop doing things just because they feel good." Gerwig's acting is so authentic that it's easy to take for granted. This is as much her vehicle as it is Stiller's, and she holds her own amongst the cast of screen veterans.



Greenberg was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on July 13th, 2010.

Photo credit: Universal Home Entertainment

In many ways, "Greenberg" is Baumbach's "Annie Hall," with Stiller as Woody Allen, Gerwig as Diane Keaton and Ifans as Tony Roberts. The script lacks Allen's sharp-witted one-liners, but Baumbach's primary goal isn't earning laughs. His films have always been as painful as they are funny, and as squirm-inducing as they are entertaining. Like the Duplass brothers, Baumbach is clearly interested in complex characters and situations, rather than straightforward punchlines. This film is a triumphant return to form for the filmmaker, after his caustic sophomore effort, "Margot at the Wedding," in which practically every character was repellant. Roger may be an S.O.B., but he's at least making attempts to move his life in a better direction (he has, after all, just spent time in a mental hospital). Stiller has played tongue-in-cheek doofuses for so long that it's rather stunning to see him fully commit to playing a three-dimensional role rather than a one-note punching bag. His performance is wonderful, and so is the film.

"Greenberg" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, French and Spanish audio tracks, and includes pocket BLU and social BLU apps. What it doesn't include are any substantial extras, and that's a definite letdown, especially considering how Baumbach's debut feature, "The Squid and the Whale," was loaded with special features, including a director commentary. Here, we're only offered three pathetic featurettes, the longest of which runs a whopping three minutes, and mainly consists of film clips. It's startling to see such trite, Hollywood-style extras accompanying a film as refreshing and uncommercial as "Greenberg." I have half a mind to write Universal a letter about this. I'll begin with, "Dear Universal, in your attempt to give this under-appreciated gem a proper Blu-Ray release, you've been surprisingly successful for the most part. The part that isn't covered by 'the most part' sucks."

'Greenberg' is released by Universal Home Entertainment and stars Ben Stiller, Greta Gerwig, Rhys Ifans, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Chris Messina and Mark Duplass. It was written and directed by Noah Baumbach. It was released on July 13th, 2010. It is rated R.



By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [14]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

[13]

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