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GEN-X FILMMAKERS AND STARS

A RECENT COVER STORY IN *HARPER'S* asked the question “What Happened to Gen X?” Written by the Canadian-American philosophy professor Justin E. H. Smith, the piece opens with memories of breakfasting across from Douglas Coupland, the title of whose 1991 novel gave people my age that generational name, and it goes on to lament how little we have accomplished or committed to, at least collectively. “I acknowledge that I am feeling defeated, and it is a symptom of this defeat that I have withdrawn to live in the past,” he concludes. This is a common lament not exactly of Generation X—that is to say, of people born between 1965 and 1980—but simply of middle age. People my age are getting old, and we’re not handling it super gracefully, or at least that’s the thesis of Smith’s piece.

Nicole Holofcener was born in 1960, so she is maybe a little too old to be Generation X (according to the Wikipedia-provided definition I just cited). But nuts to that: the whole generation thing is a little bit made up, so a few years here and there makes little difference. More importantly, she is handling this whole “people my age are getting old” thing a lot better than Smith suggests his (my) cohort is, and she has been doing so for a while. Perhaps she has been doing so for much longer than people who have seen some of her earlier films, like *Walking and Talking* (1996), *Friends with Money* (2006), and *Enough Said* (2013), might imagine.

Her latest film, *You Hurt My Feelings* (2023), is a portrait of upper-middle-class anomie, particularly around the semi-sacred principle of honesty in intimate relationships. Julia Louis-Dreyfus plays Beth, a moderately successful memoirist who teaches writing at the New School and has just finished her first novel. Tobias Menzies plays her husband Don, whose practice as a therapist is less and less satisfying as he feels less and less on his game. (When he admits to mixing up his patients during a session, he presents that particular failing as something of a cardinal sin in the profession.) The basic conflict in the film stems from Don telling Beth that her new book

is great, after which she overhears him telling his brother-in-law Mark (a somewhat hapless actor played by Arian Moayed) that he doesn't actually like it at all, which opens up a serious rift in their marriage. In the end, though, it's not that serious; resentment simmers, and they fight a bit, but it all sort of works out in the end.

"It all sort of works out in the end" may as well be the motto of Holofcener's entire oeuvre. As someone born in 1971, I am coming to see this as a distinctly middle-aged insight, coming up halfway between both the melodramatic fireworks of youth and the fatalism that I suspect is no small part of old age (if some of my eldest colleagues are any indication, anyway). Holofcener's work is generally defined by a sort of non-self-effacing modesty, as her characters more or less do their best to be good people and do so in surroundings that are comfortable without being opulent. Seen in retrospect, the same could even be said of a film like *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018), which Holofcener was supposed to direct but ended up co-writing. Melissa McCarthy's desperate author-turned-forger Lee Israel (based on a real person but with the usual liberties taken) is petty, a little bit mean, and obviously living very precariously, but the film presents her as touchingly attached to friendship and existing in a state of cozy bohemian grubbiness. The edges are a lot softer in *You Hurt My Feelings*, but there are flashes of comparable rawness, especially in Don's therapy sessions, most of which are with people who are damaged, self-absorbed, difficult to feel sympathy for, and obviously in need of help. That, of course, is no small part of Don's dilemma. When he reads a letter from one of his patients demanding a full refund for the therapy he and his wife have done over the years and now see as worthless, you can feel him facing the reality that, despite all the therapist-speak about professional boundaries and not judging people for what their problems lead them to do, he clearly dislikes this guy, and this guy is far from the only patient of whom that's true. But he still goes on, and it all sort of works out in the end.

This Upper-West-Side world of authors and therapists was once the realm of Woody Allen, and I think that is not a bad lens through which to see Holofcener's cinema. I haven't been able to watch Allen's films for a long time now, and I find even the early stuff to be either silly (including *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex * But Were Afraid to Ask* in 1972, *Broadway Danny Rose* in 1984, and many of the films made in between) or cringe-inducingly self-serious (including *Interiors* in 1978, *Another Woman*

in 1988, and several of the films made in between). But for a little while he was getting stuff exactly right, albeit only once a decade. I can still watch *Annie Hall* (1977), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), and *Husbands and Wives* (1992) over and over again and marvel at the delicacy and affectionate irony with which the mannerisms, moral sensibilities, anxieties, and behavioural ticks of the upper middle class are put onto the screen. I now see it as no minor matter that the first two of these films were produced by Charles H. Joffe, who is Holofcener's stepfather. Indeed, Wikipedia further informs us that Holofcener was an apprentice editor on the best of those films and surely the best film Allen ever made—namely, *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Really, it is Holofcener who has inherited Allen's project, and on the whole she's done a much better job with it than he did. New York is a culturally rich place, and it is a joy to see it rendered on the screen with such affection. A scene where Beth and Don share a bodega picnic in the park is redolent of a comfort, ease, and simple joy that is quite rare in contemporary cinema. When Beth drops by the pot shop where her flailing son works, it is robbed at gunpoint; everyone has to get down on the floor, and a brilliant tableau with the camera set at ground level has Louis-Dreyfus crawling all over her twenty-something child trying to protect him in a basically perfect piece of physical comedy that says everything there is to say about the parenting efforts of my generation. Holofcener is interested in more or less the same subject matter as Allen but has bypassed his intellectual pretensions and nostalgia—the two vices that undercut so many of his films and that he managed miraculously and, as it turns out, uniquely in *Annie Hall*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Husbands and Wives*.

If this makes Holofcener's work sound unambitious and workday—the stuff of television rather than film—that's because it is, and that is fine. Indeed, Holofcener has directed a lot of television over the years—really, really good television—including episodes of *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019), and *Lucky Hank* (2023). These episodes, which aired from 2002 to 2023, represent the best of what television can do by illuminating everyday life in ways that go beyond simple reflection and exaggeration. It is in this way that Holofcener really is the ultimate Gen-X filmmaker. It was on our watch, as we moved into positions of control over the media (well, not me personally, but people more or less my age), that “film” stopped meaning celluloid and “television” stopped meaning broadcast. All

of it went digital, and most of it went online. As a result, only the thinnest of wedges now separates what we once called film and television, as it's all just narrative moving-image art that we watch on various screens. I saw *You Hurt My Feelings* in exactly the same way I saw the episode of *Lucky Hank* that Holofcener directed: as a streaming object on Amazon Prime. What, you think a slow, low-budget, and non-explosiony movie like this is going to open in a *movie theatre* in Saskatoon, where I currently live? Fat chance. What the first National Film Board commissioner John Grierson called (in 1944) the “non-theatrical revolution” is finally here, and Holofcener is one of its most consistently enjoyable humble bards.

Speaking of the generationally inflected dissolution of borders between media (we were, weren't we?), it turns out that Arnold Schwarzenegger has a podcast. I know this because my 14-year-old son is really into Schwarzenegger. I am generationally programmed to find this worrying. Being “really into Schwarzenegger” for a guy my age summons images of high-octane-testosterone-soaked kickassery, such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982)—long a favourite of right-wing weirdos, very much including its director and co-writer John Milius—or *The Terminator* (1984)—the first instalment of a franchise that takes just a little too much glee in its visions of an apocalypse that burns it all down. It turns out that this is not necessarily the case, or at least not anymore. The teenage son in question has recently declared Ivan Reitman's *Twins* (1988), wherein Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito turn out to be long-separated brothers, to be his favourite movie. Not long ago we all watched *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), also by Reitman and starring Schwarzenegger as an undercover policeman who winds up responsible for about two dozen 5-year-olds, and I could not believe how charming I found it. It is not great cinema, and an earlier enunciation of me might have called it “sitcom-esque,” but I found that it had aged as well as a few other sitcoms of that era, such as *Newhart* (1982-1990). So, to return to my formulations of Holofcener's work, it turns out that Schwarzenegger also has this side that is a bit unambitious and workday and seems rather the stuff of television instead of movies, and that is fine.

This is absolutely of a piece with his podcast, which is rather deceptively titled *Arnold's Pump Club* (2023-). Its subject is fitness along with some bits and bobs of self-help and a little soupçon of peer-reviewed scientific research. Most episodes are shorter than 10 minutes. The ones that the boyo

had me listen to are really low-tech: basically Arnold in front of a microphone. As with *Kindergarten Cop*, I found myself totally charmed by all of this.

Perhaps more poignantly, the podcast brought back memories of a similarly modest work that Schwarzenegger recently produced: a 7½ minute video issued on January 10, 2021—four days after the donnybrook at the U.S. Capitol (available on YouTube). It is made up entirely of a few medium shots of Schwarzenegger, looking old with thinning hair and a whisp of a beard, sitting at a desk with American and Californian flags in the background, and speaking bluntly: “Wednesday was the Day of Broken Glass right here in the United States. . . . President Trump is a failed leader. He will go down in history as the worst president ever. . . . What are we to make of those elected leaders who have enabled his lies and his treachery?” He ended on words that it is impossible to imagine most of his fellow Republicans saying today: “President-Elect Biden, we stand with you today, tomorrow, and forever in defence of our democracy from those who would threaten it.”

As the icon of vaguely right-wing cinematic masculinity drifted into the internet age, where cinema, television, and podcasting all sort of blur into one, Schwarzenegger seems to answer a form of the question posed in the title of Smith’s article: what happened to Gen X’s movie idols? They have gotten old, for sure, but that doesn’t mean *at all* that they have withdrawn to live in the past. In fact, sometimes the opposite is the case. It turns out that it all sort of works out in the end.