

Whit Stillman's *The Last Days of Disco*: Life for some in the 'very early 1980s'

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Director Whit Stillman, the son of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administrative aide, makes films, in his own words, about the 'urban haute bourgeoisie.' In *The Last Days of Disco*, set in the 'very early 1980s,' a number of WASPish college graduates try to make their way in careers and in love. A hip Manhattan club is at the center of their social life. The character through whose eyes we see most of the goings-on is a sad-eyed, relative innocent named Alice (Chloë Sevigny). She and her pretty, self-centered roommate, Charlotte (Kate Beckinsale), work in publishing at relatively meager salaries. They search for the bestseller that will earn them a promotion. Meanwhile they share a railroad apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with Holly (Tara Subkoff), attractive but fairly empty-headed.

The three young women attract and circulate with and among a number of young men: Des (Chris Eigeman), an assistant to the club's drug-dealing owner; Jimmy (Mackenzie Astin), a young adman whose job depends on his ability to get clients into the club; Josh (Matt Keeslar), an assistant district attorney with a history of emotional difficulties; Dan (Matt Ross), a co-worker with a self-conscious disdain for the upper classes; Tom (Sean Robert Leonard), a Harvard graduate and environment lawyer, supposedly on the rebound from a failed relationship.

Various triangles form and dissolve. Alice has an original interest in Jimmy; sleeps with Tom, who promptly drops her; takes up with the womanizing Des; and finally chooses Josh, unstable but sincere. In the background more serious problems loom. The district attorney's office is interested in the thriving drug trade going on at the club. Josh and Des, rivals for Alice, find themselves on opposite sides of the law as well.

The Last Days of Disco is Stillman's third feature film. His first, *Metropolitan* (1990), looked at a few months in the lives of Manhattan debutantes and their escorts. Ads

for the films read: 'Doomed. Bourgeois. In Love.' *Barcelona* (1994) examined some of the same emotional and sociological territory, this time its subjects being well-off Americans residing in Spain.

Stillman's films are intelligently written. His direction is discreet and well-paced. He has a feel for the dynamics and conviviality of people in social settings. Indeed his group scenes are invariably greater than the sum of the one-on-one encounters that go on. One can't help suspecting that Charlotte speaks for Stillman when she inveighs against the 'ferocious pairing off' that is the inevitable outcome of any social scene. If his films are at their most carefree in bars and clubs, they are at their most melancholy in bedrooms. Seduction is usually a prelude to heartache or worse. In Alice's case it leads to several unpleasant ailments and a trip to the doctor and the pharmacist.

One can make a number of favorable comments about Stillman's films, but inevitably one runs up against certain difficulties. The chief problem is not so much the circumscribed lives his characters lead--almost anyone's life can be the subject of art--as it is the deliberately circumscribed and inconsistent approach Stillman takes to them.

First, one must point out that the 'very early 1980s' bring to mind different things to different people. Some of us think of the election of Reagan, the PATCO strike, and so forth. Is Stillman obliged to take those events into account? Certainly not. But a work that *so conspicuously and determinedly* makes a point of ignoring larger issues puts one on guard. After all, even the most self-absorbed read newspapers, watch television and make comments about the panorama of world events. With *The Last Days of Disco* one is alerted from the outset to the fact that certain problems may be discussed and others may not.

Furthermore, are we to assume that there is anything critical, or even incisively ironic, in the director's

treatment of these privileged, and not terribly bright people? His film's title suggests something momentous coming to an end, as in *The Last Days of Pompeii*. Of course one is supposed to recognize the joke. In the grand scheme of things, the director is telling us ahead of time, this is pretty inconsequential stuff. But one has the feeling that Stillman wants to have his cake and eat it too.

Like many contemporary works of this type, the film is not sincere in its insubstantiality. Stillman makes fun of his characters' brainlessness--the only cultural references in the film are to Disney's *Lady and the Tramp*, *Bambi* and Uncle Scrooge comic books--and then asks us to take their emotional traumas seriously. He wants credit both for exposing their amusing prattle (which also serves the purpose of demonstrating that he is smarter than they are) *and* for demonstrating sensitivity about their dilemmas. Corresponding to this division in approach, the characters in the film tend to gravitate toward one of two poles: Charlotte and Des toward mindless fun--the scenes they dominate are built around getting laughs, not by the internal logic of the narrative; Alice, Josh and perhaps Jimmy toward seriousness--one is supposed to read their faces for pain.

Alternately sneering at, speaking through and seeking sympathy for his characters Stillman is incapable of providing a satisfying perspective on them. One doesn't know which attitude to trust. And so when--in the film's final scene--an entire subway train and station platform break into disco dancing inspired by Alice and Josh, one is not entirely willing to be seduced by a democratic gesture that comes too late and may or may not express the director's deepest sentiments.

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