

Mark C. Henrie

## Film, Comedy, and Christian Humanism: A First Look at Whit Stillman

More than a few readers will be surprised to find a symposium in the pages of *The Intercollegiate Review* dedicated to the work of a contemporary filmmaker. Among conservatives of a certain vintage, the custom has long been to denounce popular culture, and all its works and ways, in a defense of traditional art forms and of permanent standards of excellence. True culture is a matter of cultivation, of becoming familiar with “the best which has been thought and said,” as Matthew Arnold put it. Such high cultivation must view with disdain the low diversions of the *demos*, and movies are the pre-eminent American—and therefore, the pre-eminent democratic—art form.

It is certainly true that contemporary Hollywood films are dominated by technological spectacle and coarse titillation. Films of this sort contribute only to what has been called the *deculturation* of their audiences. The “art house” productions of self-described purists, on the other hand, frequently serve merely to rehearse those tedious and false platitudes which provincial cosmopolitans (mis)take to be profound. America’s popular culture amply deserves the critique to which conservatives have subjected it.

But film, in itself, is no more intrinsically base than are the stage play or the opera, both of which have also appealed to mass tastes while gaining a recognized status among the fine arts. Like theater and opera, film is an art form that calls upon many arts

for its realization; it combines visual, literary, and frequently musical arts. Masters of the craft such as John Huston or Orson Welles do merit the attention of conservatives who are serious about culture.

Still, the skill of most great filmmakers has been primarily visual, and contemporary students of film in fact concentrate on the visual elements of their craft. While filmmakers often involve themselves in story development, it is rare to come upon a director who is also the writer of his works. It is rarer still to find in any screenplay the intelligence and nuance of true literary art. Rarest of all is to discover a film of the highest quality that sympathetically addresses themes of direct interest to conservatives. When such a discovery is made, the *IR* must take notice. We are delighted to offer in the following symposium a first look at the work of one such filmmaker.

Whit Stillman has written, produced, and directed an extraordinary trilogy of films which sensitively examine the human condition in our democratic age. *Metropolitan* (1990) takes us into the privileged drawing rooms of Manhattan’s Upper East Side during the Christmas debutante season and introduces us to some “basically...good [people].” *Barcelona* (1994) then chronicles the encounter of two very American cous-

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ins, apparently Chicago natives, with the wiles and seductions of old Europe. The conclusion of the trilogy, *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), portrays a group of Harvard graduates in their first jobs after college, who take up with two Hampshire graduates working in publishing. Each of the films might be classed as a comedy of manners. Stillman's unostentatious camera work directs our attention to what his characters are saying, to the *word*; and his dialogue displays almost astonishing wit. The films are the farthest thing from cinematic spectacle.

Stillman himself is from an elite socioeconomic background. He is a graduate of Harvard College who has lived in Barcelona and once worked in publishing. He writes about what he knows. But in so doing, he has hit upon an exceptionally useful device to explore the possibilities and limitations, under the democratic dispensation, of human beings as such. In each of his films, Stillman provides a highly-reflective portrayal of the lives, loves, and longings of the high-born class who in another age would have been the serenely self-confident carriers of aristocratic tradition. Under democracy, the status of this class is profoundly in doubt—as are the very ideals and virtues that the aristocrats claimed to represent. While necessarily touched by anxiety, however, Stillman's young men and women remain aware at least of a rumor of the noble and the gracious, of the higher things which are properly human. Oddly, Stillman's rare specimens may be closer to human nature than are we. But like all of us, the well born suffer the disorientation of modernity, the loss of tradition. The perplexity that animates each of Stillman's films is how to find our way, how to live well, when the cake of custom has been broken.

Whatever Whit Stillman's politics may be, the very form of his artistic sensibility

illuminates what an imaginative conservative cultural intervention in our time might entail. Each film in his trilogy concerns an ending, a passing away. In *Metropolitan*, the characters lament that they are living through the last debutante season as they know it, one already "pretty much reduced" from earlier years. *Barcelona* takes place in "the last decade of the cold war." And a sense of ending is explicit in the *faux*-apocalyptic title of *The Last Days of Disco*. In each of the films a note of wistful nostalgia may be detected with which conservatives are well acquainted. Such a feeling arises from a powerful intuition of the human good which is revealed in its passing away. Knowledge of that passing good should stir us to *affection*—and away from cynicism—for to know the human good is to know an essence that can never finally pass away. Such a *comic* sensibility leads us beyond mere nostalgia and pain of loss and contains the germ of action. Allen Tate glimpsed as much when he observed, "The most that we can do with the past is to salvage what is good in the present and hold on to it; and that creates a new past."

American conservatives have indulged too long in a preference for *tragic* art. Perversely, they are given to admiring those voices which tell them that the fate of all they hold dear is hopeless. But if conservatives are right about what they profess concerning human nature, if they are right about the grace of God, then *comedy* is their rightful genre. Not the ridicule-ridden ancient comedy of that fearful conservative, Aristophanes, but the gentle and ironic comedy of a Christian humanist. When the action of Stillman's trilogy is arranged chronologically, *Barcelona*, not *Last Days*, is the final act; and as in Shakespeare, the comedy concludes with a multiple marriage. At present such comedy is a rarified taste, but its discrete charm may lead one day to a common grace.