

Peter Augustine Lawler

## Nature, Grace, and *The Last Days of Disco*

Whit Stillman's films, which he both writes and directs, are rather Socratic, Christian, and at least ambiguously conservative. For an audience that for the most part possesses none of those qualities, he presents his insight lightly and indirectly. Only occasionally does he allow us to glimpse the extent of his ambition. He told a *Psychology Today* interviewer that he turned down an opportunity to film *Sense and Sensibility* because he found it unchallenging. But that's not because he does not appreciate Jane Austen's unrivaled ability to discover the truth about human nature or human types in the forms and formalities of her particular class and time. Stillman knows his challenge is to do the same for his class and time. That class was named in *Metropolitan*, his first film, the Urban Haute Bourgeoisie (UHB). Its world is defined by elite New England colleges—Harvard and Hampshire—and Manhattan. The UHB distinguishes itself from yuppies: Its members do not define themselves by their professions, and they fear downward far more than they hope or work for upward mobility.

Stillman's *Last Days of Disco* is about the odd and amusing mixture of class-con-

sciousness and self-consciousness of socially, but not extraordinarily naturally, gifted young people in a decadent, democratic time. The members of that class are privileged in terms of opportunities easily gained and in their unprecedented freedom, but they really have not received much of an inheritance at all. Their social position is very insecure. Their status does not guarantee them good jobs or housing, or even admission to their social club of choice, the disco. Their education and breeding have given them fairly good manners and the language and style for clever conversation, but they have not really learned how or what to think about or to believe.

The members of the UHB, "uhbs," sometimes speak with an intellectual snobbery that points in the direction of liberal education. A pompous rejoinder in the midst of a conversation about the male view of the female breast is "It is more complicated and nuanced than that." Their higher education allows them to go beyond common opinion to notice that Disney's *Lady and the*

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*Tramp* is not really about dogs, because the dogs all “represent human types.” In their amusingly erudite, sentimental, and shamelessly self-serving discussion of this cartoon, they cannot see that the types they discover are merely their simple-minded caricatures of themselves.

Their formal education and their tradition have not provided the content required to have a genuinely thoughtful or revealing discussion about human types. Their points of intellectual pride do not take them beyond Disney, Scrooge McDuck, and J.D. Salinger. And with a couple of disquieting, rather disconnected exceptions, they associate traditional Christianity, the religion of their class, with reactionary propaganda and insanity. Stillman shows us a New York full of churches and allows us to hear church bells, just to make clear that the “uhbs” of *Last Days* never really see or hear them (except, significantly, Des). They know of no duties specifically associated with their class, and they are in no strong sense citizens. They really are close to clueless, and they are so insecure or lost in the world that they rarely dare speak of their insecurity.

Because the UHB talk dumb, they act dumb. Their words don’t really correspond to their longings and anxieties. Stillman’s most troubling—and hopeful—observations concern the disproportion between the pretentious banality of their language and the depth and complexity of their longings. But there is also a disproportion between their bragging about living on the dark side and the tameness of most of their actual experiences and aspirations. These disproportions are the source of much of the film’s humor. But we have to listen closely in order to laugh.

In a Socratic fashion, Stillman treats his subjects’ opinions, manners, and other modes of expression as revelations of their natures or characters. They may be almost equally clueless, but nature gives them all at

least some guidance. As beings given language by nature, the UHB are—like all human beings—singularly perverse, wonderful, and pathetic mixtures of self-consciousness, biological desire, and more. Just beneath the surface of UHB or yuppie uniformity, Stillman discovers a fascinating variety of human types or natures. He finds both virtue and vice, friendship and betrayal, moral strength and moral weakness, beings capable of loving and being loved (and so of hating and being hated), and what one character astutely calls big, healthy, and bikini-sized personalities.

Stillman’s “uhbs” are among the most maligned Americans ever. They are written about by our cultural critics the way black slaves once were. They are called not really human at all. This most damning attack has come from both the Left and the Right. They are one-dimensional (Herbert Marcuse) or flat-souled (Allan Bloom). They are without distinctively human eros or longing. They live contentedly in the present without God or country or deep commitments or friendships. They are clever animals or competent specialists and nothing more. They live in an abstracted world created by technology and therapeutic language that has no place for the real human experiences of love and death (Christopher Lasch).

Stillman shows that our critics, in truth, are the ones who mistake abstractions for reality. They write as if the modern conquest of nature has actually transformed human beings into something else, as if Locke or Hegel actually described Americans today. For the attentive observer nothing could be further from the truth. Stillman’s achievement is to portray the bourgeoisie of our time as human beings. And he does so within the context of a disco club modeled on Studio 54! If there is anything our contemporary culture and critics hold more in contempt than the UHB, it is

the age of disco and almost all it represents. Disco tunes are often portrayed as soulless and mindless, interchangeable versions of techno-generated rhythm fit for a particularly silly and narcissistic form of dancing in polyester outfits and platform shoes. Disco is denounced because its emergence signified the failure of message-driven rock music in the late sixties to transform America

too was a diversion from emptiness, and the illusion of freedom from personal responsibility was destroyed by epidemics of a variety of diseases, most notably AIDS. So all in all, the fact that even the haute bourgeois graduates of our best colleges embraced the disco scene and its music seems to be particularly telling evidence of how pervasive our wasteland was and is.



Courtesy of Castle Rock Entertainment

*The antagonists and friends in Whit Stillman's The Last Days of Disco (1998) have just been ejected from a nightclub.*

in an idealistic, ideological direction. To the critics, disco was nothing but a fad so empty it could not last for long. If sixties rock aimed to change the world; seventies disco music aimed instead to divert dancers from the hellish reality that remains capitalist America. The John Travolta character in *Saturday Night Fever* is a depressing mixture of ignorant depravity and misguided nobility, a victim of religious and familial disintegration in an ethnic enclave. He is distinguished from his friends because he really can dance, although he wastes his talent and love of excellence on disco. For them, disco is only opium dulling them to the empty misery of their lives.

Some of our critics do see something good in disco: it was the music appropriate for the wild and impersonal promiscuity of the urban gay liberation of the seventies, and that sort of mechanical promiscuity, as Stillman shows, was imperfectly imitated by the straights. But surely promiscuity

Stillman reverses the critical ranking of rock and disco. As one of his characters exclaims, disco was much more and much better than Travolta, Olivia Newton-John, and our other fashionable stereotypes. For his characters, disco meant “the return of clubs, cocktails, dancing, conversation, exchange of ideas and points of view, dressing up, and manners.” Music became less loud and insistent and more melodic and urbane. It made real dancing possible

once again, and it didn't drown out all human speech except screaming. One of Allan Bloom's most penetrating conservative criticisms of rock is its hostility to conversation and so to genuine friendship. Stillman clearly shares that view, but he goes beyond Bloom by using it to distinguish among and rank contemporary forms of music. Disco, as one of his characters says, really was, for the UHB at least, liberation from the social wasteland of the sixties, the one which carried over to their undergraduate lives. For Stillman, the days of disco signaled the beginning of what Francis Fukuyama calls the great restoration of social life in America.

Disco nights for the UHB of *Last Days* are far from wild or impersonal. They do not dance like Travolta or experiment much with any liberating vice. With one exception, they do not use drugs, and their sexual experimentation is not very experimental. One character claims to be gay, but only as

a classy, sympathetic way of ditching girls. Another claims to have gay friends, but we know she is lying too. The “uhbs” seek and find some old-fashioned security in their group social life centered around the club. The club is also the scene of intense, college-style conversation, with music only in the background. The club is college in effect continued, only better. Stillman’s characters are liberated from the repressive and isolating ethic of liberation retailed by their professors, and of course they no longer must waste their nights studying.

One difference between Stillman and his characters is that he really knows and loves disco music. In his film, he allows us to hear almost 30 disco hits, and he chooses them to set the mood for every key scene. The music is more witty, diverse, and pleasing than I remember, and only a very priggish listener could leave the film without seeing some good in it. But the tunes actually seem to mean little to the UHB. They only care about having a fashionable place to show themselves off in a well-defined group through talking and dancing. They share that perennial concern with Jane Austen’s young characters. They assert that they are less boring and otherwise better than both preppies and the “conceited” anti-dancers of the sixties because they really can both dance and talk

Most of the UHB may not possess the moral strength required for the consistent practice of virtue, but one thing is certain: they are not much distorted by the vice of greed. When push comes to shove, loyalty to friends often wins out over vulgar selfishness, although not over attraction to the opposite sex. The UHB are both better and worse than stereotypical yuppies. The club is a respite from their inability to take seriously enough what they must really do in their careers. When we are shown what is required to succeed in book publishing and

advertising, we have considerable sympathy with their youthful irresponsibility. As a defender of the privileged, Stillman cannot help but have some justifiable contempt for the effects of capitalism on moral virtue, even as he celebrates in many ways the American view of liberty.

The most scholarly of the characters in *Last Days* works in publishing with the two leading women. “Departmental Dan,” who has neither the breeding nor the rich parents of the UHB, is on the edge of the group. His quasi-Marxist, theoretical criticism of UHB materialism and greed constantly misses the mark, and he cannot acknowledge his own class-envy and his attraction to the music and dancing of the club. He says “Disco sucks,” but he really means he doesn’t think he can get into the club. Nor can he admit or explain his weakness for cultivated physical beauty for its own sake. And despite his knowledge of critics and criticism, he can neither talk nor dance well. The UHB do tend to have the aristocratic shortcoming of insensitivity to their own dependence on the achievement of others and to those not of their class. And they care more about “the environment” or “Bambi” than they do about people who do manual labor. But all in all they are less self-deceptive and more generous than Dan (who actually improves a bit through his contact with them). They see through Dan better than he sees through them. He whines that their criticism is tough, but they brush his off. Class analysis cannot be reduced to materialism, and perhaps the human strengths and weaknesses of one class can rarely be understood by members of another. That is why we turn to Stillman, not theorists, to understand the UHB.

Nature in *Last Days* triumphs in a way reminiscent of Austen; the main characters pair off well by the film’s end. Like finally attracts like, and the coming together of

friendship and sexual attraction is more important than the fact that all the characters but one are unemployed at the film's end. Marrying well remains ordinarily the key to happiness in our time, as it was in Austen's, and we can be confident that these "uhbs," still protected to varying degrees by their parental safety nets and entering the era of Reagan, will make plenty of money one way or another. But we can also be a bit sad at the prospect of the probable narrowing of their social circle. The life of the unchurched bourgeoisie in their prime as moms and dads, married or divorced, in a big American city is ordinarily socially impoverished, or quite individualistic in Tocqueville's sense, especially when compared to that of genuine aristocrats.

One of the film's themes is the fragility not only of group social life but of male friendship in the era of the bourgeois or nuclear family. Another is the fragility of marriage in a world so individualistic or unsocial that sex often seems to be the only way really to connect with another human being. Biological instinct alone points in the direction, as one character says, of "pairing off," but not pairing off for a lifetime. A third and related theme is the different ways men and women tend to view sex outside of marriage: For women, it is often a means to security, partnership, and friendship with a man. For men, it is more often merely to satisfy the bodily urge and as momentary respite from anxious emptiness. Women are also capable of employing sex as a diversion, but they are more likely to recognize immediately the futility of the effort.

Men, perversely, are also capable of so spiritualizing or disembodimenting some women that they can separate romantic love from sexual passion. So they may put women into two distinct categories—the good or rational and the hot or purely instinctual—and view the good as respite from the pressure put on them by the hot.

They see women as minds or bodies but not as real human beings, and the most pathetic male character in the film is ridiculously disoriented by being unable to see that the same woman might be both very rational and very erotic. All the men in the film are attracted to the one woman who seems most moral or decent, Alice, and that attraction comes in large part from the perception that she is somehow on a higher "plane" than they are.

Men's perceptions are usually too abstracted or individualistic for them easily to have women as friends. Women, clearly, are more social or less individualistic than men. They more readily see human beings for what they are, and so they use their minds less to satisfy their bodies than to seduce men into becoming beings more fit for society. In that respect, as Tocqueville says and Stillman confirms, American women in general are superior to American men in general. We must add that the two successful pairings off in *Last Days* are initiated by men, but men who had been educated by women. And the earlier, "liberated" efforts of women to control men openly and aggressively fail. It is still the case that the rule of women must be secret and indirect, and that men must be allowed to act as men.

The film's two leading women, Alice and Charlotte, are each a version of the superior American woman. Alice seems at first to be morally superior but practically inferior to Charlotte. She takes intellectual life more seriously, and she is less aggressive and manipulative, more passive, about letting nature take its course. Alice wants to trust and be trusted, and she seems to be the mixture of priggish moralism and innocence characteristic of a "kindergarten teacher." She is too judgmental, in part, because she is shy and insecure, and she is readily dominated at first by Charlotte's

aggressive self-confidence. Alice wants to be more popular and especially more attractive to men than she was in college. Despite her claim that most young men are shallow “jerks,” she is infatuated at one time or another with the film’s three most handsome and hardly intellectually compelling men. So she readily succumbs to Charlotte’s bad advice to change her image, to become sexually aggressive and seductive, and she



Courtesy of Castle Rock Entertainment.

Josh (left), Alice (center), and Charlotte (right) escape at night from their jobs to the most popular New York nightclub of the early 1980s in Whit Stillman’s film *The Last Days of Disco*.

has a disastrous (if sexually quite successful) one-night stand with a weak, insipid Kennedy-type. Not only does she give up her “technical” virginity, but she contracts two venereal diseases. The lesson would be the fragility of virtue if we really quite believed that Alice’s virginity was mostly the result of virtue. Next she is attracted to a notorious womanizer. Both these men had idealized her, but maybe they had misunderstood her. Her moral decency may have actually been mostly shyness; she had learned how to be quite a lover merely from reading books.

But Alice’s experiences with untrustworthy, good-looking men lead her to conclude that “...maybe the old system of people getting married based on mutual respect and shared aspirations, and then slowly, over time, earning each other’s love and admiration, worked the best.” She learns,

quite reasonably, to subordinate eros to loyalty and friendship, and so she affirms the “reactionary” view that love, by itself, cannot produce marital stability. By choosing stability, she chooses moral decency, a normal life appropriate for her normal, healthy personality. And so she chooses a basically healthy, competent but not brilliant, admirable, loyal and devoted man, the “Scotty” of *Lady and the Tramp*. Alice recognizes that what she most needs is marital and professional stability, and she finally turns her mind to achieving them both.

But Stillman does not make Alice’s choice obvious, because Josh is a former manic depressive—and so, an “abnormal” healthy personality. Josh realizes that the drug lithium, “a naturally occurring salt,” has put him “on a perfectly even keel, perhaps too even.” He claims that his depression was not as bad as people think, and he senses that the judgment of others aims to deprive him of something essential to his being. But Josh also says that “I’m still waiting for my ‘growing spurt’...Tall people tend to have great personalities....” He knows he is not “tall” by nature, and the drug has nothing to do with it. Like Alice, he is shy and awkward with others, and he’ll never be noticed in a room full of people. He is an unstylish dancer and dresser. In one sense, he has been normalized by a naturally occurring drug, but in another sense, he is quite normal or unexceptional by nature.

Josh’s “mantra” while in the hospital for mental illness during college was the hymn “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.” His breakdown may well have been a genuine “religious mania,” which at Harvard in our time is viewed as the worst form of “nut case” (see John Rawls). Even Alice is “weirded out” when Josh actually sings that hymn to

her when describing his depression and hospitalization, and she dumps him for the moment. Josh was hoping to connect with her on the level of his mania, but he emphatically fails. They never, in fact, connect on that level; there is more to Josh than there is to Alice.

Josh's mania or longing has been suppressed, although not perfectly, by the drug. His devotion to God is partly replaced by his devotion to disco, and he gives a very intense and somewhat ridiculous speech bemoaning the disappearance—and predicting the return—of the good that is disco while church bells are ringing in the background. Josh is “electrified” by disco. But his lithium also allows him to focus much of his longing and devotion on a particular woman, and Alice finally responds to his quite singular love. But we sometimes suspect that she may have finally settled for Josh by denying her deepest, including her erotic, longings. And her success in publishing comes not through finding her “dream book” but by cleverly marketing a fraudulent Buddhist religious memoir as a “self-actualization” book.

But there is more to the story, because Alice's settling for Josh is really her appreciation of the genuine good which is the love of one flawed mortal for another. Alice realizes, in fact, that there is something both humanly good and flawed in all that she eventually affirms—her company which had been “great” to her but downsized her friends, the spiritual truth to be found in the fraudulent memoir, and of course the capacity of the somewhat manic or electrified Josh for enthusiastic and loyal devotion. And the story is more complicated and nuanced still.

For Alice needed help which she could not provide for herself finally to love Josh. Calculation alone had led her to push him away as too abnormal; she really was too cold and judgmental, too intolerant and

prideful. The most wonderful part of *Last Days* occurs very soon after Alice hears Josh sing his hymn and right before she becomes certain she has incurable herpes. Charlotte in a moment of despair sings her own favorite hymn, “Amazing Grace,” and we hear in the conviction of her voice and see in her eyes the joyful help it gives her. We don't see Alice's reaction, but we can imagine it. Charlotte's singing continues as background for Alice's visit to the women's health clinic and the pharmacy. Her knowledge of her incurable disease has made her feel wretched and appears so to others. A counselor lays out her choices now: She can either sleep with men so promiscuous that they are likely infected themselves anyway, or she can find someone so idealistic that he would stay with her “exclusively” for the rest of her life.

At this point, of course, Alice needs Josh like she did not before, and she sees more clearly why he is better than other men in the most important respect. Only the newly but permanently flawed Alice, perhaps, could have accepted the differently flawed Josh. She no longer thinks she is on a different “plane” from him, that she is settling for someone inferior to herself. So as Charlotte says, but for a different reason, there really can be something good about venereal disease.

Incurable herpes, in a most strange way, might have been Alice's amazing grace. Really bad luck, at first glance, turns out to be best for her. It is finally what brings together the apparently healthy and normal Alice with the healthy and apparently abnormal Josh. They both have glimpsed the truth about the human good, including its mixture with all forms of imperfection, in each other. In this respect, we must say that Josh is the exception to the rule about American men. He alone among the men was always attracted to the real Alice, and only for him would herpes (as opposed to

a curable venereal disease) make no difference. In this way, he is the most realistic and least romantic of the characters.

A persistent theme in the film's conversations is the extent to which people can really change, or whether their characters are fixed by nature. But a third possibility is a change in a person's nature. Josh changes through the "natural high" of lithium. And Alice changes her nature, in a way, through contracting herpes. But Alice's strange and undeserved natural change is the only one that occurs during the time of the film, and it results in a change in her character. Herpes cures her of some of her pride and leads her to happiness with another. Alice, in her pride, longed for grace less than the other main characters, but perhaps only she receives it. Maybe, because of her pride, she needed it the most. She is grateful to Josh and not to God, but she sees something of God in Josh's singular devotion, which cannot be explained by nature or biological instinct, much less by lithium.

Charlotte, despite her stunning physical beauty, seems much more unattractive than Alice. She is vain, manipulative, aggressive, completely untrustworthy, and intellectually superficial, preferring television to books. Most striking is her emphatically modern desire to be self-sufficient: "I just think it's so important to be in control of your own destiny—not to fall into that 50s cliché of waiting by the phone for guys to call. The right ones never do." And she does make things happen; she successfully plans a dinner party in an apartment that she has not yet found. But generally her luck with men is not good. Men prefer Alice's shyness to Charlotte's candid aggressiveness. Charlotte controls her life, finally, by affirming as good whatever happens, however terrible it might seem. She even extols the upside of having venereal disease; it can actually "improve your reputation" with

men. And she claims that "I'm not upset that I was laid off" from book publishing, because it "will motivate me to find a better job in television."

The root of Charlotte's desire to be completely in control, and so her inability to have friends, particularly women friends, is her betrayal by her parents as a child, the typical sort of betrayal in our time. She observes that "people hate being criticized. Everybody hates that. It's one of the great truths of human nature—I think it's why my parents got divorced." The truth is that people hate the truth, and so all must be manipulation. Charlotte usually thinks she has no choice but to live the liberal, therapeutic platitudes of choice and self-sufficiency because love is an illusion and other people will invariably betray you. She views compulsive betrayals and cruel candor as preemptive strikes, and her talk about control barely conceals how chaotic her soul really is. Her deeper aim is longing to achieve an "emotional breakthrough" with a man, and she breaks down when her best effort fails. Her deepest suspicion is that for some cruel reason that possibility has been denied her.

Charlotte, the big, "television" personality, is surprised by how "intolerant" Alice is about Josh's hymn singing. She says, "I've sung [hymns] on the street myself—I didn't realize it was so controversial." And she is not just once again asserting her superiority to Alice. She sings "Amazing Grace" quite movingly. It is a sign of her (quite temporary) loss of personal control. It may also be a sign that she is deeper and less normal than Alice or the lithium-dosed Josh. Charlotte, we can say, knows sometimes that the view of life she voices is untrue, and her personality is large enough to reach beyond the banalities of her time and class. She knows on occasion that she needs help she cannot provide for herself. She knows that she is a soul in trouble and



somehow in need of grace. Liberal, individualistic extremism points not to bourgeois self-sufficiency but to a return to faith. And Charlotte's experiences, far more than Alice's, constitute *Last Days*' criticism of the misanthropic pretensions of feminism.

Charlotte ends up with Des, the only character, at first, who seems worse than she. He is a Harvard drop-out, a nightclub "flunkey," a promiscuous coward with women, a cocaine addict, and generally irresponsible. His constant theme is *change*. Sometimes he asserts he can change even his sexual orientation to suit his convenience. He hopes that the influence of a good woman like Alice, combined with the institution of marriage, can change his womanizing ways. And he resolves "to turn over a new leaf" or "several new leaves." Most of his talk about change comes from weakness of will; he won't really make the effort to change. But he is not wrong to think that he is morally weak by nature, and he often recognizes his sins for what they are. He criticizes "the Shakespearean admonition 'To thine own self be true'" in his own case. He asks "What if 'thine own self' is not so good—what if it's pretty bad. Wouldn't it be better not to be true to thine own self in that case? You see, that's my situation." But in truth, that is the situation of all human beings, and "To thine own self be true" is the cliché at the heart of the American lie of self-sufficiency.

So Des has a sort of self-knowledge that is more Christian than the quest for self-actualization. He sometimes knows, more than Alice did, that he needs to change, and that his weakness of will makes change impossible without help beyond the self. He knows, like Charlotte, that he needs something like grace, or at least an extraordinary and undeserved woman. And at the film's end he experiences a genuine kinship with Charlotte. They make a date to watch TV. Des knows that Charlotte can see through him. They can see through each

other—and so appreciate the strengths and weaknesses, the greatness and the misery, of each other's big personality. Their screwed-up lives make clear the looniness and the deprivation at the heart of bourgeois life, and even at the heart of human life. So their natures and their need for (and so perhaps openness to) grace, the unexpected intrusions of Christian anthropology into the closed world of the UHB, is Stillman's message of hope.

Maybe the end of disco is also the end of the UHB, that partly aristocratic class that is better and worse than yuppies. Alice and Josh are likely on the way to becoming yuppies, although yuppies of the most decent and admirable sort. Charlotte and Des may well have big careers in television and nightclubs, but in those fields the size of one's personality transcends class. Stillman's sympathy for his characters is evident in his own choice of the big adventure of film making over the security of a salaried job, and in his awareness of his own natural excellence. Stillman remembers the UHB, but he is no longer one of them. None of the UHB has many resources from the past on which to draw, and so their futures, as one character says, will largely be determined by how well their natures fit the contexts in which they find themselves. Natural flourishing depends quite a bit on luck, and nature cannot be completely mastered or brought under control. So there is still space or need for grace, which may mysteriously appear. The film ends with Alice and Josh dancing on a train to the feel-good disco hit "Love Train." Love has made them happy enough in a quite healthy and normal way. But the final song of the film, sung over the credits, is Charlotte's "Amazing Grace." Nature is not quite enough to account for human experience, and, by itself, nature is not what makes possible human change or conversion.