

Mary P. Nichols

Whit Stillman's Comic Art

Whit Stillman has claimed that he does not want to make serious dramas, only comedies. This does not mean, however, that his work has no serious intention. Critics have classified his three films, *Metropolitan* (1990), *Barcelona* (1994), and *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), as comedies of manners, and are reminded of Jane Austen. And well they might be, for Stillman has admitted that Austen, along with Tolstoy and Samuel Johnson, are the authors he loves most. A comedy of manners, according to the dictionary definition, is a satirical treatment of conventional or fashionable society. Satire arises when an author places an outsider among those who take the fashions, customs, and attitudes of their class for granted, allowing the audience to see conventional society from the outsider's perspective. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, we watch along with Mr. Bennet the absurdities of his wife's efforts to introduce their daughters into fashionable society. Comedy lies in the discrepancy between that society's understanding of itself and what the outsider sees. In a way, a comedy of manners portrays fashionable society itself as a version of the classic comic figure, the boaster, at whom the audience

laughs when the discrepancy between his pretensions and the truth comes to light.

Comedies of manners, however, need not be simply critical of the manners they satirize. While the English society of *Pride and Prejudice* offers us the hypocritical Miss Bingley, it also offers us Mr. Darcy, whose character and life reveal a sensitivity and moral worth inconceivable without society. Elizabeth Bennet may be an outsider whose keen perception penetrates Miss Bingley, but then so is Elizabeth's sister Lydia whose scorn for conventions leads to disgrace. Nor is it possible to understand Stillman's comedy without exploring the ambiguity of his attitude toward his characters, captured by one reviewer as "mocking affection."

In *Metropolitan*, we see a group of Manhattan socialites through the eyes of outsider Tom Townsend (Edward Clements), a Westsider among the Eastsider elites, a disciple of the French socialist Charles Fourier, a reader of Thorstein Veblen, and one opposed to debutante parties on principle.

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One of the debutantes of the group, Audrey Rouget (Carolyn Farina), is herself a kind of outsider, due in part to her love of Jane Austen. When Tom objects that "everything Jane Austen wrote seems ridiculous from today's perspective," Audrey is quick to respond: "Has it ever occurred to you that today, looked at from Jane Austen's perspective, would look much worse?" By the end of the movie, Tom comes to appreciate Austen, Audrey, and his new friends.*

In *Barcelona*, Ted and Fred Boynton (Taylor Nichols and Chris Eigeman) are American innocents abroad, one in the office of an American company in Barcelona, the other a naval officer on a diplomatic assignment there. However much they try to belong to the Spanish social scene, they are bourgeois Americans trying to negotiate European culture and corruption as well as anti-American political sentiment. Their unsophisticated tastes and sexual mores, their capitalist values, their American patriotism, and even old-fashioned piety at first appear as ridiculous, especially in the eyes of their Spanish friends, but ultimately constitute their solid human decency. The movie suggests a bridge between the two cultures when Ted's business requires commuting between Barcelona and Chicago, and eventually both Ted and Fred marry foreign women and bring them to the States.

* I have quoted throughout from Stillman's actual movies, although the shooting scripts, as written by Stillman, are available. The scripts of Stillman's first two movies appear in *Barcelona and Metropolitan: Tales of Two Cities* (Faber and Faber, 1994). Some scenes were expanded, modified, and even omitted in the course of shooting and editing. While the scripts may reveal Stillman's "original plan" (p. vi), the final authority in my view is Stillman's finished product, the films themselves.

The preppies of *Metropolitan* have become yuppies in *The Last Days of Disco*, and they frequent an exclusive Manhattan disco club. They are all now more or less outside, constantly trying to get into the Club. Even the Club's underboss occupies a precarious status, constantly risking his job by admitting friends through the backdoor. Stillman presents the conventions of disco culture, and the social craze it represents, as ridiculous, and certainly as morally questionable as the fashionable society of Austen's novels. But while the fashions of any age may be limited and timebound, Stillman lets us see the human aspirations moving his characters' attraction to disco, just as Austen herself illustrates the moral benefits of social conventions. In this essay, I shall explore Stillman's comic standpoint in his three films—one that makes Stillman himself a mocking but affectionate critic, an outsider who is not simply an outsider.

Metropolitan shows us Manhattan debutantes and their escorts home for Christmas vacation from their ivy-league schools. Scenes occur primarily at all-night "afterparties" in the affluent living rooms of the "urban haute bourgeoisie," or the UHB, a term coined by the group's theoretician, Charlie (Taylor Nichols). The film is well described as one of "preppie angst." Stillman shows us Spengler's *Decline of the West* by Tom's bedside as he dresses in his tuxedo. Another of the escorts laments the changing social conditions that foretell the "last deb season as we know it." Another senses that their whole preppie class is "doomed" to failure and extinction. Or perhaps their angst must be understood in less world historical terms, for as they themselves recognize, they are "at a very vulnerable point in their lives."

Metropolitan opens with the tears of its heroine, insecure deb Audrey Rouget, who

is having difficulty with the fit of her new evening dress. Her mother tries to comfort her with the thought that her younger brother is no authority on female anatomy. Mrs. Rouget can at least take in the dress where "it is a bit full." As Mrs. Rouget knows, her daughter's dress may be altered, not so that it hides defects but so that it allows strengths to appear to best advantage. Hers is an art motivated by love.

Audrey comes to like her group's new-comer Tom, although he claims that Austen's *Mansfield Park* is "a notoriously bad book." Tom is initially the critic not only of Austen, but of the whole debutante scene. Falling in with the snobbish and sophisticated SFRP (the Sally Fowler Rat Pack, as they call themselves after one of their group), Tom is a less "haute" bourgeois. He rents rather than owns his tuxedo, and intends to go to no more dances—until Nick Smith (Chris Eigeman) changes his mind.

Nick also advises Tom about the dress code, defending the use of detachable collars in men's formal evening dress—"a small thing, but symbolically important," he informs Tom, observing that "our parents' generation was never interested in keeping up standards." Although such collars "look much better," like many things they "have been abandoned for supposed convenience." Although Stillman encourages us to smile at Nick's concern with detachable collars, he lets Nick's remarks about standards echo later in the movie when Nick himself has to admit he "failed to live up to [the standards of the UHB]."

Nick's failure lay in telling a story about Polly Perkins—a young woman whom Nick claims was mistreated by the movie's cad Rick Von Sloneker. But Polly Perkins is "a fabrication," and Von Sloneker accuses Nick of lying. Even Nick's friend Charlie tells him "this looks really bad." Nick insists that Polly Perkins is a composite rather than a fabrication, for while there is no one Polly "they're many of them." But Von Sloneker's view prevails with the rat pack. While Frank

Sinatra's rat pack, from which Sally Fowler's takes its name, was more style than substance, Sally's pack has standards that uphold the truth. The film's defender of appearance seems to have strayed too far: the invention of the detachable collar makes evening wear "look better," but Nick's invention of Polly Perkins that makes Von Sloneker look bad makes Nick look even worse.

On the other hand, appearances can deceive. When Nick presents the story of Polly Perkins, Cynthia defends Von

Sloneker, claiming that she knew Polly and it wasn't Rick's fault. Because there is no one Polly Perkins, Cynthia's response proves, Nick argues, "that Von Sloneker is doing those kinds of things all the time." The film's exploration of the question of truth emerges in other ways as well.

At one afterparty, Sally Fowler proposes the game "Truth," in which players answer questions with "absolute honesty" and "openness." Audrey objects that "there are good reasons why people don't go around telling each other their most intimate thoughts" and that is why there are



Courtesy of Castle Rock Entertainment.

Writer-director Whit Stillman on the set of *Barcelona* (1994), the second film in his comedy-of-manners trilogy.

"convention[s]," but Cynthia accuses her of having something "to hide." Audrey, the reader of Jane Austen, is overruled in her reluctance to play "Truth," and the game proceeds. But we might ask, with whom does Stillman side? In this instance, not only are two players, Jane and Audrey, hurt by "truths" that others reveal, it is not clear that a simple answer to a question can reveal the truth in all its complexity. When Cynthia reveals the "truth" that the last person she slept with was Nick, for example, its meaning is open to various interpretations, as the subsequent discussion demonstrates. As to Tom's declaration of his crush on Serena Slocum and his lack of interest in anyone else, events prove that Tom, for all his honesty, was far from understanding his real feelings. The strictures on excessive candor may not be "just a social convention," as Cynthia insists, or even an awareness that the truth may hurt, as Audrey realizes, but a recognition that the truth may not be so simple a matter that it emerges with mere "honesty and openness."

It is Cynthia's ready acceptance of Nick's fabrication about Polly Perkins, after all, that Nick takes as proof that his fabrication was indeed a composite. And what looks like hypocrisy to Nick's accusers (his answering "yes and no", when asked if he made it all up) is in fact the truth, even if Nick's friends do not understand it, and even if Nick may be faulted for applying the device of poetry too simply to life. To say, as Nick does, that *New York Magazine* also creates composites is no justification. Poetry's composites do not speak about individuals, as Nick's does about Von Sloneker.

As Christmas vacation approaches its close, the group dissolves. Curiously, it is the initially critical newcomer Tom who seems most distressed. He has also come to appreciate Jane Austen, for now he is actually reading her, rather than getting her second hand through literary critics. He

even wonders if "Fourier was a crank." Lest we suppose that the social critic has been co-opted by the system he criticized, we should note that Tom is less concerned by the disintegration of the Rat Pack than by the disappearance of Audrey, for a date with his idealized Serena has opened his eyes to his affection for Audrey. He is even more distraught when he discovers that she has gone with Cynthia to Von Sloneker's house party in Southampton and thinks that she has "turned her back on [Austen]." He and Charlie go on a rescue mission, but of course Audrey's virtue is safe. Von Sloneker is only too glad to have the "flat-chested goody-goody, pain-in-the-neck" leave with her rescuers.

When Nick says good-bye to Tom before heading upstate, he "leave[s] counting on [him] and Charlie to maintain the standards and ideals of the UHB," for "[Tom] and Charlie are the only ones who understand this kind of thing." Although Tom seems perplexed, Nick may again speak the truth, if in fact it takes someone who retains the perspective of the outsider to appreciate and maintain a society's standards and ideals. As they leave Von Sloneker's, Audrey asks Tom if he really thinks she is flat-chested. Tom has learned something about excessive candor, or about UHB ideals as well as behavior, for he answers, "Well, I shouldn't say that. The thing is, you look great—and that's what important. You don't want to overdo it." These are the last words of the movie, and we witness "a small thing, but symbolically important," words that might apply to Stillman's film itself.

Barcelona revolves around two young Americans in Spain, and the women they meet, date, and love. Ted Boynton is a sales manager for the Barcelona office of the Illinois High-Speed Motor Corporation, and his cousin Fred a naval lieutenant do-

ing diplomatic work there during “the last decade of the Cold War.” The relation of the cousins is close, but not without friction. Fred drops in on Ted unannounced and takes his prolonged stay for granted. Fred also thinks his cousin “a prig.” We see why. Because the “inordinate concern for physical beauty has wrecked...lives,” Ted tells his cousin, he has decided to go out only with “plain or homely women.” Fred, definitely interested in meeting “terribly attractive women” in Barcelona, and not at all put off by Ted’s description of Spanish girls as “really promiscuous,” claims that Ted’s idea about homely women is “pathetic” and “crazy.” No wonder Ted tells his cousin less than he tells us in a “voice-over” (film’s substitute for stage’s soliloquies) about his “aspiration...to free romance from the chains of physical beauty and carnality,” and how he reads Old Testament books for “advice on romantic matters.” If the character of Ted is a development of the virtuous Audrey (Fred refers to Ted as a “goody-goody,” as Von Sloneker had Audrey), his virtue, as seen through Fred’s eyes, appears ridiculous. It is no wonder that Fred cannot resist confiding in Ted’s women friends that Ted “is not at all how he seems”—in fact, Ted admires the Marquis de Sade, and “under the apparently very normal clothes he’s wearing these black leather straps, drawn so taut that while he dances....” No wonder that Ted fails to appreciate Fred as “the best P.R. guy [he’ll] ever have,” or “get down on his knees and thank God [he has] a cousin who makes up interesting stories about [him].”

Ted looks ridiculous enough even without Fred, as he hides his Bible, filled with yellow Post-it notes, inside a copy of *The Economist* and reads the Holy Writ while swaying to the music of Glenn Miller. Perhaps, however, there is good reason to be circumspect about one’s faith in a culture where it can be said matter-of-factly, as one

of their “cool” women friends Montserrat (Tushka Bergen) does, that “‘all the old gods are dead,’—there is no God. That we know.” Montserrat seems quite sympathetic to the discovery made by her Spanish lover Ramon that “the idea of physical beauty...is the closest thing that remains to divinity in the modern world.”

Apart from religion and sex, the other passion in Ted’s life is his work. He is devoted to his job in “sales,” which he views as “more than just a job.... It’s a culture, a whole way of thinking about experience.” Along with the Old Testament, Ted believes in “the genius of Carnegie’s theory of human relations.” In this film, *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Sales* and *The Effective Executive* have replaced *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. Its moral lesson for sales is Ben Franklin’s: “to bluntly tell the truth” about one’s product, for honesty is “always safe and best.” Stillman may have more elevated examples than Ted about what constitutes “the classic literature of self-improvement,” but Ted’s honest practice results in more than sales: “many [of his customers] also became his friends.”

If the old gods are dead, however, Fred’s patriotism is not. Fred insists on scratching out insulting anti-American graffiti, even if it takes “paint[ing] the whole wall with a ballpoint pen.” He also proudly wears his naval dress uniform—to Ted’s chagrin—as he and Ted make the rounds of Barcelona’s social scene, although it provokes the outcry of “fascist” from the locals. Anti-American feeling intensifies in the course of the film, culminating in Fred’s being shot by terrorists. The last quarter of the movie is dominated by Ted’s vigil in the hospital at comatose Fred’s bedside, keeping a steady stream of one-sided conversation or reading aloud in the hopes of bringing Fred back to consciousness.

For all the tension between these cousins—at least since they were ten, when Fred,

without asking, borrowed and accidentally sunk Ted's kayak—their differences are more cosmetic than real. Like Fred, Ted is also a patriot, who not only defends hamburgers, but calls Ramon a liar to his face regarding his anti-American statements. Fred, for his part, is not as liberated from bourgeois ideals as his mockery of Ted might indicate. He is astounded when Marta (Mira Sorvino) expresses the view that wanting to get married is “[thinking]

Fred do his words of regret by themselves revive his cousin. Only when Ted gets on his knees to pray, asking God to bring Fred back “to full consciousness” and to forgive his “doubting, vainglory, and unworthiness,” does Fred speak. “Oh, give me a break,” he responds to Ted's prayer, and turns away. One way or another, Ted's prayer has brought Fred out of his coma. “[Fred's] going to have a complete recovery,” the ecstatic Ted proclaims to everyone.



Courtesy of Castle Rock Entertainment.

Ted Boynton (left), Montserrat (left-center), Fred Boynton (right-center), and Marta (right) in a scene from Whit Stillman's 1998 film *Barcelona*.

in extremist terms.” And he desires to meet “the one [woman] in the world he was meant to be with.”

By the third day of Fred's unconsciousness, Ted confesses that Fred, the stronger swimmer, may have in fact saved his life by going down in his kayak in his place. Ted speaks honestly, although it puts his own long-held grudge against Fred in a petty light. However much Ted understands his honesty in the style of Ben Franklin, his honesty here comes closer to George Washington's. American virtue may be enlightened self-interest, as Tocqueville said, but it occasionally reaches beyond itself.

At Ted's confession, Fred briefly opens his unbandaged eye. But no more than the words of the novel Ted has been reading to

capture Ramon's interest when Greta confides that she “loathes” Ramon, and thinks he is “repelente.” She also draws sketches of “hovering angels.”

In the last scene of the movie, set in the United States, Greta is with Ted, Montserrat with Fred, and Aurora has been introduced to Ted's business associate Dickie Taylor. They are grilling hamburgers and hot dogs, and bourgeois life in America never looked so good, at least to the European women who earlier had contempt for hamburgers and other signs of American “culture.” Dickie is perplexed that Aurora keeps smirking about his underwear. Ted, who may even be the cause of her smirk, plays along. He has gained enough distance from himself to become playful, and enough confi-

A number of brief scenes conclude the movie, including plans for Ted's promotion and transfer back to Chicago and for his marriage to Greta. Ted met Greta in the hospital, when Aurora brought her along to help read to Fred. Ted is evidently not put off by her beauty, asking why wasn't she in any of Ramon's articles about beautiful women. There is a hint that it takes more than physical beauty to

dence to acknowledge Fred's perspective. Ted has not entirely forsworn the romantic illusions he tried earlier to reject. This does not mean that he is any less accepting of bourgeois life than he was earlier in the film. That rejection the film leaves to Ramon. But Ted makes bourgeois life interesting through art, just as Stillman does through his film.

The Last Days of Disco returns to Manhattan and to preppies who have graduated to jobs in business, publishing, and law. They frequent an exclusive Manhattan disco club—a place they “always dreamed of. Cocktails, dancing, conversation, exchanges of ideas and points of view. Everyone's here.” Little, however, is as it seems in *Last Days*. Charlotte (Chloë Sevigny) and Alice (Kate Beckinsale), who attended college together and now work in the same publishing firm, turn out not to be the friends they seem. Nor is club manager Des (Chris Eigeman) the homosexual he claims to be in order to extricate himself from affairs with women. And the “clients” whom Jimmy Steinway (Mackenzie Astin) gets into the Club through his friendship with Des, turn out to be federal investigators. The Club itself, and its culture, encourages the cultivation of appearance: Alice suggests they she and Charlotte will be more likely to get into the Club if they arrive in a cab rather than on foot. Jimmy tries to hide his boss's garish clothes under his own stylish overcoat so that he will more likely be admitted. Tom (Robert Sean Leonard) advises Josh (Matt Keeslar) to “try to avoid eye contact” with the doorman as they go by. Whereas Fred's naval uniform in *Barcelona* is not a costume, even if Marta understands it that way, Des gives his friends costumes to sneak into the Club unknown. Other patrons dress as the Cowardly Lion and the Tin Man. Before the movie is over, the glitter of the Club gives way to its seamy

underside—drug dealing and money laundering—followed by arrests and prosecutions.

As in Stillman's other films, *Last Days* has its virtuous heroine. Alice reads, and has better judgment and more refined tastes than some of her contemporaries. But her hero is J.D. Salinger rather than Jane Austen. She is also plagued with self-doubts, and tempted by the experience with men that she lacks. Alice is weaker than Audrey, lacks her moral resources, and is burdened by the advice of Charlotte who feeds her insecurities under the guise of building her self-esteem. “For most guys, sexual repressiveness is a turnoff,” Charlotte confides. But when Alice succeeds in getting Tom into bed, she also loses his respect. Like the Club itself for so many, Alice is for Tom a vision or ideal that disappoints. Unlike the Club, however, Alice suffers, learns, and matures.

In spite of her susceptibility to Charlotte's advice and pressure, Alice makes two choices in the course of the movie that demonstrate her developing strength of character. She accepts Josh, despite his manic depression and Charlotte's contempt for him as a “sick-o.” Alice also supports the publication of a manuscript on Tibetan Buddhism that Charlotte recommended rejecting. When the author turns out to be a fraud—a writer from Los Angeles rather than the brother of the Dali Lama he claimed to be, she is able to save “a really good book” by transferring it from nonfiction to the “self-actualization” category. Alice's ability to appreciate the virtue in what others find defective reaps her a promotion to associate editor by the end of the film, whereas Charlotte is laid off. Charlotte of course is hardly crushed, for she has no “devotion to the written word,” and thinks she will find “a better job in television, ... where [her] interests really lie.”

Whereas Alice finds worth in a rejected manuscript, Josh criticizes the moral effect

of a movie. *Lady and the Tramp* is "a primer for love and marriage directed at very young people, imprinting on their little psyches the idea that smooth talking delinquents recently escaped from the local pound are a good match for nice girls from sheltered homes." The cartoon "program[s] women to adore jerks." The only sympathetic character, the little Scotty who is loyal and concerned about Lady, "is mocked as old-fashioned and irrelevant." Josh not only knows the moral danger of art, he would be able to appreciate Jane Austen. And we have seen his attraction to Alice from the moment he is introduced into the movie.

As assistant district attorney, Josh pursues the arrests and indictments that lead to the demise of the Club he loves. He also warns Des to clean up his act (he is taking cocaine) before the DA's office moves against the Club. In spite of the success of the prosecutions, Josh is laid off for giving "preferential treatment to a friend." He appears to have no regrets, although he must also have that friend's passport confiscated at the airport to force him to do the right thing, to stay to testify. Des for his part is trying to run away, he admits, "like a rat," aware that the "Shakespearean admonition, "To thine own self be true" cannot apply to him, for his own self is "pretty bad." Integrity alone is not enough, there are standards by which to measure integrity. It is fitting that he and Charlotte in the end form a couple, as do Josh and Alice. Both couples in the end violate Charlotte's earlier stricture against "ferocious pairing off" from the group, a stricture she used to keep Alice away from Jimmy until she could grab him for herself. Like integrity itself, pairing off is not simply good. Pairing off cannot be judged apart from the character of the pair.

Religion makes an appearance in *Last Days* in a more muted form than in *Barcelona*, where there is mention of the Bible, prayer, and angels. Nor does religion

receive the serious attention it does in *Metropolitan*, when Charlie argues at an afterparty that most of us as we mature lose our innate belief in God, which we later "regain only by a conscious act of faith," although he has not yet experienced such an act. We do see Charlie's utter faith in Audrey by the end of *Metropolitan*, perhaps foreshadowing *Last Days*. There, Alice not only finds value in a religious book and promotes its publication, she overcomes her hesitancy about Josh, whose "mania" became manifest in college by singing a hymn asking God's forgiveness. Charlotte, who originally criticized Alice's interest in Josh, later attacks her for being "weirded out" when Josh "sang a hymn" on the street. Charlotte claims that she herself has sung hymns on the street, and she breaks into "Amazing Grace." The words of the hymn continue to follow Alice as she walks along Manhattan streets. Charlotte's defense of singing hymns is only one more way to attack Alice, and to make her feel bad about herself under the guise of good advice. But this time she does give good advice, which Alice follows. Stillman does not mock the hymn, any more than he mocks the advice, by putting it in the mouth of such a defective character as Charlotte. The hymn is not less beautiful in being sung by Charlotte, nor the advice less good by being ill-intentioned. Greater the power of divinity when it works through imperfect means. As the words of "Amazing Grace" suggest, religion is less the conscious act of faith Charlie supposes than an acceptance of grace that permits one to find the good even in its imperfect forms.

At the end of *Last Days*, the Club has been destroyed, new owners cannot resurrect it, and more generally, the bottom has dropped out of disco record sales. The former doorman at the Club, now turned

prosecution witness, announces that disco is dead. Josh delivers a final paean to disco: “[it] will never be over. It will always live in our minds and hearts. [It] was too great and too much fun to be gone forever. It’s got to come back, someday.” Josh recognizes not inevitable historical decline, as in theories about the decline of the West, but the necessary reemergence of the good because it is good. At the end of his speech in praise of disco, the group stares at him in silence, and we wait for some contemptuous comment by Des about Josh’s manic phases. But Josh recognizes that he is making himself ridiculous, and becomes his own critic before Des can speak: “Sorry,” he apologizes, “I’ve got a job interview this afternoon. I was just trying to get revved up.” By finding a way to call attention to his own absurdity, Josh prevents his praise of disco from being negated with laughter: “most of what I said, I believe.”

In his description of the end of disco, Josh sounds a theme that we have heard in other forms: “for a few years, maybe for many years, it will be considered passé, and ridiculous. It will be misrepresented, and caricatured, and sneered at, or worse, completely ignored.” Stillman hints at the difficulty he faces in writing comedy in the modern world, when the old gods have become passé and ridiculous, caricatured and ignored. In a world in which Ramon can be thought not only “fascinating” but godly, and where disco clubs substitute for churches in giving meaning to life, can religion do anything but hide itself—or peep out in ridiculous form from between the covers of *The Economist*? And if comedy presents the old gods only in comic guise, would it not simply contribute to their absurdity?

There are different kinds of comedy. There is a comedy that Stillman criticizes, seen in Cynthia’s description of Nick as someone who looks down “from such lofty

heights [that] everything below seems a bit comical.” So too, everything high may seem ridiculous if one looks from too low a perspective, as suggested by the words of the limbo that Nick and Ted dance when they meet Ramon: “How low can you go?” Stillman’s comic perspective is not one of ridicule, either of the low or of the high. Ted speaks for Stillman in *Barcelona* when he objects to a “perceptiveness” that ridicules rather than comprehends. Stillman’s films ask us, as Audrey asks Tom, to look at ourselves from Jane Austen’s perspective. But asking is not enough. For denizens of the modern age, Austen is an acquired taste, as she was for Tom. Tom’s coming to know and eventually love Audrey was a precondition for his liking Austen. Stillman’s films, including the one in which we too meet Audrey, function for us as Audrey does for Tom. Appreciating Austen—or Stillman—is a metaphor for something important today—attaining a comic standpoint of mocking affection rather than of ridicule and cynicism. Ramon, we have seen, attempts to remind his readers of divinity through his stories and photographs of women of extraordinary physical beauty. Stillman suggests that Ramon has had some success; at least he has a following who is listening to him intently whenever we see him. Stillman’s films are a better version of Ramon’s journalism, for they reveal an inner beauty that reminds us of our connection with something higher than ourselves. We may be laughable, but we are not contemptible. “Mocking affection” fits, even for the bourgeoisie.

In *Metropolitan*, Charlie says that when he first heard of Bunuel’s *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* he “thought, ‘finally someone’s going to tell the truth about the bourgeoisie,’” but it is “hard to imagine a less fair or accurate portrait.” Giving a more fair and accurate portrait—“the bourgeoisie does have a lot of charm,”

Charlie insists—is presumably how Stillman understands his task. But the task is a difficult one for an artist, not only because like the old gods the bourgeoisie has been discredited, but also because the bourgeoisie has been discredited for being prosaic. Charmless. If Stillman shows the charm of the bourgeoisie, as critics recognize, perhaps he can make the old gods credible as well. He does so in part by incorporating into his movies the doubts of even those who believe, as well as criticisms, such as Fred's criticism of Ted's search for a homely woman to marry in *Barcelona*, or Tom's of debutante parties in *Metropolitan*, or even Josh's criticism of himself in *The Last Days of Disco*. And then Stillman shows life triumphing over those doubts and criticisms.

Last Days ends when Josh and Alice meet on the subway on their way to an exclusive midtown restaurant to celebrate Alice's promotion to associate editor. At the sound of disco music coming from we know not where, Josh and Alice spontaneously start dancing, and soon everyone in the subway car, and even everyone on the platform waiting for the train, is dancing—rich and

poor, young and old. Like the vision Stillman captures in his film, the joy from the music spreads from the couple, not to those admitted to an exclusive club, but to everyone. Stillman ends, however, like Josh before him, on a note of self-mockery, for the disco music blends into the words of "Amazing Grace." Maintaining through the end the distance from his film that preserves its charm, Stillman allows the hymn-singing Charlotte to deliver his film's final message.

Earlier in *Last Days*, the publishing staff where Alice and Charlotte work discuss an "outline" for how to write a best-seller: "create sympathetic characters with whom readers identify, give them problems, make those problems big." One member of the staff is disgusted, finds the outline "completely formulaic," and prefers nonfiction to fiction. Stillman, of course, opts for fiction, but he creates characters who evoke our laughter as well as our sympathy. And while he gives them problems, it is to his credit that he never makes those problems bigger than they are. Nor are their solutions out of reach. Such is his comedy of manners.