Interview

The mind of a moralist

Three decades after they were made, the cult comedies of Whit Stillman are finding – and guiding – new audiences

By Tanjil Rashid

The first thing one notices when meeting Whit Stillman, as a seasoned viewer of his films, is that he is not a young man in his twenties. This shouldn't surprise me; he made his debut film in 1990, the year I was born. But since the films are peopled exclusively by bright young things fresh out of college, or still there, one expects him to be one too.

Instead, the man who slouches into the *New Statesman*, towing a mysterious suitcase, has what no one in a Whit Stillman film ever had: grey hair. He's fussy, asking if there are thieves at the office. Eyes fixed on his luggage, he is apparently not joking. I reassure him. We are, however, based in Hatton Garden, famous for jewel heists; I fear I could be discredited at any moment by the sudden re-emergence of the Brink's-Mat burglars.

More predictably, Stillman is attired as every fellow in a Whit Stillman film must be: blazer, shirt, tie. The shirt is crisp and white, surely pressed; the tie is knitted. He remains cloaked in the ambience of his preppy past, but the preppy is now a patrician; it shows.

No longer in the vernal season of life so delicately depicted in the *Doomed. Bourgeois. In Love* trilogy, with its young, mondaine Manhattanites trying to understand the world and their true selves, Stillman is now a person of eminence, a worldly wise cosmopolitan. He's here in London at the end of a summer-long nationwide retrospective of his acclaimed cult trilogy.

Actually, it's more of a triptych, each component linked not by plot but tone and style: ironic, bewitching, visually voluptuous. Like the panels of a painted altarpiece, they ought to be viewed alongside each other rather than one after the other, since the films are in no sense sequels. There is no progression. Time stands still, in a single, idealised cultural moment. Stillman spent a decade making these films; yet the characters inside never age, mired in eternal youth. Their creator, on the other hand – now an indie legend – is 73.

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Why has he fixated on portraits of youth? "Well, young people look a lot better," he quips. That's certainly true. The essential prerequisite to being cast by Stillman seems to be the ability to look sensational in evening dress. Obviously, there's more to it than that. "The films are comedies of identity," he says, and youth is "a 'crossroads' period of forming your identity, I think, between 16 and 32."

Crossroads like these: What do you do if you oppose inherited privilege, but find the privileged sexually irresistible (*Metropolitan*, 1990)? What if you love your country, but those who hate it are also sexually irresistible (*Barcelona*, 1995)? Is it inevitable to betray your ideals to make yourself, well, sexually irresistible (*The Last Days of Disco*, 1998)? The trilogy enquires into the tension between desire and principle, or, in other words, between the social and the political.

Stillman is sheepish about his films' didactic bent, which prompted Bret Easton Ellis, he recalls, to condemn his first film as "moralistic" – a judgement he now shares. "It's kind of almost hysterically moralistic," he says of *Metropolitan*. Its plot, like *Barcelona*'s, rests on a terror that the women of one's dreams may ruin themselves with promiscuity. They may even enjoy it. In *The Last Days of Disco*, one – portrayed by Chloë Sevigny, in the role that inaugurated her as the Nineties New York It-girl – does actually come to ruin, afflicted with an incurable STD, a modern twist on the classical trope of the fallen woman.

"I do think that there are men who are reassured in youth by a moralistic perspective," says Stillman. "I think it is helpful to be moralistic when young." I wonder if he knows of the manosphere, or if the manosphere knows of his films. In *Barcelona* (tagline: "Americans. Anti Americans. In Love"), a Wasp abroad, bewildered by the forwardness of Spanish ladies, complains of the way the world was turned upside down by the sexual revolution. "Has it ever occurred to you," his streetwise companion counsels, "that maybe the world was upside down before, and now it's right-side up?"

Films about the neuroses of youth, about the raging transformations of self and society, appeal to those still wrestling with them; surely, this guarantees a perpetually self-renewing audience. After all, Stillman has been attending packed screenings of his films in places like Sheffield and Newcastle, because a new generation must have been seduced by them. Social media is awash with clips from his films, their witticisms reiterated in memes. The programmer behind the UK tour, Geoff Badger, informs me that at least half the films' viewers "were seeing them for the first time".

"I'm a little sceptical about how deep that revival is," cautions Stillman. "The exhibitors say that, post-pandemic, there's a much younger audience that's coming." But, acknowledging his dubious status as a cult figure, he reminds us: "The essential fact of 'cult' is that not many people know about it." ▸

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What manner of youth compels an artist to return to it forever? "I had a very lucky childhood," admits Stillman, modestly. "My parents were in the preppy class, but they were progressives in the preppy class" – his father, I'm told, was a classmate of JFK's, and later worked for him. Stillman is a certain Wasp: the term popularised by his godfather, E Digby Baltzell, in *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America* (1964), a sociology classic published when Stillman was 12.

So, he grew up observing his milieu at the moment it was being codified. That left its mark in his characters' zeal for social classification. The class-consciously genteel youngsters in *Metropolitan* (tagline: "Finally... a film about the downwardly mobile") dub themselves – in a parody of Baltzell – UHBs (pronounced "aahbs"), belonging to the stratum they call "urban haute bourgeoisie". In conversation, they casually cite the great interpreters of American social life, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Thorstein Veblen.

Stillman was raised an insider-outsider. His parents "would sneer at Republicans, people who played golf, people who played bridge". But, he adds, "this gave me the space to be the family rebel in embracing what they sneered at" – notably, preppy style, the East Coast fashion subculture that so distinctively adorns the Stillmanverse. But he also embraced socialism, in its non-Marxist 19th-century French tradition. (Preposterously, "Fourier" is among the more frequently cited proper nouns in his work, alongside "Upper East Side" and "Harvard".) All the while, his mother insisted he go to debutante balls as arm-candy for blue-blooded damsels. "I was drafted to remediate the escort shortage," he says, smiling puckishly.

He was a party-goer. After graduating from Harvard, dabbling in publishing, he immersed himself in New York nightlife, mythologised in *The Last Days of Disco* (tagline: "History is made at night"). The nightclub portrayed in the film was real: Midtown Manhattan's Studio 54, where on a given night one was liable to find, say, Salvador Dalí and Diana Ross on the dance floor. Stillman only got in, he claims, thanks to his father's Savile Row suit. Those dancing days of his meant so much because the Seventies had been, he recalls, "this wasteland of social life and lack of dancing and lack of going out and having fun". Disco's efflorescence changed all that. "I remember when the song 'Do the Hustle' came on in 1975, I was in an Upper East Side bar... I remember excitedly thinking: 'This is dance music.'"

It's not just disco. Stillman's films all have scenes in homage to different dance traditions: cha-cha, limbo, tap and, for *Damsels in Distress* (2011, no tagline), even an invented one, the sambola – "The Sambola International Dance Craze is the official name," Stillman interjects.

Why obsess over dance? "I think the question is: why isn't everyone else obsessed with dance?" he replies. "It's very peculiar, the lack of interest in social dancing." His concern is highly reminiscent of the great dance theorist Roger Scruton (who also dabbled in political philosophy). "The old ways of dancing taught us that rhythm is not a solitary thing but a form of social awareness," wrote Scruton, and it has been eroded by contemporary music: "Rhythm divorced from melodic organisation loses its last link to the social dance." Stillman, it would appear, is similarly strident. "It's the way the world should be. And so I'm just trying to foment something that we've lost."

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This sensation of loss, of the evanescence of a cultural moment, would eventually, nearing the millennium's end, inspire his greatest film. He would make two more films in the 21st century, but *The Last Days of Disco* is his career's culmination.

Debating Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* – a novel he has not read – with Audrey, his love interest, Tom Townsend of *Metropolitan* says, in the most quotable line from the Stillman filmography: "I don't read novels. I prefer good literary criticism. That way you get both the novelists' ideas as well as the critics' thinking."

Stillman thinks similarly. "I love literary criticism," he enthuses. "Samuel Johnson is my favourite writer." Only one film other than his own – René Clair's *Under the Roofs of Paris* (1930) – has been mentioned in our conversation. Otherwise, perhaps in keeping with his screenplays' verbosity, he cites writers and literary critics, not auteurs and film theorists. Book reviews by Lionel Trilling, Mary McCarthy and Alfred Kazin find their way into the chatter of his films. "You really like Trilling?" Audrey asks. "I think he's very strange."

Why is literary criticism so central to the vision of Stillman's films? It recalls a time when the practice was not merely about art, but life itself, illuminating "the moral imagination", Trilling writes, "inviting us to put our own motives under examination". Stillman's films do that. Their creator *is* a moralist, but not in the puritanical sense employed by Ellis; rather in the capacious sense of the so-called English moralists, the mainline of English literary criticism going back to Johnson. At Harvard, Stillman tells me, he'd studied under Johnson's biographer, Walter Jackson Bate. "A lot of his theories and insights are with me to this day," says Stillman. Importantly, Bate wrote that "the aim of art", for Johnson, was "the moral enlargement of man". This is the true meaning of Stillman the moralist: not one who judges narrow-mindedly, but mind-openingly.

Tom and Audrey's debate about Austen and Trilling is a disagreement about how to live one's life. Debating Stillman's films, I have found, has helped me do that too. Does Stillman see that? "Too big a question for me." He admires critics enough to leave the interpretation to them. But he does have this to say: "It's more about the ephemeral moment... that those wonderful moments should be appreciated because they're going to go away."

And with that, my moment with Whit Stillman has vanished too. He is comforted to see his suitcase still there – the gangs have thought better of raiding London magazine offices today – and out he lugs it into the city, in his blazer, shirt and tie. ●

"Metropolitan", "Barcelona" and "The Last Days of Disco" are available to stream on the Criterion Channel