

**LE FREAK, C'EST CHIC!
DISCO CULTURE AND WHIT STILLMAN'S
THE LAST DAYS OF DISCO**Ioana STAMATESCU¹

Abstract

*Whit Stillman's movie focuses on a phenomenon that retrospectively comes out as "more embarrassing for most Americans than Watergate" (David Schickler). I discuss in this essay the disco movement from a twofold perspective: historical and artistic. The historical one centers on the main stages in the development of disco culture, the clash with the rock culture and the message the former advanced, while the artistic perspective refers to an illustration of the phenomenon in the film *The Last Days of Disco* –a sociological romance which gives us a portrait of the class of yuppies that was on the rise in the eighties. The aim of the present research is to shed light on the bizarre mixture of fascination and loathing that the disco culture produced and on the lifestyles and attitudes that this hugely popular musical style, which is the precursor of nowadays genre-crossing, gender-bending dance music, clubs and nightlife culture, triggered.*

Keywords: discomania, yuppie culture, sexual liberation, empowerment, comedy, sociological romance

1. Disco music and culture

1.1 A brief history of disco

Disco began in the early 1970 and lasted for about a decade –by the early 1980s it was no longer a fashion. There are some precise landmarks that one can find in all historical accounts of the decade's disco developments. I will briefly touch upon each –their specificity and significance—for a better grasp of the phenomenon.

According to some people chronicling the event², it has a precise time and date: Valentine's Day 1970, when David Mancuso, a New York DJ, threw a party at his loft in lower Manhattan. The party was entitled "Love Saves the Day" (LSD), hence we have at least an idea as to some of the things the celebration was about.

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² Eric Weisbard, among others, quoted by Weinraub in "Here's to Disco, It Never Could Say Goodbye", *The New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2002.

People started cramming in the Loft, a private space that had become semi-public, and enjoyed the various little freedoms this protected niche offered.

Disco started with a sense of isolation from the mainstream culture, fostering a culture of its own, but without taking upon itself a proper and coherent countercultural stance. It was aesthetically different from the counterculture of the hippies and deliberately so. Being different from the hippies meant in this case dressing up as opposed to dressing down, being fancy, glitz and urban, as opposed to casual and comfy. This was also appealing to a class of people that was on the rise at the time: the young upwardly mobile professionals (yuppies) who thought they could find a place for themselves in what was becoming a fairly sophisticated environment, and advance the social ladder. Richard Powers explains in his article on “The Disco Style”:

A core element of the new disco scene was sophistication. This meant upscale and classy, but keeping the counterculture emphasis on becoming personally evolved. Sophistication was also defined by what it wasn't — it wasn't rustic country life and dressing down. So the sexual liberation pioneered in the sixties was embraced, but as a glamorous urban version. There was another reason for the change in aesthetics (the disco look) beyond change for change's sake, and this involved a second disco population: the suburban middle class and blue collar working class. Here we find the same upward mobility which has motivated the middle classes for two centuries. Disco was appealing because its sophistication was a step up for them, but within reach. All they had to do was dress up and pay the admission and they could live in an elegant, futuristic world for a night. And hopefully mingle with people a step higher on the social ladder.

In 1973 a revolution in sound occurred, which rather consecrated the disco beat into what we now know and what later spawned new musical styles. From Africa came the *Soul Makossa* single by Manu Dibango which hit the New York scene with an exhilaratingly different sound: “It was stunningly unlike anything else at the time — a repetitious motif with no melody line, or story in the lyrics, and with a steady dance beat” (Powers, “The Disco”). An orchestral style, funky rhythms and Motown soul music resonances were added and thus came the sound of disco. Even if mostly based on African American rhythms, Tim Lawrence explains in “Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor” that the sound was rather eclectic than uniform:

The term ‘disco music’ (...) referred not to a coherent and recognizable generic sound, but instead to the far-reaching selection of R&B, soul, funk, gospel, salsa, and danceable rock plus African and European imports that could be heard in Manhattan’s discotheques. Even when the sound of disco became more obviously recognizable during 1974 and 1975, DJs would intersperse the emergent genre with contrasting sounds. The introduction of sonic contrast and difference helped

generate a sense of unpredictability and expectation on the dance floor, and the juxtaposition of different styles enabled dancers to experience existence as complex and open rather than singular and closed. In other words, DJs were generating a soundtrack that encouraged dancers to be multiple, fluid and queer. (236)

One of the lasting inventions of disco was the figure of the DJ, who became a central player of the party. They altered the songs as they saw fit, tweaked and extended them, mixing the pieces to fuse and prolong the rhythms. In a word, they appropriated the music, becoming a new breed of artists for the public. Consequently, “a form of illegitimate music making emerged in which the conventional performing artist was displaced by the improvising figure of the DJ, who could draw on a wide repertoire of sounds and programme them within a democratic economy of desire” (Lawrence 236). This changed the way of relating to the artist as creator of music, who no longer held an elevated and untouchable standing, as with the rock stars for example. In disco music everything could be tempered with for the purpose of collective pleasure and nothing was inviolable.

Nile Rodgers, the songwriter and producer of disco hits such as “Le Freak”, “Good times”, “We are Family”, “Like a Virgin” and many others, writes in his autobiography about the onset of disco and its claims:

A new way of living, with a new kind of activism, had emerged, and my new crew (...) embodied it. As founding members of this fledgling counterculture lifestyle, we held our meetings and demonstrations on the dance floor. (...) they were more expressive, political, and communal than the hippies before them, because they bonded through their bodies, through dance; they were propelled by a new kind of funky groove music. Dance had become primal and ubiquitous, a powerful communication tool, every bit as motivational as an Angela Davis speech or treasured as that eighteen-dollar, three-day Woodstock festival ticket. All revolutionary movements are fueled by a desire for change to an unsustainable status quo. This revolution's warriors were engaged in a battle for recognition. “Sex, drugs, and disco” was the new battle cry. The underground, now ethnic and more empowered than ever before, was becoming mainstream. (115-116)

Politically, this was the period when the disco movement was active in its anti-establishment stance through a “discourse of change, liberation and internationalism” (Lawrence 240). Newly-politicized, marginal groups started to find shelter from the public into these liberated spaces encouraging free expression and the seeking of pleasure. How then, from what used to be quite an exclusive space for the black and gay urban culture, the disco became an inclusive space of pleasure for the masses to enjoy? The year 1977 came into play to explain it. First there was the new club policy –the huge discoteques located in midtown New York whose intention was to attract elite groups and people from film, fashion and

related industries, such as the famous Studio 54³, on which Whit Stillman's Club is based. This purportedly selective policy ended up creating huge crowds waiting in line for admission to the club, which naturally raised the popularity of the phenomenon and turned it from underground into mainstream. A definite contribution to this was the film *Saturday Night Fever* released in December 1977, which had tremendous box office success and which led disco to its second phase. If the first phase generated a movement, the second generated a mania. According to Richard Powers, *Saturday Night Fever* made disco accessible to all classes and therefore mainstream:

Organized around the culture of the suburban discotheque and the figure of Tony Manero, played by John Travolta, the film enacted the reappropriation of the dance floor by straight male culture inasmuch as it became a space for straight men to display their prowess and hunt for a partner of the opposite sex. The film also popularized the hustle (a Latin social dance) within disco culture, and in so doing reinstated the straight dancing couple at the centre of the dance exchange.

The discomania launched by the movie translated in a drastic increase in the number of clubs: from 1,500 to 45,000 (Powers, "The Disco"). As any manic phase, it was short-lived. In two years' time the backlash against disco was ready. Record companies had invested substantially in a type of music launched by *Saturday Night Fever* that turned out to be not very popular with the class of white straight professionals they targeted⁴. By the time the Chicago record burning took place, in July 1979, disco culture had mostly waned out and its proponents were seen as beneficiaries of the liberalism of the 1960s, which was responsible in people's minds for the economic recession of the 1970s (Lawrence 241).

There are several contradictions that one can observe in the disco phenomenon. One that lies at its core is that, on the one hand, disco was inclusive as far as the marginalized social-political categories were concerned, and on the other, it was exclusive, with its emphasis on sophistication, urban lifestyle and social climbing, in contrast to the hippie culture. This contradiction is tellingly shown in the status held by the protagonist of *Saturday Night Fever*, played by John Travolta: "a working class Italian American who was a hardware clerk by day and a Disco King by night" (Powers, "The Disco").

³ Regarding the club's policy, this is how Studio 54 is mentioned in Nile Rodgers's autobiography: "Studio was all about who you were and how you looked." (136)

⁴ Alice Echols in her history of disco, discussing the public's perception of the movie in retrospect, shows that "the iconic image of John Travolta as dance-floor king Tony Manero in white polyester suit, arm thrust to the disco heavens, has come to symbolize the narcissistic imbecility and inconsequentiality of the disco years." (xvi)

1.2 Disco versus Rock

In July 1979 the anti-disco rally was held at a baseball game in Chicago by thousands of rock fans who brought as many disco records with them as they could find and set them on fire. An estimated 10,000 disco records burned that day symbolizing the reaction of loathing that the phenomenon triggered in all these people whose music and lifestyle were different, to say the least. The “Disco sucks” slogan, with its clearly homophobic implications, is a further testimony to this.

The music was banal and predictable, said the rock musicians and their fans. If one is to compare the two, rock proponents agreed, obvious contrasts come to the fore. The rock music is based on virtuoso guitar playing, musical craftsmanship and showmanship by performers-songwriters like Jimmy Hendrix, the 2016 Nobel Prize winner for literature Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, and others. The lyrics of these artists’ songs had a solid and subtle message, as some of the musicians were also poets, like Bob Dylan. Weinraub sustains that “their works helped redefine popular music with songs rooted in the blues that were alternately poetic, confessional and political. By contrast disco was about dancing and, to some degree, about sexual liberation.” Alice Echols in her sharp study of the movement *Hot Stuff. Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* points out further significant differences between the two:

Rock’s embrace of the serious or the “heavy”, its privileging of artistic integrity and emotional sincerity over the imperatives of show business, were almost utterly disregarded by disco. The ethos of naturalness that so defined sixties’ rock (be it Dylan’s untuneful voice or Janis Joplin’s raspy near-screach) did not much interest disco, which favored the slick and the synthetic, and, indeed, some would say the plastic. (...) It was a culture that, in contrast to rock, didn’t trade on “realness”, preferring instead to revel in the pleasures of the artificial, what theorist Walter Benjamin called “the sex appeal of the inorganic (xxiv).

Summing up the comparison, the rock music was virtuosic, whereas the disco music was gimmicky and artificial; rock was poetic and political at the same time, while disco was something like itsy-bitsy-teeny-weeny-yellow-polka-dot-bikini. To put it more gravely, all disco was about amounts to dancing and sexual liberation. It is natural that such a message did not escape scorn from the much more serious rock advocates.

Their audiences were also very different. The audience of rock was mainly young white male, while that of disco was much more eclectic, bringing together young and old, white and black, straight and gay. As to the musicians themselves, Eric Weisbard puts it quite clearly: “Most rock singers were white men, while the

classic disco singer was a black diva". What it all boils down to is probably a difference in sensibility: while rock had a clearly defined, homogeneous sensibility, disco did not; it had a heterogeneous sensibility which can better be characterized by what it was not. Barry Walters, a senior *Rolling Stone* music critic clarifies: "Some people were threatened because it had a different sensibility. (...) I'm not saying disco had a black sensibility or a gay sensibility or a female sensibility. But it didn't have a straight-white-male sensibility" (Weinraub, "Here's to Disco").

I would like to discuss here a concept which I believe sheds light on the difference between the two, as well as on the rock reaction against disco. In his 2006 extensive study on *Manliness*, Harvey Mansfield defines the title concept as a quality that manly men have, which has to do with assertion, a demand for justice, and seeking attention for what one deems important. "If you want to be manly", Mansfield explains, "you have to be assertive" (*Manliness*, Kindle ed., ch. 3 "Manly Assertion").

Manliness is assertive. Rock is assertive: it has a social message, it demands justice or rebels against the system; it defies conventions and conformism. If disco is assertive, all it asserts is: enjoy, have fun, explore pleasure. We all know, however, that life is not actually about that. Promoting a carefree attitude and pleasure seeking is bound to bring in contentions. All these, together with its artificial sounds and fashions, led to an attitude that despised disco for its paltry, irrelevant frame, which brings us a step forward in clarifying the reasons for loathing.

1.3 Disco message

Several things related to the culture and message of disco have been pointed out above. One is a culture of outward sophistication, dressing up and conspicuously, in pursuit of bodily pleasures and in an environment of tolerance to difference. This nevertheless coexisted with the natural desire for moving up in the world and therefore mingling a step higher from one's social status in a club. Sophistication is, after all, an aspiration for seeing oneself as better and evolved, and the yuppie culture, on the rise then, gave it a perfect expression. The world itself evolved with disco to a sort of futuristic appearance, from the discoteque design, with its state-of-the-art sound and illumination systems, to the electronic synthesized music, the computerized multimedia visuals and the fog machines, to the latex, polyester and sequin-covered disco outfits. All of this was the expression of a desire for escapism and an emphasis on self-expression through sexual liberation. The songs testify to this: they celebrate "macho men and foxy ladies, love machines and "doing it"" (Powers, "The Disco").

Disco comes out as a complex phenomenon, full of contradictions: it was anti-macho and macho; inclusive and exclusive⁵; sophisticatedly bourgeois and at the same time inclusive of marginal, disenfranchised people; underground and mainstream; modern in sound and appearance and also traditional, as it tapped into old African rhythms.

Adam Mattera in his article on “How disco changed music for ever” mentions three basic trends in the disco songs as far as their texts are concerned: “disco’s pansexual spiritual call to arms of unity (“We Are Family”), empowerment (“I Will Survive”) and sheer sexual liberation (“I Feel Love”).” Its overarching message about love and togetherness, simplistic, trite and corny as it is, puts forth a philosophy of hedonism that is certainly not singular in the history of popular music. This brings back the escapism issue, together with the fair acknowledgement that most popular music caters to it, to various degrees of success. While not bad in itself, it is a matter of common sense and knowledge that escapism cannot be sustained for long. Who could seriously and wholeheartedly admit, in their adult age, that all they like doing is shaking their limbs in the air and cheering to the sound of funky tunes?

2. Whit Stillman’s The Last Days of Disco

2.1 Context and plot

The movie was released in 1998 and is part of a trilogy which Stillman entitled the “Doomed Bourgeois in Love”. It is the third in the trilogy, preceded by *Metropolitan* (1990) and *Barcelona* (1994), and, since Stillman thinks of his work as open, with interconnected pieces, the movie features cameos by actors from both of the previous films in the trilogy. His interest in the topic of the *haute bourgeoisie* is lasting, as can be seen from his latest film released in May 2016 *Love & Friendship* –based on Jane Austen’s *Lady Susan* -- as well as from his recent TV undertakings: he is working on a new television series project called *The Cosmopolitans* produced by Amazon Studios.

Just like the other films in the trilogy, *The Last Days of Disco* is a study in manners in the form of a sociological romance. If *Metropolitan* focused on the preppies and debutantes milieu, and *Barcelona* on ‘American imperialists’, as Stillman himself

⁵ An interesting secondary contradiction on this point of inclusion and exclusion is that, while disco started as exclusive because it centered around various gay minorities that were not accepted in public places, from among those very minorities there grew an elite, with a cultivated sense of aesthetics and intellectual pursuits, which wanted to separate from the mainstream gay population that frequented the disco scene and started attending other disco clubs. For a more detailed account of this see Tim Lawrence’s article on “Disco and the Queering of the Dance Floor” quoted in this essay.

explains, the third film in the trilogy explores the New York City disco scene of the early 1980s and the yuppie culture that in many ways attended it. He focuses both on the emergence of disco and on its demise in the story, which he chooses to tell honestly, partly with nostalgia, partly with irony, through the extremely verbose characters -- young ambitious people trying to make sense of their predicament while always looking upward for their social mobility. Recent graduates from Harvard and Hampshire, they have landed their first jobs and are looking for advancing their careers and moving up in the world; they are, in other words, starting their adult life.

Like all Stillman films, *The Last Days of Disco* doesn't have a solid plot, as the action is just a pretext for scintillating conversations and clever repartees. All characters, "the kind of yuppie Manhattan careerists the better clubs would block at the door" (Travers, "The Last"), are frequenting the Club --a discoteque of the eighties apparently fashioned after the famous Studio 54 in New York⁶. First we have the Charlotte-Alice duo. Charlotte is malicious and scheming, always trying to give shy Alice advice. Alice is innocent and bookish, clever and modest, the character with whom we are invited to identify. They come from Hampshire, are working as readers in the publishing industry in New York City and end up roommates in a railroad apartment in Manhattan. Then there is Jimmy Stewart, who is working in the advertising business and who has to get his rich clients into the Club in order to keep his job. The Club manager is Des --played by the actor who has the role of a smart-aleck in all three movies of the series (Chris Eigeman) - - a womanizer who uses homosexuality as a break-up line for the girls with whom he sleeps. Josh is the Assistant District Attorney who used to have a psychological condition in his college days and which he has been successfully treating. His attending the Club is not so innocent, as he is looking into possible illegal activities; ironically, he will be the one who closes the club as well as the one who seems most genuinely appreciative of what disco stands for. The characters come together in different contexts, at the club, at a diner, at the girls' apartment and, most importantly, outside the unemployment office in a scene close to the end. There is a lesson to be learned there, as Joseph Lanthier in his review of the movie observes: "Growing up doesn't necessarily mean taking definitive charge of your life: It means being man or woman enough to sign your claim, grab the classifieds, and take it one interview at a time." Life goes on, Stillman seems to pronounce at the close of the movie, and such occurrences are part and parcel of adult life.

⁶ Most critics and reviewers agree on the model for Stillman's Club -- see, for example, "Meet the F. Scott Fitzgerald of Modern Moviemaking" (August 18, 2016) by Henry Hanks, on Tribecashortlist.com

2.2 Disco meanings

Always fascinated with the comedy of manners and with conversation, Stillman shows us what is interesting about those who are interesting. How do all these characters relate to disco? They relate to it from the outside, rather than from the inside. Recent college graduates, with little life experience, coming out of the self-sufficient university environments, what they are looking for in the disco world is an opportunity for ascending socially or just a chance to know the world. Ready and eager to impart opinions to their peers, to present their theories and to contradict each other, they are the ones more suitable to pass judgment on the world they see precisely because they never take center stage in the disco culture. Like all Stillman characters, they are good conversationalists and they engage each other “with self-congratulatory earnestness” (Ebert, “The Last Days”). We might wonder why Stillman chose graduates from Ivy League universities: out of nostalgia (he is himself a Harvard graduate) or perhaps because their conversations are more intriguing, even if less credible to audiences –nobody speaks like Josh or Des in their rants about *Lady and the Tramp* or the Shakespearean “to thine own self be true”. It is the spark of conversation that enthuses and reminds one of the conversation salons in Oscar Wilde’s time, if Wilde could have persuaded himself to be casual.

What is disco to them? A revered place? A place of self-expression? A place of freedom and choice? The scene when Alice and Charlotte descend the stairs in the Club and look upon the crowd shows they are outsiders, passing judgment on it, but wanting to enjoy its benefits. They are not the people who take center stage -- like the overly conspicuous Tiger Lady, played by Drew Barrymore’s mother, or the body-painted dancers of whom we get a glimpse now and then on the dance floor; their dancing is sometimes shy or cute, not in the least obvious or the ‘make a statement’ type. What are these young protagonists getting out of it and out of this era? Perhaps it all revolves around their youth, around a moment of fantasy in their otherwise implacable life paths and winding destinies. In light of this, disco was about how people personally experienced it – it didn’t have a well-defined social message; it was about pleasure and feeling good, about youth, freedom and self-expression. One is left wondering: how come then, that a type of music that had no clear solid social message could have such tremendous social effects, influencing most popular music that came after it?

Some of the most relevant matters and points of contention regarding the disco era and its specificity come out in the protagonists’ casual discussions. To begin with, there is feisty Charlotte. If Alice has values and principles, Charlotte has goals. She embodies the quite snobbish, haughty yuppie of the era whose agenda includes social climbing. She is many times insufferable in her treatment of Alice and the petty or downright evil schemes she pulls off, but she somehow retains her

humanity -- at times, we see her insecurities and weakness come out. She takes on the roles of custodian and counselor to Alice at the beginning of the movie, when she advises her on how to behave so as to appear less serious and therefore more attractive to men. Music, she says, makes one less critical, mingles crowds of diverse capabilities and makes people more laid-back -- Alice's being critical is a source of her unpopularity. Another matter of importance, Charlotte professes, is control. She sees disco as the beginning of a whole new era in music and social models which places women in control of their destinies. "Look down", she tells Alice as they descend the stairs in the Club toward the crowded dance floor, "there are a lot of choices out there!" Control and choice come together, naturally, and what Charlotte voices is the promise of sexual liberation.

An interesting perspective on what comes out as the thorny issue of sexual liberation or revolution comes from another character in the movie Tom, who ends up going home with Alice after a night at the Club. The next time he sees Alice, he tells her:

I was also curious if the sexual revolution went as far as everyone said. It had. But emotionally, I couldn't handle it, I got so depressed. When I saw you that night, you were a vision --not just of loveliness, but of virtue and sanity. You're very sexy, and modern and hot, but what I was craving was a sentient individual who wouldn't abandon her intelligence to hop into bed with every guy she meets in a nightclub. Why is it that when people have sex with strangers on their mind their IQ just drops, like 40 points? All that affected sexy seductress slinking around? (The Last)

The point of view he expresses shows his ambivalence toward the sexual liberation on the rise in the seventies. It is in this that Stillman's mastery lies -- in the ability to present facts in their complexity without being tempted to resort to simplistic explanations or critique. Tom is himself part of the sexual revolution that he decries. He wants to see its limits --which already suggests he is free of the moral principles that might prevent him from sleeping with the first girl he meets on a club—but at the same time has a desire to fall in love with a "vision of loveliness" and moral rectitude that would prove intangible ("wouldn't abandon her intelligence to hop into bed"). The disco is the environment for this loosening of morals which, on the one hand, he enjoys, and, on the other, he loathes. This coexistence of irreconcilable hopes and desires is, in a nutshell, the disco phenomenon seen from the outside, we may conclude.

It is this kind of conundrums that Stillman's characters evince once they start debating in the casual but determined way of young people who want to make sense of life's ways and quandaries.

Des has his own perspective to contribute to the sexual liberation matter. He has a story that he tells whenever he has the chance. When he was a college boy, a girl he fancied took off her shirt in front of him and unveiled a pair of large breasts that intimidated him. She was thinking, Des says, that “I should be slain by them, as if I hadn’t already been slain on a higher level. I found this arrogant”, he adds. “In all the time that I had thought of her, this thing never figured” (*The Last*). This story gives a glimpse into the female empowerment that was promoted by disco—one of the most celebrated songs of the era is Gloria Gaynor’s *I will survive*, a piercing female empowerment manifesto—and the forms through which it came out. Des complains about something which is quite similar to what Tom suggests: the lack of idealism and romance in love. The girl was in control and at ease to demand satisfaction; she dumps him when she sees his hesitation or intimidation. Des feels that he loses ground in front of this newly gained control of the woman over her sexuality, as he has no longer a role to play as a seducer. All this has accomplished, his story suggests, is freedom to the detriment of romance, a transactional relationship of sex that he himself ended up practicing. He poses as a victim of female aggression and duplicity, as Josh later says of him, but this doesn’t stop him from exploiting the opposite sex.

Josh is the only one who declares himself a loyal adherent to the disco movement and at the same time the one who is the farthest from enjoying the Club, since he is always on a mission there. For him, disco is a social opportunity that compensates for the “terrible social wasteland” of college. He sees such clubs as venues for “dancing, conversation, exchange of ideas and points of view”, indeed a contemporary version of the Victorian salons rather than the drug-dealing sexually loose places discos came to be known for. He contributes some of the most genuinely interesting exhortations in the film, like those about *The Tortoise and the Hare* or *Lady and the Tramp*.

“The tortoise won one race”, he says. “If you were a betting person, would you say ‘That tortoise won against the hare. In future races I’m backing him?’ No. The race was almost certainly a fluke and afterwards the tortoise is still a tortoise, and a hare a hare” (*The Last*). This is a subtle hint to the disco message foregrounding illusion over prudence or wisdom and Josh delivers it with the confidence that stems from a fine judgment of cultural phenomena. Emphasizing the need for rationality over self-delusion, he exposes the promise of an era that put forth the guiding principle of abilities that match desires: you can achieve anything if you only put your mind to it.

The discussion over the movie *Lady and the Tramp* taps into yet another topical issue: women’s education. Josh confidently explains this is not really a film about dogs, as the latter stand for human types. Lady is a “fluffy blonde cocker spaniel with absolutely nothing on her brain. She’s great looking, but incredibly insipid”, goes his critique. She falls in love with Tramp, “a smarmy braggart of the most

obnoxious kind, an oily jailbird out for a piece of tail or whatever he can get”, and the conclusion is that “films like this program women to adore jerks” (*The Last*).

All of these discussions are as interesting as any serious philosophical dialogue on the human predicament, and the characters show a zest for life and self-assertion in their desire to exchange ideas and points of view that cannot but be endearing. This, as well as that, good as well as bad, were part of the age.

Josh is also the one who delivers the final exhortation on disco:

“Something like this, that was this big and this important and this great, will never die. For a few years –maybe many years—it’ll be considered passé and ridiculous. It’ll be misrepresented and caricatured and sneered at, or worse, completely ignored. People will laugh about John Travolta, Olivia Newton-John, white polyester suits, and platform shoes, and going like this [makes the gesture of arms going diagonally, stretched out, like Travolta], but we had nothing to do with those things and still loved disco” (*The Last*).

Disco, he points out, was not only about the showy things that history chronicles, it was also about a part of people’s lives that had to do with youth and *joie de vivre*. It was as innocent as it was gaudy and decadent. It was about the conspicuous people on stage as well as about the inconspicuous people in this story, “straight-arrow revelers who loved the club scene even if they didn’t attract attention there” (Maslin, “Night”), who wanted to have the experience of dancing and socializing in a brave new world. It was about hopes and aspirations as much as it was about vulgarity and brashness.

2.3 *The work of comedy*

The film is nevertheless a comedy. Stillman is somewhat nostalgic but also, and most definitely, comedic. He chooses to deliver wisdom in an offhand manner and often in a comic tone. Many of the repartees are crafted in this style, such as, when Des brings to the fore the famous “to thine own self be true”. We hear him impart his wisdom to Jimmy, in as casual a manner as a taxi conversation can require: “It’s premised on the idea that “thine own self” is something pretty good, being true to which is commendable. But what if “thine own self” is not so good? What if it’s pretty bad? Wouldn’t it be better in that case not to be true to thine own self? See, that’s my situation” (*The Last*). The approach is clearly lighthearted, but the topic is a matter for serious consideration. This piece of advice has become a well-known dictum of our age with a totally new meaning attached to it, which was also embraced by the disco culture of free expression and liberation. Let us not forget that the pronouncement was uttered by none other than Polonius, whose “own self” was anything but good, which shows a total twist in meaning and an oblivious eye to the irony that lies at the core of the message. Don’t rush into received meanings,

always look closer and deeper, Stillman's characters, young as they are, seem to warn the audience. All of them are looking for betterment and understanding through their conversations and relationships, even if they do not know exactly where they are going and sometimes are misled by their snobbish goals and aspirations.

Still, they keep looking into and questioning their condition; however nonchalantly or ironically, they need to interact in order to make sense of things. The topics they broach are burning topics of the age, from the sexual revolution, to the meaning of the word "yuppie", to the new social models and culture of dancing. David Schickler in his review for the Criterion Collection remarks:

"It is immaterial if we have never met a group of young people who have the collective, absurd verbal resolve and acuity to hold forth as often and for as long as Charlotte and Alice and Des and Jimmy and Josh do. We delight in their straight-faced, discursive tête-à-têtes about weighty topics like "The Tortoise and the Hare" or Lady and the Tramp or Scrooge McDuck because Stillman's leading lords and ladies are all so damn (...) earnest. And (...), they almost always return to one another's side at the end of the night and ask for forgiveness. "Please understand," they seem to plead, "I am still so confoundingly young." Stillman's protagonists in The Last Days of Disco are doing what supposedly upwardly mobile twentysomethings in Manhattan have always done: they are trying."

Stillman achieves a balance between nostalgia and critique, between a warm understanding of the characters' dilemmas and an ironic detachment from them. The protagonists are a good illustration of the disco trend, its contradictory but not hateful nature, Stillman seems to advance. The film therefore comes out as an exercise in sophistication, which puts forth a perspective able to understand the phenomenon for what it was, without oversimplifying it, which entails seeing the good parts despite the bad ones, and, what is most important, educating the viewer's understanding of a puzzling age without a tendency to moralize.

3. Conclusions

Fascination and loathing is always part of the disco fabric, because of the social complexity of the phenomenon and its multiple contradictions whose nature was to a certain extent sketched above. There are always contentions and critique depending on the angle from which we choose to see things: too effeminate, too ghettoized -- the straight (white) male would sustain; too populist -- the elitist gay male or female; too eclectic and kitschy -- the educated in rock or in other musical genre, etc. We may still not have a satisfying explanation as to the reasons for which, when one hears a disco beat -- the kind of rhythmical beat often used in commercials to get people to pay attention to the product, for example -- one starts

involuntarily to keep the rhythm with the feet, or tap it with the fingers, or, sometimes, one almost feels like getting up and dancing. Perhaps it taps into the *joie de vivre* that we all have somewhere, even when melancholy or today's urban erudition keeps it hidden and atrophied.

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