

Historical Knowledge as Self-Understanding in the Films of Whit Stillman

Timothy Yenter



ABSTRACT: Whit Stillman’s films depict characters attempting to gain relevant knowledge of their historical situation so that they can shape their lives. Through an analysis of scenes from each of Stillman’s films, this essay demonstrates that historical knowledge is presented as a kind of self-understanding in the films. That historical knowledge is useful for gaining control over one’s future as well as for properly evaluating one’s life reveals a philosophically interesting approach to self-knowledge. Stillman’s complex approach of layering contexts further suggests an elusive account of the self.

1. INTRODUCTION

Whit Stillman’s erudite dialogue nimbly moves between global and personal questions, often in a single sentence. “Should I leave my job?” can be introduced by fretting that one is doomed by uncontrollable historical forces, and “where should I live?” can introduce a discussion of the history of urban planning. This poses what is at root a philosophical problem: What must I know in order to know myself? Self-knowledge can be the difference between making wise and foolish judgments in particular cases. In the working out of these practical questions, Stillman’s characters jump to larger contexts. This oscillation of registers—variously historical and personal—distinguishes Stillman from his “smart cinema” contemporaries (Sconce 2002, Perkins 2012).

Stillman has professed his love for shifting historical moments, of “hooking onto things and getting to like them just as they’re going out of fashion” (Levy 1999: 201). This view is fundamentally romantic, according to Stillman, because “if you want to show people with a romantic sensibility, they have to feel like it’s the end of something” (Ebiri 2016). Noticing the land very slowly shift beneath one’s feet is central to Stillman’s approach to storytelling, but it also speaks to a larger intellectual interest in thinking about the individual in different historical contexts.

To appreciate the philosophical interest of Stillman’s approach, I begin by laying out some of the philosophical approaches to the intersection of self-understanding and historical knowledge. Then, through an examination of scenes from Stillman’s films, we will see how his approach connects self-understanding to historical understanding, which illuminates the importance of this question for making decisions and evaluating lives.

2. KNOWING THYSELF

What do I know when I know myself? Is it knowing my own mind? My beliefs? My desires? My subconscious desires? These might all, for lack of a better term, be called “internal,” and they are candidates for what is meant by “knowing oneself.” There’s another category, the relational, that might also include candidates for “knowing oneself.” It is not enough to know that I am happiest when reading a book or walking in the woods, I might also need to know that I tend to let others dominate the conversation in large groups or that once I consider someone a friend I relax and stop talking and thus come across as sullen. This relational knowledge includes a host of things about how I relate to others, what I value in others, understanding how others see me, and more.

Perhaps there is a third category that is necessary to know myself. Must I understand myself in my larger social or historical situation? Maybe I live during late capitalism, or the final death throes of the American economic and cultural empire, or an era of extreme political correctness, or the end times, or the dawning of a new age, or the collapse of some long-standing institution that we won’t even recognize was collapsing until after it is has collapsed. If I am known by those who live after me, then they will likely think of me in relation to events and movements and epochs that may not be clear to me at that moment: “sadly he died just weeks before personal jetpacks became widely used for travel,” or “she lived just long enough to see the first of the alien contacts.” Part of our significance for those who remember us is not just who we were and what we did but how we are situated in history. This knowledge might be relevant not only for thinking of our lives as part of a larger narrative but also for the meaning of our lives as lived. We might, as presidents are of-

ten described, be concerned with our legacy. More immediately, choosing to become a nurse would be aided by knowledge that one is making the decision just before a nursing shortage drives up demand, respect, and wages. Indeed, knowing whether market forces alter occupational respect would be useful. Finally, we might consider whether we have a duty to know some certain things about oneself that would require historical knowledge (e.g., that God created the world, or that my choice of whether to invade this country will have lasting effects on millions of lives). What I need depends partly on what my problem is. Do I need liberation from my self-imposed nonage? Do I experience alienation and need to root out the cause of it? Do I need to know which careers will exist in twenty years? Do I care what my grandchildren will think of me? Should I try to be on “the right side of history”? What historical information I actually need to know varies based on the reason why I need to know it and the situation in which I find myself. All of these suggest a moral imperative to discover the relevant historical knowledge to inform self-knowledge—moral in the broadest sense of deciding how to live and assign meaning.

A second way to connect self-knowledge to historical knowledge is through a direct link between the two. Here is a list of reasons, given by those traditionally classified as philosophers, to think that knowing oneself will lead one to know a relevant history. On these accounts, important self-knowledge is only possible if I have the appropriate historical knowledge.

- macro-history: The relevant causal explanation of who or what I am and how I understand the world has a world-historical explanation, which could be theistic (Augustine), idealist (Hegel, Collingwood), or materialist (Marx).
- micro-history: Who I am is shaped (or determined by) by my upbringing; my parents were shaped by their upbringing; and so on (Freud).
- mereology: The whole is prior to the part, and thus an explanation of me requires an explanation of the world (Spinoza, Bradley).
- uniformity: The laws that govern history are the same that govern me; to know one set of laws is to know the other (Heraclitus, Emerson).
- historicism: Understanding myself is at least partly understanding human nature; but human nature is not a fixed, immutable essence, but a changeable, historically conditioned thing, so I must come to understand the historical conditions (Herder).
- liberation: Genealogical accounts help free us from our bondage, where that bondage might be with regard to ethics, epistemology, or ontology (Kant, Nietzsche, Foucault, MacIntyre).

- evolution: We are biological beings, and the correct explanation of our biology includes evolutionary factors stretching back thousands or millions of years.

This list highlights some key views, but it is not exhaustive. Indeed, the list would lengthen considerably if we included novelists, poets, and others not often classified as philosophers.

Thus far I have motivated the view, through a quick summary of positions, that one of the core philosophical ideals—self-knowledge—might require knowledge of one’s moment in history or one’s relation to historical forces. In the rest of the essay, I turn to how Whit Stillman’s films explore characters’ relations to their moment. For Stillman’s characters, the desire for historical knowledge is often for one of two reasons. First, it helps one know what to do (especially with regard to a job or relationships). Second, it can heighten or lessen one’s anxieties about failure.

3. HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN STILLMAN’S FILMS

Two common but inadequate ways of framing Stillman’s characters is through class consciousness and nostalgia. What can seem like class anxiety in Stillman’s films is often a keen awareness of how changes in social and economic structures have both cultural and individual impacts. Class consciousness in Stillman’s films isn’t static; class anxiety is an awareness of one’s shifting historical moment.

Awareness of the shifting historical moment is tied to many viewers’ claim that Stillman’s films express a longing for the past or a nostalgia. As one author puts it, “anyone who believes in the value of tradition should appreciate [*Metropolitan*]’s unabashed nostalgia, formal costuming, and witty dialogue” (Kelly 2015). Despite the tendency of Stillman’s admirers to enjoy what they call his nostalgia, I think we should be careful with this term. Not all remembrances of a happy past are nostalgic, so we should not conclude that reflections on positive aspects of passing times means they view these positively. Remembrances of a purportedly happy past can also be painful; this seems to be Charlie’s worry in *Metropolitan*. Knowing what is good in the recent past can make one wistful or somber or aware of the tragedy. As James Bowman (2000) points out, many of Stillman’s characters (everyone in *Metropolitan*, the American cousins in *Barcelona*, Josh in *Disco*, and Violet from *Damsels*) represent a now-lost innocence that isn’t unreflectively nostalgic; rather they seek something good in what is passing away. What are the consequences of the sexual revolution, of the decline of Carnegie businessmen, of the loss of discotheques?¹ Stillman presents us with opportunities to posit such reflection through characters who seem displaced from their “rightful” time.

Turning now to the individual films, I will take at least one moment from each of the five released films to show how Stillman's films work at the interesting intersection of self-knowledge and historical understanding.

3.1. Metropolitan

Metropolitan is the first of what would be deemed the "Doomed Bourgeois in Love Trilogy," which draws from this film's advertising tagline. Let us note three points.

Early in the film, we enter partway into a conversation in which we hear:

Charlie: "I think that we are all in a sense doomed."

Nick: "What are you talking about?"

Charlie: "Downward social mobility. We hear a lot about 'the great social mobility in America' with the focus usually on the comparative ease of moving upwards. But what's less discussed is how easy it is to . . . to go down. And I think that is the direction we are all headed in. And I think the downward fall is going to be very fast. Not just for us as individuals, but the whole preppie class."

Notice that Charlie shifts from himself and his friends to "the whole preppie class." When Charlie, Nick, and (to a lesser extent) Tom have these conversations about themselves, they work at the level of the collective. Audrey, though, always sees the individuals in these discussions of the collective. These are her friends that are being discussed; they are the people who will become "personal failures." Later, Tom and Charlie return to the question of being doomed. Charlie is concerned about whether they are doomed, or if "we simply fail without being doomed." Charlie's concern is a causal, historical analysis that could increase or reduce anxiety about being a failure. Being doomed would ease his anxiety about failing. It is comforting to know that you never had a chance. Charlie's anxious concern throughout the film is a purported historical awareness. He is not nostalgic, like Nick, for what has been lost; he's anxious about a future that he suspects is already closed off to him, if his historical situation is as he perceives it to be. Who he is and who he can be are both defined and limited by the decline of the UHB ("urban haute bourgeoisie" or "preppy class").

It should be re-emphasized at this point that this is Charlie's self-diagnosis. The film's shifting perspectives and refusal to reinforce consistently any particular character's viewpoint leaves open whether Charlie's self-diagnosis is correct. It matters to him, and he might be right. It might also be true, as Tom (the outsider) states, "Doomed. Even if he were right it wouldn't be any great tragedy if some of these people lost their class prerogatives."

Are the UHB doomed? Stillman's authorial style demurs. Stillman is forever putting forward an idea then taking it back. There is always one more comment, one more scene, one more context in which to understand what has been said or done. In Stillman's own words,

What I like and find liberating in dialogue comedy is that the characters, and what they say, are not me. . . . These are fleeting thoughts and observations and not presented as truths but as something that illuminates the character and the dynamic between the characters. This kind of dialogue is thesis and antithesis—and we never get to a synthesis. (Brown 2012)

Scenes rarely begin and end with a fully formed conversation. Especially in the frequent fades to black in *Metropolitan*, the blocking and editing reinforce the slippery nature of every purported assertion made by a character. Stillman, in his commentary track for the Criterion edition, describes scripting brief snippets that were filmed early in close-ups that could then be inserted throughout the film, which creates the effect of times running together. In some cases, entire scenes are constructed as if in a single conversation but where space and time are clearly elided. We catch only snippets of conversations as characters are paired and re-paired over the course of a night in *Metropolitan*, refusing to let the viewer remain settled on whether any character has the final say. Relatively rarely do we see the group together. In one case where we have a standard establishing shot show the spatial relationships of the entire group, gathered in Jane's apartment, we cut in to realize they uncomfortably sit alternated by gender, leading to Jane eventually slapping Nick. This analytical editing is less common than the constructive editing employed in most scenes. Even the famous discussion of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* occurs in pieces across the film. Stillman would later skip through time and space to a different effect in *Damsels in Distress*, where Violet's authority over the group is affirmed early on by having her monologues play continuously while characters jump from one location to the next over time, a technique that disappears as her authority erodes. Although I will focus on dialogue in the analyses that follow, we should keep in mind that in all his films, Stillman and his collaborators use understated editing techniques to prevent any pronouncement from having the final say.

Secondly, we could consider Nick's account of Tom: "A West Sider is among us. That explains it." What is explained? It is a statement about class, yes, but it is not only or even primarily about money. It is about the social status that comes with one's family being long rich and continuously so (and thus Upper East Side Manhattan) rather than in the more socially mixed (at that time) West Side, which can include up-and-comers or, more likely in the

case of Tom who loses his trust fund, someone who is slipping out of the *haute bourgeoisie*.

Finally, after the mythologizing of Serena Slocum, a long-distance girlfriend who would read Tom's letters aloud to her college floormates, we are introduced to Tom's nascent social-political consciousness. One of his letters to Serena, according to Sarah, "was one of the first things to set Alice Dreyer off about Marxism. Since then she's joined the red underground army." Tom clarifies, "I'm a committed socialist but not a Marxist." The subsequent exchange leads to the memorable parting remark, "Good luck with your Fourierism." We could think about how Tom's adherence, later abandoned, to a lesser-known socialist movement suggests an atypical engagement for a young man (a college freshman) with history. It is another attachment to a past historical moment, this one a hundred years prior, that emphasizes a character's displaced existence. This displacement is emphasized by the lack of adults in most scenes; the young UHB are set adrift.

3.2. Barcelona

Historical knowledge is not sufficient for self-knowledge or even for maturity, as we see in Chris Eigeman's characters across films. They can pronounce hilariously on extremely specific points of historical circumstance, such as his praise of detachable collars in *Metropolitan*: "so many things which were better in the past were abandoned for supposed convenience." In Eigeman's performances, there is always a disconnect between his elevated vocal performance and his relaxed body and wide-open eyes. This leads to the pleasant unease of never being sure if he is serious or putting the other characters on. His performances thus also serve Stillman's mode of both putting forward a claim and then quickly pulling it back. Importantly, Eigeman's characters often lack self-concern or the desire for change. Historical knowledge may be necessary for personal progress, but it is not sufficient by itself.

Fred, Eigeman's character in *Barcelona*, is interestingly different. Eigeman's characters in other Stillman films try to dominate socially through their on-high pronouncements and theories, but Fred actively tries to convince Ted (Taylor Nichols) that the Barcelonans' contempt for NATO and the US military is both morally wrong and historically misguided. Breaking from the simmering stew of contempt, arrogance, and indifference of *Metropolitan* and *Disco*, Eigeman's Fred, wearing his navy blues, is set off by a group of young people, one of whom contemptuously calls out "facha." When Fred learns that this is slang for "fascist," he is furious. Fred intones, "So 'facha' is something good, then. . . . Because if they were referring to the political movement Benito Mussolini led, I'd be really offended. Men wearing this uniform died ridding Europe of

Fascism.” Part of what Fred fails to understand, but his stated job would very much require him to understand, is that to a Spaniard of the 1980s, a primary influence on their understanding of fascism is not (only) Mussolini or Hitler, as Fred thinks, but also Francisco Franco. Franco does not seem to play any part in Fred’s understanding of fascism, so he has trouble reading the young Spaniards’ disdain for military uniforms and other symbols of Francoist fascism, including the USA’s tolerance of Franco and push for its admittance into NATO. Fred’s poor fit for his task is not only temperamental (“that will take a lot of tact”) but also culturally necessary historical knowledge.

Stillman reinforces the lack of certain kinds of historical inquisitiveness by the juxtaposition with the next scenes. In a two-shot, Ted drives Fred through town, showing him the sights. Ted clearly knows more about Barcelona, but it is Fred who has been tasked with the job that requires both tact and historical knowledge, which he seems neither to have nor to want.

Ted: “That’s the cathedral.”

Fred: (nonplussed) “Uhn-huhn.”

Ted: “These are the remnants of the old Roman walls.”

Fred: “Uhn-huhn.” . . .

Ted attempts to “call it a night” but Fred is too worked up.

Ted: “There’s a lot of anti-NATO feeling here—”

Fred: “Anti-what?!”

Ted: “Anti-NATO.”

Fred: “Anti-NATO?!”

Ted: “Well, here it’s OTAN.”

Fred: “They’re against OTAN?!”

Fred’s surprise and disgust demonstrates he both lacks the historical knowledge necessary to perform his role well but also allows him to suggest the historical knowledge that he thinks should be employed and why therefore the Catalans should support OTAN. The conflict between historical contexts is raised again in Ted’s story of the red and black ants, to which Fred memorably and wordlessly responds with a rock, in the discussion of the sinking of the *Maine*, and in the discussion of the “AFL-CIA” (which Fred double-checks, in an aside to Ted, isn’t a real thing; Ted says no, but it is a long-standing term of approbation).

To know how one ought to act requires understanding the appropriate historical context for evaluating one’s moment. Ted’s gentler manner and milder temperament obscure a different application of historical knowledge. His con-

versations with Fred and with Montserrat (Tushka Bergen), his respect for the unseen Jack as one of the WWII generation, and as his reading of mid-century business theory suggest a kind of historical awareness. Most clearly, we see Ted's historical understanding in his frequent allusions to the sexual revolution, which he claims hit Spain later but with more lasting impact than in the United States. In what may be the greatest but least appreciated line in Stillman's films, Ted's voiceover rumination on physical beauty and sex leads to the gorgeously understated, "All this had led pretty directly to the Old Testament." It is a defining character moment because thoughts of sex would not lead everyone to Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, but it also shows Stillman's broad interest in how the past can shape the present and how people can choose to live in a version of the past constructed out of carefully selected totems, like detachable collars, Glenn Miller classics, and discothèques.

3.3. The Last Days of Disco

Josh: "I still consider myself a loyal adherent to the Disco movement."

Tom: "It's a movement?"

Knowing what time one is in (the *last* days of disco) and how one relates to it (the disco *movement*) is key to Stillman's first three films, but in *Disco* the characters' concerns join with the plotting to produce a story that interacts with their concerns. *The Last Days of Disco* is filled with characters' growing awareness that they are reaching the end of something. Josh (Matt Keeslar), who is viewed warily by Des (Eigeman) and Charlotte (Kate Beckinsale), may have seen the changes before the others, which is suggested by his breakdown in college. *Disco* is less about boldly declaring what is the appropriate historical context or whether there is any way to survive the decline of one's perceived class than it is about the possibility of controlling one's future. As Charlotte delightfully, paradoxically puts it, "I think it's so important that we be in control of our own destinies." Three characters represent the possibility of control: Charlotte, who manipulates others and declares control over her own future but fails to actually do so; Dan (Matt Ross), who parlays grand historical narratives and forecasts doom but also actively works to create his own future; and Alice (Chloë Sevigny), who has little useful knowledge at the start but actually succeeds in making the right decisions at the right times.

Charlotte may want to control her own destiny, but she lacks the judgment to make the decisions that would allow her to get the position she wants ("associate editor"); this doesn't shake her confidence, and she ends the film convinced she will end up in television, where (she tells herself and others) she really wants to be. Her failed decision-making is partly due to being un-

aware of the historical forces shaping her life. It is Dan who informs the roommates, “These [railroad] apartments were actually planned in the last century as tenement housing for working class families. Now all the yuppie roommate combos are crowding them out.” Charlotte is unmoved, failing to see how her living situation is due to economic factors both present and past.² She also does not recognize the potential in the book that Alice does. Jimmy is impressed by her apparent knowledge that the Woodstock generation didn’t dance in bars, but she’s not able to use this historical knowledge for a purpose beyond wielding momentary power over Jimmy. The momentary, fleeting power over others is the only control Charlotte manages.

Dan, by contrast, fails to use his historical knowledge to control the interpersonal dynamics of the moment. His insights are forever falling flat in the moment, but he does exert control by organizing a union,³ working his way up in publishing, and otherwise striving to control his future based on his acute historical knowledge.

Alice succeeds in gaining the interpersonal knowledge that is necessary for her development, but she also sees the possibility of marketing the book as a self-help book, recognizing an emerging market at exactly the right time. Alice’s emergence by the end expresses how her growing awareness shows both promise and possible autonomy.

Even more than these three, Josh merges recognition of the historical moment with well-chosen actions. He sees, he knows, he eventually acts. Lack of confidence is his primary fault, it seems, not the mental instability that so worries Des. His justly famous speech on the enduring qualities of disco is one of the most well-known from Stillman’s oeuvre, but we can usefully pause to think about the conversation about the club closing that leads up to the impassioned “disco will never be over” speech:

Charlotte: “Could part of it be related to the herpes epidemic?”

Van: “Maybe.” . . .

Van: “Suddenly it’s dead. Over.”

Josh: “God, that’s sad.”

Des: “We’re getting older. We’ve lived through a period that’s ended. It’s like dying, a little bit.”

Josh’s speech occurs in the context of the group’s slow recognition that they have experienced the passing of a recognizable historical phase. His rousing speech is immediately undermined by his own tossed-off claim that he is getting himself motivated for a job interview, which is itself undermined by his further claim, “Most of what I said I believe.” Stillman delights in adding one

more context than another to recontextualize what has just happened. In *Disco* the characters, who, like most of Stillman's characters, are often obsessed with their moment in history and whether they are doomed, develop through a story that sees them through the changing moment and ushers them into the moment beyond, making *Disco* perhaps Stillman's most satisfying blending of plot and character in the Doomed-Bourgeois-in-Love trilogy.

3.4. Damsels in Distress

Strikingly, Stillman's two most recent films have somewhat moved away from an explicit link between historical understanding and self-understanding that dominated the Doomed-Bourgeois-In-Love triptych. *Damsels in Distress* is fascinatingly out-of-time in its depiction of Seven Oaks University. In *Metropolitan*, Stillman intentionally removed markers that would specify a time. A similar strategy seems to be employed even more drastically in *Damsels*. Based loosely on a purported group of women at Harvard in the 1970s, the 1995 hit "Another Night" plays at a party ("a golden oldie!"), characters use cellphones, and Violet (Greta Gerwig) wears sundress-sweater combinations that would fit in the 1950s next to Lily (Lio Tipton) who is dressed in the skinny pants and layered tops of the early 2010s.

Characters don't worry that they are doomed by historical circumstance as in the earlier films, but the impulse to use historical facts to explain features of their life does carry over. "It was the last of the Select Seven to go co-ed. An atmosphere of male barbarism predominates. But we're going to change all that." That it was the last of the Select Seven (presumably a play on the Seven Sisters) to go co-ed is supposed to *explain* the atmosphere of male barbarism. (Like Charlotte in *Disco*, Violet is confident she can change this inherited circumstance.) The "decline of decadence" is put forward as an explanation for people's behavior. Xavier (Hugo Becker) says he aspires to be a Cathar, decrying their historical persecution, until he drops his "adherence to the Cathar faith"; it is left indeterminate whether this is to be explained by his sexual interests, his religious commitments, or his historical awareness. Rick (Zach Woods) assumes that his audience would know that *The Daily Complainer* is a biblical reference that connects to the school's history. "The name dates from university's earliest days as a divinity school. The reference is to the book of Job—Job's complaint with the world." Gone, though, is the sense of doom, which is surely related to the film's far lighter tone (shockingly so, at times, as its plot revolves around suicide and depression/"tailspin"). It wasn't until Stillman made a comedy (that becomes a musical comedy) that it became very clear just how much his earlier, very funny films were driven by dark, dramatic themes that were handled with a very light touch. *Damsels* represents a partial break from the triptych. *Love & Friendship* (2016) goes further.

3.5. Love & Friendship

The characters in *Love & Friendship* are unaware of the particulars of their historical situation, although those in Stillman's Austen adaptation are very aware of the social structures that form the difficulties they face. However, with *Love & Friendship* the historical awareness is shifted from the characters to the viewers. Watching an Austen adaptation in the early twenty-first century, the audience is aware of the historical contingencies of the characters' situations, even if they are not. Historical awareness is thus dislodged but not eliminated.

For instance, consider Stillman's change of the circumstances of Mrs. Alicia Johnson from Austen's epistolary novella. In Stillman's version, Alicia has lived in Connecticut, which is described as a backward, uninhabitable place, and her husband threatens to return them there if she continues to see Lady Susan. The joke here involves contrasting the contemporary understanding of Connecticut as the wealthiest state in the country by median household income with its status as a colony in the mid- or late-eighteenth century. Furthermore, Chloë Sevigny, who plays Alicia Johnson, is from Darien, Connecticut, part of the wealthy western section of the state that is in the greater New York City metro. Famously, she was written up as the "It" girl of 1996, when she was 19, before garnering fame through modeling and acting. So to understand fully the joke in Stillman's alteration of Alicia's circumstances and the role of Connecticut, one not only must know something about Connecticut at Austen's time but also Connecticut of the last thirty years. The structure of the joke requires the *audience* to have historical awareness—the awareness of the gap between what Sevigny's character believes and what we know of Sevigny, the person playing the role.

This is not to say that such an expectation of audience awareness was never expected in the earlier films. We know the early 1980s were the last days of disco and that there will definitely be those who down-talk it. We watch *Barcelona* from the other ledge of the chasm marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the shifts in Europe of the early 1990s. Awareness of how we view a film's events and its characters differently from a film's characters is nothing new, and filmmakers have long been able to use this.⁴ Indeed, we cannot watch *Metropolitan* without noting that these UHBs, if they ever did exist, do not exist as such now. The contrast between the characters' spoken anxieties and the world they live in can often critique the world, and perhaps does so more often than it critiques the characters. As James Bowman notes, Stillman's characters' "reminiscences about the past always have a purpose in making the present appear more clearly defined in its foolishness, wrong-headedness or backwardness by contrast" (16). What's distinctive of *Love & Friendship* is how much of the humor, compared to Stillman's earlier films, is settled in the audience awareness rather than in characters' competing notions of historical context or self-understanding.

4. DOOMED?

Characters think they are “doomed.” They worry about the sexual revolution and the decline of the UHB. The decline of the UHB and the sexual revolution are certainly connected, for instance through the decline of the society ball. Even the arrangement of characters in Sally Fowler’s apartment suggests gendered roles, with careful attention to who sits, who stands, and who is in and out at any moment clearly communicated in the blocking. As Laura Carroll (2003) observes, by setting so much of the story in Sally Fowler’s apartment, we are able to observe and listen in on the characters in a fully isolated setting—a setting that only Tom doesn’t realize is fleeting. Furthermore, as Richard Brody (2015) notes, “Tom talks with Nick, Charlie, and other young and not-so-young men about careers and destinies, and talks with women about books and relationships.” Both the visual space and the spoken dialogue are gendered in ways that suggest the discomfort that underlie Ted and Fred’s experience in Barcelona in the subsequent film. Stillman’s characters survive and celebrate and mourn the last days of disco. They appeal to the decline of decadence for why their classmates are as they are. To live in a Stillman film is to live with (or dangerously without) a sense that an era is ending, and one must find something from the past to hold onto or something from the future to grab hold of. But that requires judgment and awareness and autonomy that you can’t be sure that you have. So you need the historical knowledge to understand yourself and to make prudent decisions, but in-process historical knowledge is slippery.

Should that lead to pessimism? Are we in fact doomed? I finish with some observations about Stillman’s films that are not a conclusion, traditionally understood; rather, they suggest an interpretive stance that would both support and extend what I have said so far.

Stillman’s first three films are frequently read in a way that unifies them. Claire Perkins (2008, 2012), building off work by Thomas Elsaesser and Jeffrey Sconce, has written perceptively about how Stillman’s films exemplify how American cinema of the 1990s played on European art cinema’s auteur-through-trilogy model. Trilogies, among other things, allow the development of a distinctive sensibility that are central to both the rise of auteurism and to the development of the idea of a national cinema.⁵ In the context of American film in the 1990s, filmmakers developed distinctive authorial identities by building on European arthouse cinema’s use of intertextual elements to develop an authorial voice. Stillman’s films are especially ripe for this mode of analysis because his voice of affectionate irony develops through playfully undermining character’s statements, their personalities, and their moral sense. Through reusing characters, explicit intertextual references (such as the credits to *Disco*), and similarity of tone, we are presented the opportunity to read

the films in light of each other. Perkins (2008: 35) concludes that we should comprehend Stillman's initial trilogy as presenting the flexibility and therefore unknowability of human persons, because "in repeating this search three times, Stillman concludes that the human is *not* a definable type." This conclusion is stronger than Perkins's argument justifies, particularly her contention that this is a *conclusion* that Stillman draws, as if the three films jointly make an argument.

In a modified form, though, something like what Perkins discusses is likely right. A person is never simply known or unknown. Angles on character, personality, attitude, wisdom are added with each new bit of information. Images of revealing or uncovering might come to mind, but I think it is better to think of these as adding layers on top of one another. Each new context is an addition, not a subtraction that gets us down to some immutable core. We are never given a reason to think there is a core (although perhaps the unshakable, innocent goodness of Audrey in *Metropolitan* comes close). Rather, we are given more and more complicated understandings of events and actions and persons. Consider Josh's discussed "breakdown" before the depicted events of *The Last Days of Disco*. Des presents these actions negatively. We later hear how Charlotte views the depiction of the events in a very different light. Josh is reticent to share his own version of the events publicly, which is prudent given Des's taunting, but it also speaks to his own complex understanding of the events, their significance to him, and the negotiation between their role in his life and the public perception of them, which he reveals to Alice.

Consider, too, R. Martin-Colonna de Cesari-Rocca, the playful character whom Stillman pseudonymously write as in *Love & Friendship: In Which Jane Austen's Lady Susan Vernon Is Entirely Vindicated*. "In my view, humanity is always individual. We have the great urge to speak in terms of the general but ultimately everything under the sun is specific. Nevertheless, patterns can be discerned, and the sums an author might expect to gain depend to a great degree on the success—not the truth—of the generalities he proposes" (Stillman 2016: 10). Humanity is individual, and characters in Stillman's films are almost always malleable, which Lady Susan, Charlotte, and other savvy movers exploit. Both the characters *and* the perceptions are malleable. Entrenched perceptions are harder to dislodge, but it is possible, as we see in Lady Susan's ability to salvage her reputation from Reginald DeCourcy.

The process of self-understanding, on such a picture of human persons, could never be a discovery that settles things once and for all. There is no uncoverable haecceity. There are only new discoveries, new additions, new pieces to be added to the understanding of a self—one's own or another's. The process of self-understanding is never complete. With this in mind, new historical contexts (Ted *and* Fred *and* Montserrat; Tom *and* Charlie *and* Nick *and* Audrey)

can each take us further in this process of self-understanding. Historical explanations are not zero-sum. Persons are never simple, never comprehended, never explanatorily exhausted. For Stillman, there is always more to know, and sometimes this knowledge is historical, and sometimes we should seek this historical understanding to help us better live and shape our lives.⁶

Notes

1. Bowman (2000: 19) concludes that the distilled upper-class characters are upheld by Stillman as “genuinely admirable,” and while it is true that Stillman presents them sympathetically we should be careful not to overlook the ways in which Stillman can tease out the impossibility of living as these characters do and his gentle critiques of their myopic self-imaginings and carefully crafted historical narratives. Thus, Fred in *Barcelona* could be right about the importance of the Old Testament in thinking through changing sexual mores but also wrong about whether the contacts he makes in his Carnegie-inspired approach to business are really his friends.
2. This discussion echoes an earlier, unstated element of *Metropolitan*, which is addressed in the script. When we first see Tom’s apartment, the script direction states: “Prewar Manhattan ‘luxury’ apartments typically had at least one tiny ‘maid’s room’ bedroom with bath adjoining the kitchen. In the sixties in less affluent families these were taken over by the sibling deemed to need a larger room, usually the eldest or youngest brother. Tom occupied this room” (Stillman 1994: xx). Whether he realizes it or not, Tom’s life has been shaped by these historical forces that determined architectural planning and later reimagining. To exist in a defined space can determine self-conception, social boundaries, and status.
3. “Well, I don’t know. We were exploited. But they were nice about it”—Dan on the company.
4. Striking recent examples include Mike Mills’s *20th Century Women*, the films of Sophia Coppola (especially *The Virgin Suicides* and *Marie Antoinette*), and *Mad Men* (particularly the second episode of season three, where attentive viewers know that the announced date of Margaret Sterling’s wedding will be the assassination of John F. Kennedy).
5. We could add to Perkins’s contributions Stillman’s own admissions that the first three films (at least the two Manhattan stories) are connected. “In Manhattan I’ve only chosen two periods to write about, which I guess I have an emotional aesthetic for. I’ve just thought of this now, but *Metropolitan* and *The Last Days of Disco* are bookends of a period I really hated. *Metropolitan* was the world before Woodstock and the youth culture swept a lot of things away. *Disco* was the nightlife after we came back from that time. There had been those ten years of people sitting in the mud listening to head music, wearing hippie accoutrements, smoking dope, listening to Jimi Hendrix. By the way, now [2000] is a really interesting time in my life. I wouldn’t be surprised if in twenty years I had a novel about this time now” (Morton 2000). In the promotional materials for *The Last Days of Disco*, Stillman connects all three films in the following way. “The three films are about times I know about when group social life really operated.” And later: “This would be the

- third—but final—film in the Doomed-Bourgeois-in Love series; the middle panel in a sort of triptych.”
6. I would like to thank the organizers and participants of Gonzaga University’s 2017 Faith, Film, and Philosophy Seminar on the films of Whit Stillman for providing the impetus to write this piece and for the helpful comments. I am thankful, too, for the University of Mississippi Philosophy Colloquium series for additional feedback on a very early draft, and to the journal’s assigned reviewers.

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