

# YOUTH AND MORALITY

## A Spoonful of Sugar

by John Feffer

**K**ids these days: they seem in a perpetual state of sensory overload. A new genre of film has begun to chronicle this zombification of American youth. Although presenting various explanations for the syndrome, these movies offer, for the most part, a unanimous prescription: "Wake UP!"

One of the first examples of this new cinema of the young and dazed is last year's *River's Edge* which features a set of desensitized teenagers who can't generate an emotional response to the murder of a close friend. In the more recently departed *Less Than Zero*, meanwhile, a slightly older set of characters suffer from congenital world-weariness; dispensable income, plentiful drugs and sexual experimentation still can't animate their repetitive music video lives. In both these movies, the characters eventually battle to consciousness, though not without some casualties.

The latest recasting of the formula is *Bright Lights, Big City*, a screen adaptation of Jay McInerney's novel about a young writer's descent into the inferno.

The movie begins with Jamie Conway (played by Michael J. Fox, looking all of 14 years old) staring at himself in a barroom mirror with an air of shell-shocked detachment: his wife has left him, his job is a drag and his Mephistophelian friend is tempting his soul with booze, women and the most noted of Bolivia's illegal exports.

To top it off, Jamie is struggling to come to grips with his mother's death. It's enough to turn anyone into a coma baby (the movie's apt but unsubtle metaphor). Jamie eventually exits the dreamscape of New York's party life. He stumbles out of a party, trades his sunglasses for

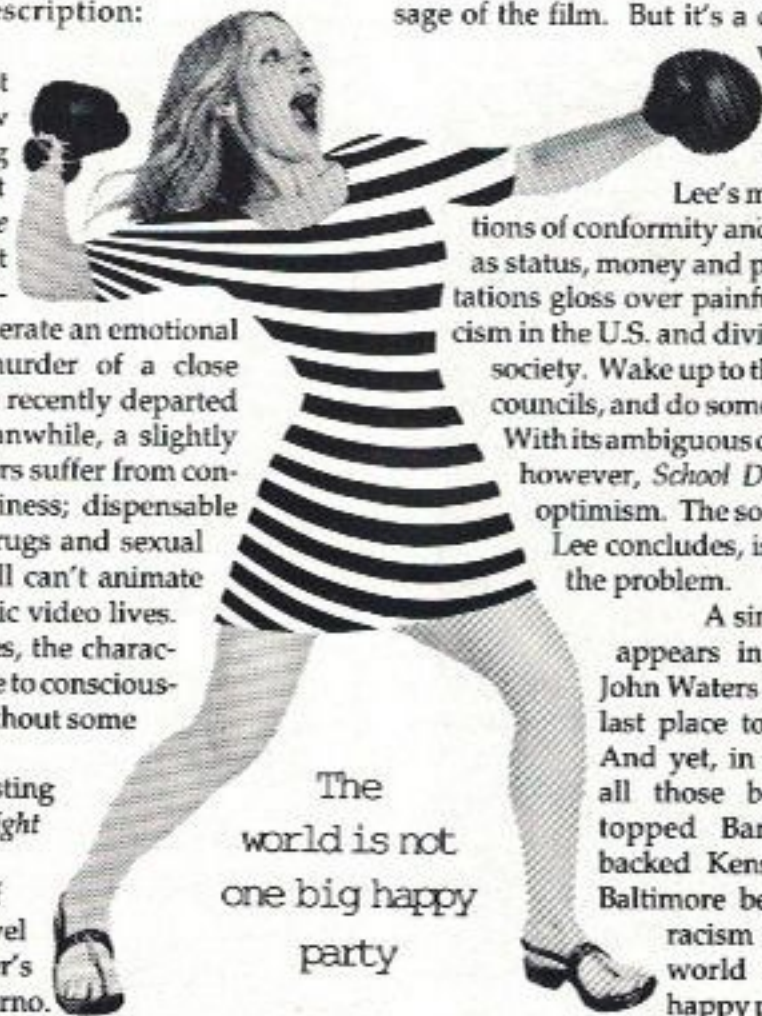
a loaf of fresh-baked bread, and watches the sun rise over the New York skyline, meditating on his new life.

What is implied in *Bright Lights* is explicit in *School Daze*, sometimes uncomfortably so—when for instance the entire *School Daze* cast joins together at the end to shout out the message of the film. But it's a daze of a different

variety that transfixes the students at the all-black college in Spike Lee's movie—the temptations of conformity and its residuals such as status, money and power. Such temptations gloss over painful realities like racism in the U.S. and divisions within black society. Wake up to these problems, Lee counsels, and do something about them. With its ambiguous dream-like ending, however, *School Daze* stops short of optimism. The solution to the Daze, Lee concludes, is just as elusive as the problem.

A similar wake-up call appears in the most recent John Waters film, probably the last place to expect morality. And yet, in *Hairspray*, amidst all those bouncy, bouffant-topped Barbies and slick-backed Kens bopping to the Baltimore beat, is a message: racism is immoral. The world is not one big happy party, Waters moralizes, when there is injustice in the world (this from the originator of "Odorama," one of the greatest cinematic injustices ever visited upon an audience). But Waters is surprisingly sensitive in *Hairspray*: his overweight female lead wages the successful battle for dance hall desegregation and it's a victory of the marginalized over the status quo.


When it comes to glorious dreams, there can be perhaps none grander than Bud Fox's in *Wall Street*. Fresh out of college, Bud has more money than he can spend and he's travelling with a fast crowd. One hitch, though: Bud's





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"Best of Philly"  
1987  
Lingerie Bargains

breaking the law through insider trading to get his extra dividends. The thrill of money and power fascinates Bud and pulls him astray. Director Oliver Stone, never one to pull a moral punch, eventually wakes Bud from his dream and makes him rectify his errors.

From film to film, the diagnoses vary. The younger generation's stupor results from societal and parental indifference (*River's Edge*), the lure of money (*Wall Street*), the solace of drugs (*Less Than Zero*, *Bright Lights*) or the comforts of conformity (*School Daze*, *Hairspray*). But each film offers a single redemptive, if slightly uninviting solution: leave the pleasurable dream worlds and face hard reality.

If this message sounds a little preachy, don't worry: the fortune cookie morals are short, sweet (if sometimes saccharine) and easy to skip over. Perhaps that explains why the most popular part of *School Daze* is not its call to consciousness but rather its show-piece tune "Da Butt." Ah, youth! ★



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