

If It's Coming of Age, It Must Be "Dazed and Confused"

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Long before the text on the screen tells you it's the summer of 1976 at the 2:50 mark of *Dazed and Confused* (1993), you know it's the 70s. Women wear their pants high, men wear their shirts loose, an orange Pontiac GTO cruises into the frame and Aerosmith croons on, "You're calling my name but I got to make clear / I can't say baby where I'll be in a year." There is a joint being rolled against the backdrop of a few dollar bills. It can't be any other decade.

Richard Linklater makes a film about the last day of school in 1976, in 1993. It is a nostalgia film and a coming-of-age film. In some ways, it is every Bildungsroman and in some ways, it is like no other. As is typical of any form of nostalgia, the film is a look back into the decade of the filmmaker's adolescence and it filters out everything unpleasant about the times being portrayed. But unlike most nostalgia-driven high school narratives, as seen in the works John Hughes, nothing big happens in *Dazed Confused*; it's a film about the small, non-dramatic things that make up the days of the lives of typical high-schoolers—there is no big reveal, no life-changing decision-making and no founding of a lifelong romance; just a bunch of teenagers who, in the words of the affable twenty-year-old loser who still hangs out with high school kids, Wooderson, "just gotta keep livin' man, L-I-V-I-N."

The characters in the film are smoking joints all the time, or being initiated into it, but none of them are inhabiting a "hippie bubble": they are all deeply connected to the larger world that lies beyond the summer break. Woodward, Bernstein and Deep Throat, all names that were added to the American vocabulary through the four years preceding the film's location in time, make an appearance in conversations between incoming seniors Mike, Tony and Benny. There is that beautiful term that Mike coins to support classmate Pink's decision to not sign an anti-drugs pledge his football coach has been forcing him to sign—Neo-McCarthyism. This at once establishes that the students know their history and, true to their 70s selves, have developed contrarian political views and zero tolerance for moral policing and surveillance. That is one of the biggest credits of the film: it is, at once, a film that could be taking place at any juncture of history, but also a film that could only be taking place in the 70s in a mostly-white American small town in Texas.

The girls discuss *Gilligan's Island* like the girls in my school discussed *Ally McBeal*, but this also lays the foundation of feminist thought in the high schooler Kaye who calls the show, "a male pornographic fantasy." Contextually, the Equal Rights Amendment had just become a reality in 1972 and 1976 saw widespread protests after the Congress cut off Medicaid funding for abortions. With the rise of Second Wave Feminism in the 70s as the backdrop, it is obvious that the hazing of female freshmen (freshwomen?) by seniors is

seen critically. Seniors Tony and Mike, denounce it by calling it degrading. It is also in the light of the movement that the unlikely friendship between the freshman, Sabrina, and senior, Jodi develops—a special camaraderie that goes beyond the dualities of the social roles of being freshman and senior.

Linklater is said to have spent most of the film's budget in acquiring the rights to the tracks he uses in the film's soundtrack. Curiously, while he sticks to every 70s cliché—marijuana, bell bottoms and big hoop earrings—he steers clear of disco. Instead, heavy metal and rock become the underlying narrator and, like a good radio station, play the right song in the right time through the events of the film. The opening song, "Sweet Emotion," works perfectly not just because it encapsulates everyone's typical 70s rebel ambitions of dressing different and talking different, it also deeply locates Pink and Wooderson as products of their time— they're big Aerosmith fans and getting tickets to their concert is admittedly Pink's top priority of the summer. A lot of the music the teenagers play in their car end up being a part of the soundtrack, which makes the foreground and background music of the film blend seamlessly into one another; when the senior O'Bannion and his cronies pursue the freshmen, in order to spank them with paddles, the car plays Black Oak Arkansas' "Jim Dandy," which goes, "Jim Dandy to the rescue! / Go, Jim Dandy! Go, Jim Dandy!" The ending, following Pink's (who is called that because his surname is Floyd) altercation with his coach, ends with "Slow Ride", which settles the tenor of the future that Pink and friends will face, or rather, want to face: " Slow ride, take it easy..."

While some things are beautifully specific about *Dazed and Confused*, some other things are also beautifully universal. I grew up in India through the 90s and there is very little common between Pink's world and mine. Yet, there is the bevy of high school characters each one of us has met; the jocks, the perpetual stoner, the brainy ones, the frivolous ones and, finally, the rebellious all-star student-sportsman who delights in his (often token) contrarian ways. And then there is the freshman underdog who, like Mitch, undergoes a rite of passage, and grows up overnight to muster enough courage to pay back bullies their own coin. By the end of the film, we are all rooting for Mitch as he stands up for himself and his friends, gets drunk, makes out with a sophomore girl and comes home very late and very drunk.

Our hearts swell with nostalgia when Pink declares, "all I'm saying is that if I ever start referring to these as the best years of my life, remind me to kill myself." We have all been there, said the same things and realized the naiveté of words like these. Right then Don chimes in, almost as a reminder to our nostalgic selves, like he just read our minds— "well, all I'm saying is that I want to look back and say that I did I the best I could while I was stuck in this place." We nod in agreement. And that's that; all our school lives summarized in one quiet scene (conspicuous by the absence of any heavy metal) where rebellious jocks sit on the football field and smoke up. We almost foresee them appreciating the worth of youth in retrospect, and the fact that, in spite of all that went awry, they survived their times and survived them in the best way they could. We smile and shake our heads

when they get drunk and philosophize, for we know that life will have its own ways to make them see the absolute ridiculousness of their existential dread, of standing there, in one of the world's most tumultuous decades, and saying, "the 70s obviously suck, maybe the 80s will be radical."

Dazed and Confused reminds us that the present always "obviously sucks" but as long as there is a bittersweet past to look back at and be nostalgic about, and a road ahead that takes us to summers of endless possibilities, life always will be quite "alright, alright, alright."