

## Richard Dyer, "In Defence of Disco" (1979)

by Luis-Manuel Garcia

"I have always listened to the wrong music," quips Richard Dyer in the introduction to his essay, "In Defence of Disco,"[1] in the British socialist gay journal, *Gay Left*. "Since I became a socialist, I've often felt virtually terrorised by the prestige of rock and folk on the left. How could I admit to two Petula Clark LPs [vinyl records] in the face of miners' songs from the North East and the Rolling Stones?"[2] His essay was part of a special issue of the journal devoted to the theme of "Personal Politics," featuring photo collages, drawings, book reviews (including a review of Foucault's newly-published *A History of Sexuality*), and articles ranging on topics from indecency laws and pedophilia to workplace discrimination and gay pacifism. Published in 1979, Dyer's essay appeared when disco was at the height of its international popularity: the film *Saturday Night Fever* had already exposed disco to a mainstream audience the year before; famous disco clubs like "Studio 54" (New York), "Trocadero Transfer" (San Francisco), and "The Embassy" (London), and "Heaven" (London) had all opened in the previous two years; and numerous television shows brought disco into the living rooms of families on both sides of the Atlantic (and elsewhere as well).

But why would disco need defending, if it was so popular at the time? As Dyer notes in the introduction to his essay, left-political activists and scholars criticized disco for its apparent endorsement of capitalism through materialism, its embeddedness in capitalist modes of music production, its apparently superficial and escapist utopianism, its lack of a clear and oppositional political message, its overweening emotionality, and its "inauthentic" musical aesthetics, which seemed to celebrate artifice and glossy studio production over the "authentic" sound of folk or rock music (much preferred by Dyer's peers). For many gay Marxists, it seemed, disco was an embarrassment.

Although Dyer devotes nearly half of his essay to a defense of disco based on a marxist-structuralist analysis of disco's relationship to the (capitalist) music industry, he devotes the other half to disco's emotional and affective dimensions. Whereas the first half of his article was a defense *against* certain accusations from the political left, the latter half argues *for* disco by pointing to what Dyer considers to be its "positive qualities" — to be found in disco's feelings rather than its overt politics. He insists that disco is not merely a musical genre, but rather a *sensibility*, with a whole culture of behavioral codes, aesthetics, styles of dance, texts, values, and embodied knowledge that give shape to this shared sensory orientation. To Dyer, part of what redeemed disco was its romantic investment in the extremes of emotion, which provided an affective basis for a form of utopian politics that was better suited to the life-worlds of marginalized queers.

Indeed, the participants in these nocturnal scenes found a great deal of redemptive and liberating potential in disco as a sensibility and a social-aesthetic practice. Since the emergence of "disco" music in early-1970s New York — and well beforehand in other contexts — the dance floor has been a potent symbol as well as a performative enactment of a world better than this one. The floors of dance venues have been repeatedly invoked by the denizens of nocturnal party-worlds as places of self-invention, experimentation, escape, comfort, refuge, transformation, connection, and communion. They are places where the injustices and indignities of everyday life can be not only temporarily relieved but to some extent redressed. Inasmuch as nightclub dance spaces can serve as rehearsal spaces for modes of being-together that are better, more just, more caring, more fulfilling, or simply less harmful, they are also spaces of utopianism. This is not to claim that all nightclubs are fully realized utopias — far from it — but rather that their dance floors are utopian in spirit: they provide concrete sites for the collective envisioning of a different kind of "good life."

This is by no means a new claim; from disco's twilight years onwards, one can follow a thread of cultural critics and scholars highlighting the utopian dimensions of the dance floor and the music that animates it. Appearing in print after the mainstream success of the disco-themed film *Saturday Night Fever*[3] and at a point when disco had saturated national and international media, Richard Dyer's essay argued for the political relevance of disco by pointing to its nearly successful mainstreaming of non-heteronormative eroticism, its subversion of rock/folk ideologies of naturalness and authenticity, its valorization of worldly pleasure without shame, its vision of a utopian "flight from banality" through romantic extremes of affect, and its role as a utopian refuge for sexual minorities. David Diebold, singer and producer of "Hi-NRG" disco, gave a similar account of gay dance clubs as utopian safe havens in his memoirs of San Francisco's club scenes.[4] By 1994, gay men's dance clubs were the subject of Foucault-inflected psychoanalysis, cast as spaces of music-driven discipline and radical self-fashioning.[5] Since then, a growing archive of memoirs, journalism, and scholarship has both extended and nuanced this account, often noting that these utopian spaces remain striated by hierarchies of beauty, coolness, fabulousness, masculinity, and wealth.[6]

## In Defence of Disco

by Richard Dyer

All my life I liked the young music I now label Ethno and rock 'n' roll; I always preferred Rosemary Clooney. And since I became a socialist, I've often felt mutually intrigued by the prairie of rock and folk on the left. How could I not? I grew up in the Midwest, and I've been particularly inspired by the folkies from the North East and the Rolling Stones? I screamed my nervelessly when I came to see show too-type music as a key part of gay culture, which, whatever its limitations, was a culture to defend. And I thought it really made a whole lot of sense. I'm a little bit of a hippie, I like the old-timey Charlestown already, and I like them! Yet the prairie of folk and rock, and now punk and (rather patronizingly, I think) reggae, still feels new. It's not just that people (except the hippies) don't know it, it's that it's new. It implies that it is politically beyond the pale to like it. It's against this attitude that I want to defend them (which, otherwise, of course, hardly needs any defense).

I'm going to talk mostly about *diào mǎn*, but there are two preliminary points I'd like to make. The first is that *diào* is more than just a form of music, although certainly the music is at the heart of it. *Diào* is also kinds of dancing, stunts, fashion, film etc. – in a word, a certain *sexuality* manifest in music, stunts etc., a heterotopia and culturally specific, economically, technologically, ideologically and aesthetically determined – and worthy of study. Secondly, as a sexuality in music it seems to me to encompass more than what we would perhaps strictly call *diào mǎn* to include a lot of soul, Tantra and even the later work of mainstream and jazz artists like Prince Lee and Johnny Mathis.

My defense is in two parts. First, a discussion of the arguments against discs in terms of its being 'capitalist music'. Second, an attempt to think through the — unambiguously, antagonistically, contradictorily — positive qualities of discs.

**Disco and Capital**

Much of the hostility to disco stems from the equation of it with capitalism. Both in how it is produced and in what it expresses, disco is held to be unendlessly capitalistic.

I show it is untenable to argue that firms are produced by capitalist industry and since capitalists are an institutional and infinite force of production, the *firm industry* is as fixed as all the rest. Of course. However, this argument has assumptions behind it that are more problematic. These are of two kinds. One assumes that capitalists *act* as a mode of production and that this mode of production is not itself fixed and that it is possible to have a capitalist society to produce things that are not stock and fishy that are outside of the capitalist mode of production. Yet quite apart from the general point that such a position seeks to renege *apart* from ensuring structures rather than struggles against them, the two kinds of modes of production are not mutually exclusive as a mode of production are not really confusing.

One of folk music – in this country, people might point to Gaelic songs and industrial ballads – was the kind of music often used, or co-opted, as left fringe theatre. There, it is argued, are not, like disco (and pop music) in general, pushed for the people but by them. They are 'authentic' people's music. But in this case, they are not. The problem is that the folk live in a society where, at best, they are a simple, communities such as produce such art. Preserving such music at best gives us a historical perspective on peasant and working class struggle, at worst leads to a nostalgia for a hoped-for socialist future.

More broadly, years on Gaelic or dealing with nineteenth century factory conditions, beautiful as they are, don't mean much to most English speaking people today

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[illegible]

The second kind of argument based on the fact that *doom* is produced by capitalism concerns *major* or *ideological* *experiences*. Here it is assumed that capitalism as a mode of production necessarily and simply produces 'capitalist' ideology. The theory of the relation between the mode of production and the ideological superstructure is thus more complicated and untrivial to be gone into here, but we can begin by emphasizing that capitalism is about profit. In the language of classical economics, capitalism produces commodities, and its interest in commodities is threefold: value (how much profit they can realize) (after this, the commodity is sold), utility (how much it can be used for) and beauty (how much it can be enjoyed for). The becomes particularly problematic for capitalism when dealing with an expressive commodity — such as *doom* — since a

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Notably, most of these analyses have focused on the nightlife scenes of marginalized groups — especially where such identities intersect, such as the primarily queer black and Latino crowds of the New York disco scene.

In many ways, the disco era has come represent a sort of utopia located in the past instead of the future. Through the foggy lens of nostalgia, the downtown Manhattan disco scene of the 1970s has served as a utopian point of reference for subsequent generations of dance music. The reality, however, was much more complex; indeed, some of the earliest disco events evinced the fragility and ephemerality of queer utopian spaces. For example, *Rolling Stone* journalist Vince Aletti located the budding disco scene in "juice bars, after-hours clubs, private lofts open on weekends to members only, floating groups of party-givers who take over the ballrooms of old hotels from midnight to dawn"[7] — that is, in venues and events that skirted the grey areas of nightlife licensing in Manhattan, thriving for a short time in the interstices of the institutionalized nightlife economy. For example, Tim Lawrence describes how the organizers of David Mancuso's legendary members-only club, The Loft, instituted a light-based warning system to protect against police raids, with different colors of light turning on in the DJ booth to indicate when a police car drove nearby, stopped, or officers began to climb the stairs to the Loft.[8]

It was only some time later in the 1970s, after "The Loft" had closed at its initial location, that New York's disco scene developed a degree of institutional stability and durability through its integration into the local entertainment economy. The earliest example was probably Nicky Siano's "The Gallery", although "Studio 54" remains the largest and most well-known from this era. Aletti was struck by the social mixing at these early disco clubs, describing them as "completely mixed, racially and sexually, where there wasn't any sense of someone being more important than someone else".[9] This utopian disco diversity was also a prominent theme in many disco hits — particularly those that were heavily influenced by gospel and soul — such as O'Jays' "Love Train"[10] or Sister Sledge's "We Are Family,"[11] both of which feature lyrics that invite listeners/dancers to join a community bound together by affect and music rather than through existing social structures.

But despite these utopian (and nostalgic) visions of open and egalitarian belonging, systems of exclusion were part of the disco scene from the very beginning. In the form of members-only policies, these were initially justified as self-protective and legally necessary — particularly for unlicensed venues — but later this turned into a form of elitist social curatorship, selecting and excluding people based on beauty, celebrity, glamour, and social connections.[12] This is a stark reminder that, while utopias may feel inclusive and egalitarian, they are often created, maintained, and shaped through exclusions and hierarchies of coolness.

From then on, disco saw a rapid rise in popularity, spilling over into mainstream discotheques, gaining national and international radio play, and attracting a growing audience of white, heterosexual, middle-class dance music fans. This period saw the opening of purpose-built disco clubs such as "Studio 54" (1977) and "Paradise Garage" (1976) in New York, as well as the "End-Up" (1973) and the "Trocadero Transfer" (1977) in San Francisco. This was also when some of disco's most emblematic artists launched their careers, including Donna Summer, The Bee Gees, KC and The Sunshine Band, and Chic. The 1977 release of the film *Saturday Night Fever*, is frequently cited as the apex of disco's popularity — as well as the beginning of its decline. Starring John Travolta and directed by John Badham, the film repackaged the disco scene for a mainstream American audience, largely underplaying the participation of queers of color while presenting a more palatable personification of disco for mainstream audiences by displacing the genre's queer Black and Latino/a associations with a heterosexual, Italian-American, and fair-skinned protagonist.

At the same time, disco recordings began to flood the music market, as major record labels saw a lucrative opportunity for their catalogue of extended-play (EP) "singles." Non-disco artists began to record "crossover" disco songs and include disco remixes on the B-sides of their EP releases, while disco "cover bands" and studio producers created "disco-fied" versions of popular rock and pop songs. By the end of the decade, disco's soundtrack to queer utopian nightlife worlds had been thoroughly commercialized, commodified, and sanitized, such that the erotic and affective contexts of its development were largely invisible to consumers — or at least rendered easier to ignore.

Although opposition to disco in some quarters emerged at the same time as disco itself, it converged into a widespread backlash during the period following the release of *Saturday Night Fever*. The film apparently did not succeed in sanitizing disco's image, seemingly unable to relieve America's mainstream music consumers of their queasiness regarding disco's queer, racialized origins. Indeed, the battle cry of disco's opponents, "Disco sucks," was not just metaphorical: it aimed to make explicit the association between disco and the "cock-sucking fags" that loved it.[13] Some black artists and audiences also rejected disco, seeing in its sensual femininity, queer ambiguity, and ecstatic artifice a white corruption of Black American musical traditions such as R&B, soul, and funk [14]; ironically, New York's Black discos would later serve as some of the first venues for early hip-hop events.[15]

It is on the eve of this anti-disco backlash that Dyer wrote his essay "In Defence of Disco". Dyer sought to rehabilitate disco's reputation in the context of its mainstream cultural saturation (and market saturation), rising criticism of it from various political factions, and growing resentment from other parts of the music industry. Writing in the British political magazine, *Gay Left*, Dyer defended disco to his readers and political peers, who had increasingly critiqued disco for its sentimentalism, crass materialism, and lack of a clear political message (like "folk" or "punk" music of the same era, for example). In addition to refuting claims of

capitalist cooptation, Dyer identified three "redeeming" qualities in disco: 1) a whole-body eroticism that contrasts to the disembodied eroticism of popular song (e.g., Cole Porter's stage musicals) and the phallic eroticism of rock; 2) a utopian romanticism; 3) and a very realist materialism.

Disco's romanticism is of particular interest here, in that Dyer looked beyond the lyrics to the musical texture of disco to find an aesthetic figuration of emotional intensity. For example, Dyer highlighted the frequent use of "massed violins" in disco (i.e., large numbers of violins playing in unison and/or octaves), which "takes us straight back, via Hollywood, to Tchaikovsky, to surging, outpouring emotions".[16] He mentioned Gloria Gaynor's "I've Got You Under My Skin" (1976) and Diana Ross's "Reach Out" (1978) and "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" (1970) as examples of this "ecstatic, soaring movement" in disco's orchestration, which he characterizes as an "escape from the confines of popular song into ecstasy".[17] Notably, Dyer seems to equate emotional excesses with the rupture and overflowing of socio-cultural boundaries.

In disco's soaring melodic lines, "heavenly" choirs, sweeping unison violins, and emotive voices Dyer located an expression of "the intensity of fleeting emotional contacts," which celebrate these emotional encounters while also including "a recognition of the (inevitably) temporary quality of the experience".[18] He observed that these musical-emotional expressions need not be euphoric — in that many disco songs explore the negative side of emotional intensity (such as abandonment or betrayal by a romantic partner) — but he nonetheless described most disco songs of this type as "both a celebration of a relationship and the almost willing recognition of its passing and the exquisite pain of its passing".[19] Dyer associated this particular emotional trope of romantic impermanence with vocalist Diana Ross, suggesting that these themes partially explain her importance in "the gay male scene culture," in that "she both reflects what that culture takes to be an inevitable reality (that relationships don't last) and at the same time celebrates it, validates it".[20] At a time when gay sex was still illegal in most states and long-term same-sex relationships had no legal recognition (as marriage or civil unions), this romantic celebration of the fleeting emotional encounter had urgent political implications.

Dyer also argued for the political relevance of disco's hyper-emotionality in general, arguing that,

*Its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday. It gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and experiential capacities — not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life. Given that everyday banality, work, domesticity, ordinary sexism and racism, are rooted in the structures of class and gender of this society, the flight from that banality can be seen as — is — a flight from capitalism and patriarchy themselves as lived experiences.[21]*

In conjuring up an alternate world of emotional plenitude, then, disco's romanticism can hold open "the gap between what is and what could or should be"[22], between the banality of alienated life and the affective heights of something that exceeds it — in other words, a utopian space.

In an earlier essay in the film journal *Movie*, Dyer [23] argued that much of popular American entertainment is pointedly utopian in its outlook; but instead of attempting to present a realistic model of how utopia would function (like in classic utopian treatises or fictional literature), entertainment tends to convey something about how utopia would *feel*. Working from an archive of American movie-musicals, Dyer compiled a catalogue of the feelings that these films highlight (i.e., energy, abundance, intensity, transparency, and community), suggesting that these constituted the affective imaginary of utopia for mid-century movie-musical audiences. He also related these feelings to a corresponding set of opposing, negative feelings (scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation), which he traced to several concrete problems that were very real and very urgent for Americans during that period. In this sense, American movie-musicals were not merely escapist, "abstract" utopian films; rather, they gave shape to American fears and dissatisfactions in inverted form. Furthermore, Dyer rightly points out that utopian world-building also shapes the terms of political action; that is, it highlights certain issues and ignores others. So, for example, American musicals foreground scarcity/abundance and transparency/manipulation, but ignore other political categories like class, gender, and race.

Given their layered spatialities, interstitial sites, and fleeting materializations, disco's dancefloors could be perhaps described as *heterotopias* [24] instead of utopias, but their cultural aesthetics, imaginaries, and aspirations remain utopian in orientation. At disco events — as well as the "house," "techno," and "rave" events that would follow in the 1980s and 1990s — music and dance provided sensory-affective relays between the practice of partying together and the sense of belonging to something larger than oneself, however incoherent or vague that "something" may be. For Dyer, the sound of disco itself communicated something essential about how such a utopia would feel: imbued with full-bodied eroticism, grounded in the material difficulties of (marginalized, minoritized) life under capitalism, and yet also charged with extremes of emotion that burst out from the routines of everyday, working life.

[1] Richard Dyer, "In Defense of Disco," *Gay Left* 8, Summer (1979).

[2] Dyer, "Defence", 20.

- [3] John Badham, dir., *Saturday Night Fever*. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1977.
- [4] David Diebold, *Tribal Rites: San Francisco's Dance Music Phenomenon, 1978-1988* (Northridge, CA: Time Warp, 1988).
- [5] Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 147-57.
- [6] Stephen Amico, "'I Want Muscles': House Music, Homosexuality and Masculine Signification," *Popular Music* 20, no. 3: 359-78; Idem, "Su Case Es Mi Casa: Latin House, Sexuality, Place," in *Queering the Popular Pitch*, Sheila Whiteley and Jennifer Rycenga, ed. (New York: Routledge), 131-51; Jonathan Bollen, "Queer Kinesthesia: Performativity on the Dance Floor," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, Jane Desmond, ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 285-314; Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Kane Race, "The Death of the Dance Party," *Australian Humanities Review* 30, online issue; Ramón Rivera-Servera, "Choreographies of Resistance: Latina/o Queer Dance and the Utopian Performative," *Modern Drama* 47, no. 2: 269-89.
- [7] Vince Aletti, "Discotheque Rock '72: Paaaaarty!," *Rolling Stone*, September 13.
- [8] Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 83-84.
- [9] Vince Aletti, "Vince Aletti Interviewed," in *The Disco Files 1973-78: New York's Underground, Week by Week*, Frank Broughton and Bill Brewster, ed. (London: DJhistory.com), 455.
- [10] The O'Jays, "Love Train," *Philadelphia International Records* ZS8-3754, vinyl, 7", 1972.
- [11] Sister Sledge, "We Are Family," *Cotillion* 44251, vinyl, 7", 1979.
- [12] Madison Alexander Moore, "Looks: Studio 54 and the Production of Fabulous Nightlife," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 1: 61-74.
- [13] Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2: 276-306; Nadine Hubbs, "'I Will Survive': Musical Mapping of Queer Social Space in a Disco Anthem," *Popular Music* 26, no. 2: 231-44; Walter Hughes, "In the Empire of the Beat: Discipline and Disco," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 147-57; Carolyn Krasnow, "Fear and Loathing in the 70s: Race, Sexuality and Disco," *Stanford Humanities Review* III, no. 2 (1993): 37-45; Frank Rose, "Discophobia: Rock & Roll Fights Back," *Village Voice* 12 November (1979): 36-7.
- [14] Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton); Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); Frank, "Discophobia".
- [15] Murray Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).
- [16] Dyer, "Defence", 22.
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Ibid, 23.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Ibid.
- [23] Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie* 24: 2-13.
- [24] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22-7.

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