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Jaap Kooijman

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# Turn the beat around

## *Richard Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' revisited*

**Jaap Kooijman**
*University of Amsterdam*

ABSTRACT Published in 1979, Richard Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' is one of the best-read but relatively little-used essays in pop music studies, queer studies and cultural studies. With his essay, not only does Dyer demystify the 'authenticity' of music genres such as folk and rock, but also validates and celebrates the inauthenticity of disco by recognizing its political potential. This review article revisits Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' and subsequently discusses those few academic works that do build upon and expand his original arguments, proving the significance of this radical essay.

KEYWORDS *AIDS, authenticity, disco, eroticism, gay identity, materialism, queer studies, romanticism*

**'Discophobia', reads the** headline of a 1979 New York *Village Voice* article, followed by the line 'Rock & Roll Fights Back'. The article reports on the then recent disco backlash, better known as the 'Disco Sucks' movement, which reached its climax on 12 July 1979 during the intermission between two baseball games at the Chicago Comiskey Park. Led by DJ Steve Dahl, thousands of predominantly white male rock fans trashed more than 10,000 disco albums, allegedly because they detested the mindlessness and repetitiveness of this 'plastic' music genre that had become dominant on American radio (Rose, 1979). However, as Carolyn Krasnow notes:

> [S]uch a violent reaction is not just a matter of aesthetic disagreement; underlying the anti-disco sentiment was a fundamental distrust of subcultural production by 'others'. As a loosely defined genre coming out of gay, Black and Hispanic communities, disco stood very much outside of the predominantly White, heterosexual male-oriented rock culture of the time. (1993: 37)

The Disco Sucks movement was indeed marked by some degree of homophobia, as the reference to fellatio obviously implies: cocksuckers love disco. No other pop music genre than disco, before or after, has been bashed so aggressively and no other pop music genre has ever been announced dead.

One of the first and best defences of disco was not written in response to the Disco Sucks movement. Although published at the same time as the disco backlash in the United States was at its peak, the British scholar Richard Dyer wrote his essay 'In Defence of Disco' as a response to his fellow gay socialists of the London Gay Left Collective, who may well have loved dancing to disco, but who perceived disco itself as a product of capitalist ideology and therefore found such an indulgence politically inappropriate. Dyer does not deny disco's capitalist origins, yet he does recognize its political potential, not so much in its production but in its reception. 'Capitalism constructs the disco experience, but it does not necessarily know what it is doing, apart from making money' (Dyer, 2002[1992]: 153). Rather than denouncing disco as a mere product of capitalism, Richard Dyer defends it by showing how its key characteristics – eroticism, romanticism and materialism – enable gay men to construct an alternative basis for subjectivity and community in the disco experience, thereby opening up space for the creation of gay identities subversive to dominant heterosexual society.

Like many of his other essays, Richard Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' reads almost like a personal account about life. References to Dyer's own pleasure in disco, his musicological and political savvy and the somewhat idiosyncratic corpus of disco songs offered as examples, make the essay an intimate read. Yet one should not be fooled by the accessible and personal style in which 'In Defence of Disco' is written; the essay is a radical appeal to rethink the qualities of disco itself and to come up with strategies to gain wider recognition for its merits and political potential. Dyer analyses how disco's key characteristics 'take us to qualities that are not only key ambiguities in gay male culture, but have also traditionally proved stumbling blocks to socialists' (2002[1992]: 154). The ambiguities in gay male culture refer, first, to investing in disco's refusal of the phallic logic of rock in favour of 'whole body eroticism' and second, to the contradiction of disco's celebration and validation of romantic but fleeting relationships in the knowledge that they will not last. Traditionally, socialists may have not been bothered much with the eroticism or romanticism of intimate relationships; thinking about materialism in a slightly too intellectualized way turns disco's qualities into stumbling blocks. As Richard Dyer suggests, gay culture, disco and socialism should be able to unite over disco's romantic and utopian promise to rethink the conditions of materialism in capitalist society. Disco offers a learning experience which accepts and invites ambiguity and contradiction. Moreover, while undoubtedly capitalist, disco may be used also for building gay, lesbian and queer communities,

demonstrated concretely in the way in which disco is used in non-commercial and self-organized dance parties or even academic conferences.[1]

Being a master of irony and contradiction himself, Richard Dyer should be able to appreciate what happened to disco and to his own remarkable essay over the past 25 years. Disco, while declared dead, proves to be very much alive; while 'In Defence of Disco' (one of the best-read essays in cultural studies, republished several times) has found relatively little intellectual following (notable exceptions are discussed below). Disco never really died but went 'underground' and reappeared in music genres such as Hi-NRG, house and urban dance. In mainstream culture, disco has become retro, a nostalgic sign of the 1970s, that decade of glitter and glamour, huge Afros, platform-soled shoes and disco balls, revived in films like *54* (1998) and *The Last Days of Disco* (1998); in music videos by Madonna ('Deeper and Deeper' and 'Music'), the Pet Shop Boys ('New York City Boy') and Kylie Minogue ('Your Disco Needs You'); and on stage in shows such as *Saturday Night Fever: The Musical*. In addition and specifically for gay men, disco has become a nostalgic sign of the post-Stonewall liberated gay dance culture, before the coming of AIDS, when homosexual men finally could be, as Valentino sang in 1975, 'happy, carefree and gay'. The political potential of disco that Dyer recognized in 1979 has been made visible in short films that use disco as a sign and soundtrack of those innocent pre-AIDS times, including *(Tell Me Why) The Epistemology of Disco* (1991), *The Dead Boys' Club* (1992) and *Paradisco* (2002). The 25th anniversaries of disco's 'Declaration of Death' and Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' – and in light of disco's continuing cultural presence – call for a revisiting of Dyer's essay against the background of how disco has been discussed in cultural studies since.

## 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)'

First published in the journal of the London Gay Left Collective *Gay Left* (Summer 1979), 'In Defence of Disco' was reprinted in Richard Dyer's essay collection *Only Entertainment* (2002[1992]) and in the anthologies *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word* (Frith and Goodwin, 1990), *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Creekmur and Doty, 1995) and *The Faber Book of Pop* (Kureishi and Savage, 1995). Its inclusion in these widely-used anthologies ensured that many in both pop music and queer studies are familiar with Dyer's arguments. However, only a minority in the academic works that have been written on disco since continue Dyer's line of argument. Important discussions of disco by Carolyn Krasnow (1993), Kai Fikentscher (2000) and Alice Echols (2002) do not mention Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' at all, while works by Brian Ward (1998), Ulf Poschardt (1998), Mark Butler (2003), Tim Lawrence (2003) and myself (Kooijman, 2004), merely refer to Dyer's essay to emphasize the importance of disco in 1970s gay male

urban dance cultures. The exceptions are essays by Walter Hughes (1994) and Paul Burston (1995) and the book *Discographies* (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999), all of which use 'In Defence of Disco' as an invitation to explore further the ambiguities and political potential of disco.

Despite Richard Dyer's essay and the work published since, disco's superficiality – its frivolousness and repetitiveness, its emphasis on bodily pleasure, its promiscuous and hedonistic lifestyle of sex, drugs and dance and its association with male homosexuality – continues to make it difficult for scholars and the general public to take disco seriously. Much of this persistent difficulty is based on the distinction between the 'authenticity' of music genres such as folk and rock, as opposed to the 'inauthenticity' of disco. Richard Dyer demystifies this distinction by pointing out that, like disco and other forms of commercial pop music, folk and rock are products of capitalism and that the ascribed sense of authenticity of those genres as music 'made for the people, by the people' only works in juxtaposition to inauthentic music such as disco. In other words, disco needs to be recognized as inauthentic to mystify and romanticize folk and rock as authentic. Although not explicitly mentioned by Dyer, rock's notion of authenticity is reinforced by the emphasis on artistic authorship and the construction of the rock album as art object which transforms the (white male) rock artist into an 'auteur', providing rock with an 'aura' that elevates it from being merely a product of capitalist mass culture (Echols, 2002; Krasnow, 1993). With the notable exception of several disco hits by African-American disco divas such as Gloria Gaynor's 'I Will Survive' (1978), Sister Sledge's 'We Are Family' (1979) and Diana Ross's 'I'm Coming Out' (1980), which can be seen clearly as strong expressions of black, female and gay self-affirmation, disco in general is less focused on the identity of the performers or the songs they sing. Disco's 'meaning' is not so much contained within the song as an artistic expression by an 'auteur'. Rather it is the disco experience created by the pulsating beat, the DJ and the dancers on the dance floor and the sensibility that disco provides, which makes disco such a special boundary-defying cultural practice.

At this point, it should be recognized that in its production disco has not been a particularly liberating music genre. As several scholars, including Sue Steward and Sheryl Garratt (1984), Nelson George (1988) and Ricky Vincent (1996), point out, the use of black female vocalists by predominantly white male producers has been perceived, with reason, as the exploitation of black female sexuality. Also, because of its commercial success, record companies pressured both female and male African-American performers into recording disco. This meant that black music was reduced to disco, which can be interpreted as a depolitization of 'the' black voice. While black funk artists of the early 1970s often explicitly addressed the socio-economic and political situation of African-Americans in the inner cities, by the mid-1970s they found themselves limited to singing about the physical pleasures of getting down on the dance floor.

Moreover, after disco became a huge commercial success during the second half of the 1970s, white artists such as Kiss, Barbra Streisand, the Rolling Stones and Rod Stewart were taking over disco. It is more than ironic that, with the *Saturday Night Fever* movie and soundtrack (1977), disco, most often associated with blackness, gayness and femininity, became embodied by three Australian straight white men, the Bee Gees. The argument that disco may have us experience ambiguity and contradiction may well include such harsh political realities. However, often these realities are held against disco and are welded with the argument that other segments of the music industry are governed by less capitalist logics that celebrate romantic, and even naive, notions of authorship and 'authentic' cultural production.

Two recent essays, for example, reinforce this distinction in terms of the authenticity of rock and the inauthenticity of disco, even if they do so in significantly different ways. In her essay on the 1970s white female singers Carole King and Carly Simon, Judy Kutulas (2003) places the positive image of the white female singer/songwriter in opposition to the negative image of the black disco diva as merely the embodiment of a male heterosexual and sexist fantasy. Although recognizing that disco songs such as 'I Will Survive' could empower women, Kutulas concludes that 'the power that women identified with in disco was a glamorous substitute for substantive economic or political power' (2003: 191). Here Kutulas falls into the trap exposed by Dyer more than two decades earlier, as she ascribes power to the 1970s female singer/songwriter – merely suggesting the authenticity of authorship – by emphasizing the inauthenticity of disco as a heterosexual male product.

In 'Taking It Seriously', Mark Butler analyses two songs by the Pet Shop Boys, both cover versions: U2's 'Where The Streets Have No Name' (1991, original version 1987) and the Village People's 'Go West' (1993, original version 1979). Butler argues that with their cover of 'Where The Streets Have No Name', the Pet Shop Boys undermine the authenticity traditionally ascribed to rock by using technology more openly and by mixing the song with 'Can't Take My Eyes Off You'. More significant is Butler's argument that with their cover version of the disco classic 'Go West', the Pet Shop Boys create authenticity for the disco genre. Rather than turning 'Go West' into 'a kitschy reminder of an embarrassing era', the Pet Shop Boys re-emphasize its longing for freedom and gay liberation and thus present 'Go West' as 'an authentic expression of an important musical and cultural tradition' (2003: 13). Butler ascribes authenticity to disco by perceiving the Pet Shop Boys as 'auteurs' who return to the 'roots' of a specifically gay male culture and continue its traditions, which means to Butler that disco 'should be taken seriously after all' (2003: 15).

Thus, although quite differently, both Judy Kutulas and Mark Butler reinforce the distinction between the authenticity of rock and the inauthenticity of disco. In this regard it is hopeful that Butler shows how this

distinction can be undermined, not only by demystifying rock but also, ironically, by mystifying disco. However, what Richard Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' teaches us – or better, taught us way back in 1979 – is that one does not need to make disco 'authentic' to take it seriously. Rather and similar to camp ('another profoundly ambiguous aspect of male gay culture'; Dyer, 2002[1992]: 153), the political potential of disco lies in the recognition, validation and celebration of its artificiality and inauthenticity.

## 'I Love To Love You Baby'

To understand how disco's political potential works, Richard Dyer focuses on two of its qualities that make disco distinctively important to gay men: its whole body eroticism and its romanticism. Unlike the popular song genre, which tends to deny the physical aspect of romance and unlike the physical though cock-oriented rock music genre, disco provides a more open and bodily experience, with a strong emphasis on rhythm and dance. Disco neither disembodies eroticism nor reduces it to the centrality of the penis. This openness of whole body (*including* the penis) eroticism creates space for more diverse sexual identities. Disco's romanticism is expressed through the use of violins and lyrics that emphasize the fleeting character of (physical) love. Dyer singles out two Diana Ross songs, 'Remember Me' (1970) and 'Touch Me In The Morning' (1973), as examples of 'both a celebration of a relationship and the almost willing recognition of its passing and the exquisite pain of its passing' (2002[1992]: 157). The importance of disco's romanticism, however, is not limited to the celebration and validation of the notion that relationships do not last. As Dyer argues, it enables the experience of contradiction in daily life and its materiality, thereby opening up space for the formation of (gay) identities, or even communities, which are subversive to dominant culture. Dyer does not advocate a single essentialist gay male identity, nor does he deny that gay men can be even more cock-oriented than straight male rockers. Instead he shows that the gay disco experience, and in particular its whole body eroticism, 'allows us to rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materiality and the possibility of change' (2002[1992]: 159).

While Dyer merely suggests that disco could function as a gay community builder, in his essay on 'Discipline and Disco' (1994), Walter Hughes perceives disco as a key element in the construction of the 1970s post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS urban gay male identity, both as an image to make male homosexuality visible to the outside world, as well as a disciplinary mould for gay men within this urban gay male culture. Like Dyer, Hughes emphasizes that the importance of disco to gay men is based on those elements that are easily dismissed by mainstream straight culture, with its pulsating beat and the desire that it embodies being the most significant. Criticism of disco music and its lifestyle, either aesthetically or socially, tends to focus on the repetitive beat as the sign of disco's emptiness,

frivolousness and inauthenticity. However, as Hughes argues, 'disco is less a decadent indulgence than a disciplinary, regulatory discourse that paradoxically permits, even creates a form of freedom' (1994: 148). Disco enables both 'the destruction and the re-creation of the self', providing gay men with a space to form and express their sexual identity by surrendering to the beat and becoming enslaved by the rhythm.

Similar to Dyer's argument of disco's whole body eroticism and its physical experience of materialism, Hughes perceives being disciplined by the disco beat as a bodily experience in which gay men are transformed into 'man-machines' or 'dancing machines' (an 'artificial' identity comparable to Donna Haraway's cyborg), thereby freeing themselves from the 'natural' category of 'man' as prescribed by heterosexual culture. Moreover, this new gay male identity (often negatively described as 'clone') is based also on gay male identification with the African-American disco diva. Here it is significant to note that, although Dyer does not make this connection explicitly, the majority of the disco songs he mentions are songs by African-American disco divas, including Gloria Gaynor, Diana Ross, Grace Jones and Donna Summer. Walter Hughes explains this connection partially by disco's celebration of whole body eroticism and specifically the suggestion of endless female multiple orgasms in disco hits such as Donna Summer's 'Love To Love You Baby' (1975) and 'I Feel Love' (1977) and Diana Ross's 'Love Hangover' (1976). More significantly, Hughes argues that, although the (often white) male gay identification with (mostly straight) black women is ambiguous and perhaps even exploitative, disco enables the negotiation and re-creation of both gay male and black female identity, making 'visible all the various subject positions between these previously polarized identities' (1994: 153). In other words, gay male identification with African-American disco divas and their songs exposes the ambiguities and contradictions of disco, as well as its political potential. As Hughes concludes:

> The identity that disco offers is sustained by the beat and its twin, desire; it could conceivably go on forever, like our dancing, if the music is right, but it will never be permanent, fixed or naturalized. Therein lies the freedom disco constructs out of our subordination to it. (1994: 154)

In *Discographies* (1999), Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson expand on this notion of a non-fixed identity by taking 'In Defence of Disco' as an invitation to deconstruct the gender binary in music, dance music in particular: 'Rather than positing a *feminine* music which would simply *reverse* the privilege granted to masculine forms by phallogocentric discourse, Dyer presents the possibility of a music which would deconstruct the opposition between masculinity and femininity' (1999: 101). Gilbert and Pearson connect Dyer's argument to the feminist and queer work of Judith Butler, who challenges the marginalization of women and queers by effectively exposing and deconstructing the categories and binary

oppositions (masculine/feminine, straight/gay) that keep us marginalized. The argument made by both Dyer and Hughes that disco, through the whole bodily experience of materialism, provides a space to recreate identities can be taken a step further. As Gilbert and Pearson argue:

> If the body in its very materiality is an effect of repeated practices of which the experience of music is one, then we can say that what a music like disco can offer is a mode of actually rematerializing the body in terms which confound the gender binary. (1999: 102)

In other words, disco may not merely provide the space for the recreation of gay male (and black female) identities, but potentially also for the deconstruction of all identities defined along the lines of straight and gay, male and female. In this way, the political potential of disco as recognized by 'In Defence of Disco' is no longer limited to gay male identity politics, as disco may prove to be more than a boundary-defying cultural practice; disco may be a boundary-destroying cultural practice.

## 'So Many Men, So Little Time'

Richard Dyer wrote 'In Defence of Disco' just before the public awareness of the AIDS epidemic, which – tragically – had a devastating impact on gay male urban culture and which also changed the perspective on disco. Both Walter Hughes and Paul Burston have shown that not only are disco and AIDS connected, but that the AIDS epidemic gave disco a harsh new meaning. In his essay 'I Will Survive', Paul Burston poses the rhetorical question:

> Can it really be a coincidence . . . that disco was proclaimed dead at precisely the same time that AIDS began making headlines? (1995: 176)

With the coming of AIDS, disco songs such as Gloria Gaynor's 'Never Can Say Goodbye' (1974) and 'I Will Survive' (1978), Diana Ross's 'Love Hangover' (1976, which includes the line: 'If there's a cure for this, I don't want it'), Thelma Houston's 'Don't Leave Me This Way' (1976), Paul Jabara's 'Heaven Is A Disco' (1977), Donna Summer's 'Last Dance' (1978) and Miguel Brown's 'So Many Men, So Little Time' (1983), among many others, no longer merely expressed the whole body eroticism of the disco experience, but also became – just as bodily – expressions of grief and mourning. In retrospect, AIDS also changed the meaning of 'In Defence of Disco', as the recognition of disco's ambiguities and contradictions, as well as its political potential, became explicit through the AIDS crisis and subsequent gay political activism.

The AIDS epidemic also forces us to recognize the distinction between, on the one hand, the re-emergence of disco in mainstream culture as a fashionable sign of the 1970s as an era of hedonistic retro fun and, on the other, the use of disco as a sign of the innocent gay male culture before the

arrival of AIDS. The recognition of disco's change of meaning caused by the AIDS epidemic seems limited to the reception by gay men. As Paul Burston states: 'In that subtle shift of meaning – from romance to mourning – there lies the critical difference between 1970s revivalism and 1970s survivalism' (1995: 179). In other words, what appears to be merely a fashionable revivalism to mainstream culture is highly invested with political meaning to gay male culture. In this way, it is tempting to perceive disco in gay male culture after the coming of AIDS as the materialization of its political potential as recognized by Dyer, while the revival of disco by mainstream culture seems to be merely a depoliticized and dequeered appropriation.

However, such a perspective would miss an important lesson that Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' teaches us, namely that the political potential of disco can be found in its inauthenticity and materialism, even when appropriated by mainstream culture. AIDS has not made disco political, but merely made visible the political potential that was there within disco all along. As Richard Dyer wrote in 1979:

> Disco can't change the world, make the revolution. No art can do that and it is pointless expecting it to. But partly by opening up experience, partly by changing definitions, art, disco, can be used. To which one might risk adding the refrain – If it feels good, *use* it. (2002[1992]: 159)

And that revolutionary call, after more than two decades, still rings true today.

## Note

1. In October 2004, I attended the 'Sylvester: The Life and Work of a Musical Icon' conference, organized by New York University. Sylvester, who died of AIDS in 1988, was an openly gay, African-American, male disco queen best known for his hit singles 'You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)' (1978) and 'Do You Wanna Funk?' (1982). The conference, including the musical tribute to Sylvester during the final evening, proved to be a stimulating mixture of academia and queer community building. Special thanks to Joke Hermes for her critical and insightful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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## Biographical note

Jaap Kooijman is Assistant Professor of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam. His research primarily focuses on the appropriation of American popular culture in Dutch cultural production (film, television, pop music). His writings on American politics and popular culture have been published in *The Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, *Post Script*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Studies in International Education* and *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (for more information, see http://www.jaapkooijman.nl). ADDRESS: Department of Media and Culture, University of Amsterdam, Turfdraagsterpad 9, 1012 XT Amsterdam, the Netherlands. [email: J.W.Kooijman@uva.nl]