

More than a Woman: Becoming-woman on the disco floor

(This was written for the collection *Female Consequences*, published in Germany. Some of the material here appears in a longer essay on Richard's Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' the journal *New Formations*, London: Lawrence & Wishart).

1977: The Bee-Gees, a trio of straight, white, bearded falsetti, break chart records and break disco into the mainstream with *Saturday Night Fever*, the soundtrack to a movie starring John Travolta. The film (mis)portrays disco as a largely white world of hyper-masculine heterosexuality and competitive individualism. Thus Disco – the sound of the black, Hispanic, gay New York demi-monde - is sold to a mass audience by a group of Australian rock singers, singing in a register normally associated with female vocalists, in a style which most closely resembles that of black gay singer Sylvester.

1979: Richard Dyer publishes his seminal essay 'In Defence of Disco' (Dyer 1990) in the British journal *Gay Left*. Arguing against the prevailing common sense - which assumes that folk, rock, punk and reggae are the 'radical' popular musics of the day, and that *Saturday Night Fever* is an accurate portrayal of disco culture - Dyer argues that it is the 'all-body-eroticism' of disco which undoes and confounds any simply gendered experience of the body in a way which rock – all pelvic thrust and rhythmically monotonous sonic penetration – cannot.

1980 in *Milles Plateaux*, the second volume of their monumental work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari present the culmination of over a decade's collaboration.

In a key passage they write that:

‘all becomings begin with and pass-through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings.’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1988: 277)

Sexuality...is badly explained by the binary organization of the sexes, and just as badly by a bisexual organization within each sex. Sexuality brings into play too great ` diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like n sexes...Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings. (Deleuze & Guattari 1988: 278)

Deleuze & Guattari, of course, say nothing about the dancefloor, although plenty has been written about it subsequently using their ideas and their vocabulary (Jordan 1995; Reynolds 1998: 411; Poschardt 1998; 328, 381-3; Eshun 1998; Gilbert and Pearson 1999: 118; Hemment 2000). Dyer says nothing about Deleuze & Guattari (hardly surprising, given that their most influential work had yet to be published). One can only assume that the Bee-Gees remained in ignorance of Dyer, Deleuze and Guattari throughout the 1970s and beyond. And yet there is a fascinating convergence here, both historical and conceptual. The fact that these three events occur within three years of each other is interesting because the conceptual overlaps between them are so striking. Clearly, Dyer writes from a perspective very close to Deleuze and Guattari's, in his adherence to an ideal of sexual politics which eschews all binary relations whatsoever. As for the Bee Ges, if all becomings pass through a becoming-woman then this could hardly be better illustrated than by their becoming-disco (/Sylvester / black / gay) via a raising of the voice into a feminine register. The complex identification of gay men with female divas is well-documented. Songs about erotic and romantic relationships

with men had an obvious resonance with gay male dancers at this early stage in the emergence of 'out' gay culture, but this deliberate transmutation of the male voice surely amounts to something more than a mere 'identification' with the feminine subject-position. Actually pushing the voice into the entire tonal range typical of feminine voices constitutes a real physical act, a material de-stabilisation of masculinity and an attempt to transcend its ordinary physical limitations in the search for some of the specific physical-musical powers of the feminine body: a becoming-woman.

At the same time, this would seem to illustrate many of the potential problems with this notoriously oblique formulation of Deleuze & Guattari's. The Bee-Gees' exercise in sonic drag, only the most extreme example of a history of falsetto singing in the rock and soul traditions, might be seen as an example of 'gender tourism' (Moore 1988) or worse, occupying the feminine register for just long enough to keep any actual women, or even any actual drag queens, out of the disco spotlight. The Bee-Gees were hardly musical pioneers. In a classic gesture of cultural appropriation, they took a style of music generated by socially marginal and sonically sophisticated groups of artists, producers, DJs and dancers and reformulated in a way which rendered it relatively harmless to hetero-normative, late-capitalist masculinity. None of the female or gay singers whose styles they imitated were ever paid as much as they were. More than this, the general effect of the Bee-Gees-Travolta assemblage was to identify disco in the public, mass-mediated imagination with a set of values, encoded in a formulaic and competitive style of dancing, which had nothing to do with the egalitarian, liberatory space of the New York 'downtown party network' (Lawrence 2003) from whence it came.

Indeed, we might say that the function of this assemblage was to recode the flows of energy and possibility set free by this particular deterritorialising machine in a form appropriate to the emergent needs of post-Fordist capitalism. The mid-1970s was the critical historical moment at which the mid-century model of capitalism collapsed. Since the 1930s in the US and the late 1940s elsewhere, the Fordist model had depended on the inculcation of particular values and traits in male workers, appropriate to their status as the producers and consumers of a society based on industrial mass production: thrift, conformism, collectivism, hard-work, dedication to the care and advancement of their immediate families (Gramsci 1971; Harvey 1989). As the redundancy of the mid-century model of working masculinity became visibly apparent, with millions being laid off in the industrial heartlands of the US and the UK, Tony Manero offered a template which a generation of men would later be forced to follow: hedonistic, narcissistic, individualistic, competitive, multi-skilled, specialist. *Saturday Night Fever* presents the dancefloor as a space in which this late-capitalist masculinity can be forged and perfected without any significant lessening of the historical privilege accorded to white, hetero-normative masculinity (Gilbert & Pearson 1999). This was a version of disco which had virtually no resonance with feminism, black pride, the counter-culture or gay liberation - the key parameters of the socio-political context within which disco emerged in the early 1970s (Lawrence 2003) – except in their powerful rejection of the values of Eisenhower’s America. In this, the becoming-woman of the Bee-Gees seems to have been part of a process by which elements of disco’s implicit radicalism were neutralised.

Of course, this isn’t the only form which a becoming-woman could take, even in this narrow context, and at this point we probably need a clearer understanding of Deleuze & Guattari’s enigmatic assertion that all becomings begin with and pass-through becoming-woman.

‘Becoming’ is the term used by Deleuze and Guattari to designate a kind of vector of transformation which, properly understood, has no point of departure and no final destination. Becoming thus conceived is never ‘pure’ flux: it always has direction, but direction is not the same thing as destination. Put very crudely, Deleuze & Guattari deploy the hyphenated form – ‘becoming-woman’, ‘becoming-Jewish’, ‘becoming-animal’, etc. – in order to find a terminology which can do the work of such identity terms as ‘woman’ and ‘Jew’ but without making any concession to the idea of identity as a fixed or fixable quantity. In addition, they understand becoming as occurring always at the ‘molecular’ level at which matter (which means everything) is always in flux, rather than at the ‘molar’ level at which individuals, identities, institutions, etc. achieve a relative degree of fixity through the aggregation and stabilisation of their constituent elements. For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘man is the molar entity par excellence’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 292), the very model of a stabilised identity.

Critics have seen these claims as amounting to a romanticism of the feminine which leaves little room for any effective feminist politics (Grosz 1994). This seems to me a short-sighted reading, as these remarks of Deleuze and Guattari’s are quite compatible with an anti-essentialist feminism which would be close to that associated with writers such as Judith Butler (Butler 1993), or even Jacques Derrida (Derrida 1991). From any feminist perspective stronger than the mildest form of liberal feminism, the normative imposition of gender norms and the cultural prioritisation of masculinity must be seen as one of the most ubiquitous and fundamental operations of power in western, and perhaps all human, culture. In this context, to be a man, fully, is *not* to be a whole range of things which are all characterised by their marginal status (their ‘minor’ status, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology): a child, a woman, an animal. Male subjects who can be defined as belonging to any of those categories

(queers, non-Europeans, the poor, etc.) can be consequently denied their status as men, but the most fundamental and irreversible class of 'not-men' is the class of women. As such, to some extent, any 'becoming' whatsoever must involve participating in something of this ontological status of being not-man which must in turn pass through becoming-woman. To illustrate this point, just consider the extent to which the patriarchal imagination assumes women to share all of the traits of these other two classes of minor being: irrationality, infantilism, 'naturalness', etc.

We should be very clear here that from Deleuze and Guattari's point of view, becoming-woman (and becoming in general) is not at all a state of abjection, as it might seem to be from the point of view of patriarchal culture or those discourses, such as Freudian psychoanalysis, which can be accused of reproducing its norms. Dyer's account of disco's 'all-body-eroticism' serves as a concrete illustration. Freud famously characterises both infantile and feminine sexuality in terms of their 'polymorphous perversity', which is as much to say their all-body-eroticism, and Dyer presents disco as offering access to this dimension of experience on the way to a general destabilisation of fixed categories of gendered corporeal experience. It is worth noting that this concern with the 'erotics' of music brings Dyer close to the later work of feminist and queer musicologist such as Susan McClary and Suzanne Cuisick (Cuisick 1994). Best known for her ground-breaking exercise in feminist musicology, *Feminine Endings* (McClary 1991), McClary's most succinct statement of theoretical purpose is her 1994 essay 'Same As It Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music'. Having discussed the long history of Western philosophy's reluctance to discuss sonic experience, aligning it with the reviled, feminised realm of sensuality, McClary writes that

those who purport to speak for popular culture have often reproduced [Plato's and Adorno's] fear of the feminine, the body and the sensual. Recall, for instance...the

continuing devaluation of dance music as a pathetic successor to the politically potent music of the sixties – especially in the “DISCO SUCKS” campaign, where an underlying homophobia is quite obvious, but also in the blanket dismissals of the many African-American genres (including disco) that are designed to maximize physical engagement ... I want to propose that music is foremost amongst cultural “technologies of the body”, that is a site where we learn how to experience socially mediated patterns of kinetic energy, being in time, emotions, desire, pleasure and much more.

(McClary 1994: 32-3)

While McClary’s key theoretical source is Teresa de Lauretis’ 1989 book *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, her highly persuasive position is clearly at least as close to the Deleuze-inspired forms of corporeal feminism proposed by Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, while being prefigured closely in Dyer’s essay. It is important to recognize here that neither McClary’s essay nor Dyer’s confines its understanding of music’s culturally-specific physicality to an assessment of its gender politics. In both instances, the relationship between ‘black’ and ‘white’ music is understood in terms of a complex corporeal politics, although it is only in Dyer’s account that we find any real recognition of the fact that the ‘physicality’ of non-European music can itself be appropriated in the service of phallic as well as non-phallic projects. In Deleuzian terms, we might say that Dyer understands rock as reterritorializing black music, ordering its physicality according to the laws of the phallus, while disco, by contrast, would be understood as European music’s own vector of becoming-African, the strings and divas of the orchestral and operatic tradition swept away on a polyrhythmic stream which runs through New York, through Cuba, across the Black Atlantic and beyond.

This finely nuanced political aesthetics remains a model for attempts to understand the politics of dance music culture in more recent times. The decline in disco's popularity at the beginning of the 1980s was followed by a long period of intense experimentation and technological change within the musical subgenres to which it gave rise – house, garage, techno – before this music emerged, quite unexpectedly, as the soundtrack to 'rave' and post-rave club cultures in the UK, continental Europe and the US during the period 1987-1997. The intriguing shifts in gendered behaviour which seemed to accompany this assemblage of technologies and practices (mass social dancing, ecstasy-use electronically-produced dance musics) were the subject of a good deal of commentary which in many ways followed Dyer's earlier lead. For example, probably the most widely-read commentator, the critic and theorist Simon Reynolds, has for most of the past 15 years offered a series of analyses of rock and dance music cultures informed by an 'erotics' of popular music very close to that offered by Dyer, although rarely achieving the level of political sophistication which distinguishes his anti-essentialist position. From Maria Pini's account of the rave experience as 'not sexual, but orgasmic' (Pini 1997: 167) to Reynolds description of rave as a culture of 'clitoris envy' (Reynolds 1997: 89), much research into rave culture and its descendents has concluded that the specificities of the house-music experience should be understood in terms of its capacity to offer an experience of feminine *jouissance* to both men and women (Gilbert & Pearson 1999).

While post-rave European dancefloors may only ever rarely have constituted successful spaces for the production of 'all-body eroticism', it is undeniable that the initial emergence of 'dance culture' and the popularisation of ecstasy was widely perceived as producing an important shift in the gendered culture of social dancing in the UK and beyond. An ethos of tactile, non-violent, egalitarian, emotionally-affirmative friendliness was understood as

informing dancefloor etiquette, and this was seen, and often genuinely experienced, as producing a profound transformation in gendered norms of behaviour. While the sight of straight men dancing together was not quite the radical departure which some commentators seemed to believe (this had happened in rock and soul clubs for years), the spectacle of them doing so with a degree of exuberance traditionally only associated with gay discos was. More importantly, what became unacceptable in many of these spaces were the traditionally predatory and / or voyeuristic modes by which men had related to women in such spaces, a situation which led dance music venues to be frequently understood as places where a utopian sexual egalitarianism was being enacted. As a character in the TV drama series 'This Life' put it: 'People don't go to clubs to pull any more: they go to dance'.

The first such model of the dancefloor as post-feminist utopia was probably that associated with the first wave of acid-house and 'rave' music and parties at the end of the 1980s. While people clearly continued to meet sexual partners in dance clubs, a key element of the rave structure of feeling was the sense that this was no longer their main purpose. It's crucial to note the difference between this configuration and that posited by Dyer as characteristic of Disco at its best. What was enabled here was not, in general an 'all-body-eroticism', but a generalised de-eroticisation of the dancefloor. The loose, asexual clothing associated with rave culture during this period was the most visible manifestation of this shift. This wave was followed by one in which a culture of glamorous display and normative heterosexuality was re-introduced in precisely those clubs in which 'garage' and US house music remained influential: in this context the preferred forms of music shifted relatively quickly towards more melodic and European sounds. Similarly, in those spaces characterised by a stylistic rejection of aspirational glamour the increasingly linear, monorhythmic and European sounds

of 'trance', 'techno' (this term quickly coming to designate not the experimental music of Detroit so much as the, angry, abrasive sounds emerging from Frankfurt and other European cities), 'happy hardcore', 'gabba' etc. preserved an affective aesthetic of regressive asexuality. By the middle of the decade, musical forms resembling the disco of Dyer's account were entirely marginal to UK dance culture.

The result of this was a situation whereby a fairly conventional sexual ethics – modified, to be sure, by the enormous social impact of liberal feminism on a generation of sexually-confident young women and the men to whom they related – and a culture of anti-political hedonism came to inform the mainstream of UK dance culture during the second-half of the 1990s. The soundtrack to this culture was, for the most part, a modified version of house music which retained Disco's fondness for grand aural gestures and lush soundscapes, but from, which almost all of the complex rhythmic and percussive elements which Dyer identifies as 'black' had been removed. The affective experience on offer here was one of euphoric collectivity punctuated by fairly conventional – if relatively egalitarian – episodes of heterosexual flirtation. In gay clubs the story was mostly the same: there was more sex available and more amyl nitrate on the dancefloor, but the soundtrack was dominated by 'hands in the air' trance and house music whose rigid structures and rhythmic simplicity contained little scope for the types of polymorphous pleasure which Dyer evokes. In those clubs and party spaces in which a self-consciously bohemian or oppositional identity was sustained, the music remained similarly conservative: faster, harder, noisier, but tending to engender much the same type of physical response.

It's perhaps no surprise, then, that disco itself underwent a radical reevaluation in the second half of the decade. The collective memory of John Travolta and the Bee Gees was so strong that up until the mid-1990s, many house music devotees regarded its 'Disco' ancestry with embarrassment. This changed rapidly around the middle of the 90s, as a generation of house fans grew old (and affluent) enough to want to enquire into its origins, and as the complex and varied experimental sounds of the less commercial 70s dance records began to take on a new appeal. While in many quarters the revival of enthusiasm for 'Disco' culture was simply the final result of the re-conquest of the dance-floor by the discourses of heterosexual aspirational glamour, which drew more for their iconography on *Saturday Night Fever* than on the newly-excavated history of the NYC downtown scene, it also gave rise to vast programme of re-issues which made much of the most important music of the 1970s available to a wider, CD-buying public for the first time. For the most part, however, 90s dance music 'heard' in disco not its jazz-derived tendencies towards polyrhythm and polyphony, but a new excuse to sequence clichéd string samples with a basic house beat.

Where all of the sonic qualities which Dyer praises in disco did survive is in the general field of 'deep house'. Borrowing from jazz, from Latin and African musics, this music has tended to remain closest to the spirit of disco as he understands it. What's fascinating to note is that in recent years, while for American producers and the more serious devotees of the sound in Europe, this instrumental 'eroticism' is coded in terms of the music's life-affirming 'spiritual' dimension, at the more popular end of the spectrum the adjective 'sexy' came to be applied (in the promotional literature for clubs and music compilation CDs¹) to any form of house music featuring a soul-tinged vocal or an instrumental jazz break.

Coming from the early 90s rave scene, I was initially suspicious of this development. The glamourisation of the dance-floor; the marketing of Ibiza as a holiday destination for those seeking casual sex rather than psychedelic togetherness; the popularity of dress-codes at over-priced 'super-clubs'; the complete disappearance of asexual clothing from womens' clubbing wardrobes; the increasing sense that it was becoming impossible for women to go out dancing without being physically harassed by men who, never having experienced the asexual Acid House utopia, took their confident modes of self-expression (or just their presence of the dancefloor) as a come-on: all seemed to bespeak a general decline in the politically progressive character of UK dance culture. I still think that this is true across a large number of sites, and it is true that the idea of the post-rave dancefloor as a space at which a feminist project is enacted has largely disappeared. However, I think that we can now see the post-rave dancefloors of Britain and much of the developed world as sites at which a whole range of different modes of gendered, de-gendered, heterosexual, homosexual, asexual and polysexual becoming are being experimented with by a range of different actors with a range of different agendas.

Understood in these terms, it isn't possible to understand the 'becoming-woman' of the Bee-Gees, or Richard Dyer, or anyone else, which dance musics have made possible, as having a simple political valency. Rather, what we learn from this story is that the politics of musical experience is always a product of very precise configurations of practice, ideology and technique whose effects and significance are dependent on the specific ways in which their components interact both with each other and with their various contexts. What we can say is

that a certain space of possibility opened up on the dancefloor in the late 1970s, a space within which contemporary gendered identities could be reconfigured in many possible ways, a space which was explored, charted, reported and occupied by a range of actors and thinkers in a range of different ways. In part a consequence of the passing of Fordist man, in part a territory opened up by the explosive insurgency of the women's movement and gay liberations, in part a product of 'molecular' transformations in the cultures of cities, recording studios and music-distribution networks (Lawrence 2003), disco was the site of a proliferation of possible becomings. What's more, it seems clear that the range of strategies and tactics by which we and others might make new uses of it is far from exhausted yet.

Works Cited

- Braidotti, Rosi (2002) *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies that Matter*, New York: 1993.
- Cuisick, Suzanne G. (1994) 'On a Lesbian Relationship with Music' in Brett et. al. *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. New York: Routledge.
- De Lauretis, Teresa (1989) *Technologies of gender : essays on theory, film, and fiction*. - Basingstoke : Macmillan.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Félix Guattari (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi. London: Athlone.
- Derrida, Jacques (1991) 'Choreographies' in Peggy Kamuf (ed.) *Between the Blinds: A Derrida Reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Dyer, Richard (1990) 'In Defence of Disco' in Simon Frith & Andrew Goodwin (eds) *On Record: Rock pop and the written word*, London: Routledge.
- Eshun, Kodwo (1998) *More Brilliant than the Sun*, London: Quartet
- Gilbert, Jeremy & Ewan Pearson (1999) *Discographies: Dance music, culture and the politics of sound*, London: Routledge
- Gilbert, Jeremy & Ewan Pearson (1999) *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*, London: Routledge.
- Gilbert, Jeremy (1999) 'White Light / White Heat: *jouissance* beyond gender in the Velvet Underground' in Andre Blake (ed.) *Living Through Pop*. London: Routledge.
- Gramsci, Antonio (1971) 'Americanism and Fordism' in Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (trans. Quentin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smit, London, Lawrence & Wishart.
- Grosz, Elizabeth (1994) *Volatile Bodies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Harvey, David (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hemment, Drew (2000) *Microgroove: simulation/amplification/intoxication* (Unpublished PhD thesis)

Jordan, Tim (1995) 'Collective bodies: raving and the politics of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari', *The Body and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp.125-44.

Lawrence, Tim (2003) *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture (1970-79)*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Moore, Suzanne (1988), 'Getting a Bit of the Other - the Pimps of Postmodernism' in: R. Chapman & J. Rutherford (ed.), *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, London: Lawrence & Wishart

Pini, Maria (1997) 'Women and the early British rave scene' in Angela McRobbie (ed.) *Back to Reality*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Pini, Maria (2001) *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity*. London: Palgrave.

Poschardt, Ulf (1998) *DJ Culture*, London: Quartet

Reynolds, Simon (1998) *Energy Flash: A journey through rave music and dance culture*, London: Picador.

Jeremy Gilbert teaches Cultural Studies at the University of East London. His publications include Gilbert, Jeremy & Ewan Pearson (1999) *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*, London: Routledge. He is currently working on *Anti-Capitalism: Cultural Theory and Popular Politics* (Berg 2007) and *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (Pluto 2007).

ⁱ Good examples of the marketing of deep house as 'sexy' were the imagery and terminology used on compilations of music on the British Hed Kandi and American Naked Music record labels.