



Title: Analysis of the Process of Recreation of the Self, Explored through the Passage from Whole-Body Eroticism of Disco Music to the de-Eroticization of the Body in Rave Culture

Authors: Piantato G.;¹ * Piantato E.²

Type: Original article

Keywords: Whole-Body Eroticism;

¹ M.A. Gender Studies, S.O.A.S., University of London, UK

² Servizio di Psichiatria, Azienda ospedaliera SS Antonio e Biagio, Alessandria Italy
E-mail: epiantato@ospedale.al.it



ABSTRACT

Background: The potential of Disco music in the creation of new social practices and values, associated with its computerization and its evolution into Rave, made Dance music able to generate alternative sense of identity, through the direct experience of the body that it offered.

Aim: In this paper authors are going to analyse the way in which self-identity is renegotiated in Dance music context with reference to Disco and Rave music in the period between the beginning of the 1970s and the end of the 1980s, respectively the moments when these new genres developed.

Method: Authors will explore the concept of Disco music and its extension into Rave culture, concentrating on the effects that they had on the music scene of the period and the ways in which they challenged the mainstream musical norm of the time. Then, we are also going to approach Dance music policy of freedom that allowed breaking down the traditional rules of sexuality and building an alternative system of social values through which the process of re-creation of the self was enacted. Finally, we will focus on the notion of 'jouissance'—whose production is the final pursuit of Dance music—also with reference to the importance the use of drugs like ecstasy had on the achievement of this liberating state.

Conclusion: This work can track the evolution of the process of renegotiation of the self in the Dance musical scene during the 1970s and 1980s by determining the intersecting factors that contributed to the production of new types of identities.



1. Development of Dance music

The term Dance refers to a form of popular instrumental music that comprehends a wide range of genres, all composed with the aim of accompanying and facilitating the act of dancing. At the beginning of the 1970s a new kind of Dance music called Disco became popular in North America—especially in New York City and Philadelphia. Disco music developed as a form of resistance and reaction to the domination of Rock ‘n Roll and Popular music in the musical scene, and its audience brought together those categories that were excluded from the hegemonic norm conceived by Western culture: white hetero masculinity. Disco music was strictly linked with the feminist movement, black pride, and gay liberation movement. Members of the gay, African American, Latino, Italian American communities, but also women, embraced this new kind of music generating a mixed, cross cultural and hedonistic collectivity. Disco music was peculiar because played uptempo and it was characterized by the influence of African American tradition of funk, soul and jazz, whose black rhythms, expressed through percussion instruments, were combined with electronic instrumentation. Thus, Disco songs were generated through the massive use of technology melded with the manipulated voice of the black glamorous Divas and reproduced into clubs by the extended ‘disco’ mixes played on vinyl by the DJs.

Although Disco started to be associated with gay culture and to be considered a feminine musical genre, the movie ‘Saturday Night Fever’ (1977) was a first attempt to heterosexualise Disco. John Travolta showed that actually also white working-class men ‘who harass homosexuals and rape women could dance to it, as long as it was performed not by the African-American divas preferred by gay men, but by a trio of Australian falsetto [Bee Gees]’ (Hughes, 1994 p. 147).

Even if Disco was a brand-new and unconventional type of music, it was still engaged in the tradition of Western Popular music with its stress on melody blended with romantic lyrics, and did not break completely with these practices (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 38). Then, the declining of Disco music at the beginning of the 1980s led to a moment of extraordinary musical experimentation, associated with important technological changes. On the wave of the new beat, a new kind of Dance music called Acid House developed in Chicago, at the same moment when another musical genre called Techno evolved in Detroit. Even if these genres were not originally linked together, they both collaborated to generate what is known as Rave culture, developed in the late 1980s, which suddenly spread to Europe, Australia and



the rest of United States. House and Techno music were the first genres to be played at rave free-parties by DJs, but nowadays the term Rave tends to be used with reference to all the variants of electronic dance music, such as Trance, Drum and Bass, Jungle, Gabber, Hardcore and so on. Peculiarities of House and Techno music were that the songs had no lyrics and when the vocal samples were used, they were inserted as pieces of sound into the songs and not as meaningful expressions; however, what made this kind of music actually stunning was that the beat became important in a way that has never been before in Western music scene (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 38).

Dance music, whatever its generic differences, with its insistence in rhythm and repetition, concentrated on the bodily and sexual dimension of the musical experience, allowing the dancers to achieve a sort of liberating state—not just mental but especially physical. The result was a new and subversive way of dancing, the 'individual dance' that broke definitively with the traditional scheme of 'couple dance' between two people of opposite sex, and also a new way to express one's sexuality without any boundaries.

2. Disco music and the whole-body eroticism

As Dyer (1979) argues, the association of Disco music with African American culture and black rhythms, considered in Western culture as 'more primitive and more 'authentically' erotic' (Dyer, 1979 p. 4), brought Disco to a level of 'whole-body' eroticism, that deeply contrasted with both Rock and Popular kinds of eroticism. On the one hand, Rock is an absolutely physical music, which provides a sort of 'phallic' eroticism since it confines sexuality to the penis; on the other hand, Popular music's eroticism is disembodied', in the sense that it rejects the physicality of eroticism, and this disembodiment is evident in the nature of romantic melodies of Popular songs. On the contrary, Disco music framework breaks with these narrative structures typical of the majority of Western music, which are based on a patriarchal discourse (McClary in Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 87). For example, the emphasis of Dance music on the repetition and fluidity of the beat contrasts with the traditional musical discourse. While the latter focuses on the song's climax, corresponding with the peak of the track, Dance music stresses instead the cyclicity of the rhythm. While the climax in the song clearly references to male ejaculation, seen as an explosive act, the flowing rhythm of Dance music represents instead the vaginal contractions typical of the female orgasm. Hence, Disco music, through its repetitive beat, invades the whole body of the listener/dancer and this is shown by the 'expressive, sinuous movements of Disco



dancing, not just that mixture of awkwardness and thrust so dismally characteristic of dancing to rock' (Dyer, 1979 p. 4).

Therefore, it is clear that Disco music 'restores eroticism to the whole of the body and for both sexes, not just confining it to the penis' (Dyer, 1979 p. 4) so it is not necessarily anti-cock, but it offers to the listener/dancer a 'polymorphous experience of the body, whose pleasure is not confined in simple gender terms' (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 100). Thus, Disco music does not reproduce the fixed and established scheme of predetermined gender identities and its binary between masculinity and femininity, but it actually gives the possibility of a 'mode of rematerializing' the body in a way that restructures this gender binarism (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 102). Indeed, a music that generates its pleasure through the interaction of masculine and feminine elements, both and neither, enacts a mechanism that can have possibly deconstructive implication for anybody, male or female, gay or straight (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 102). The ability of Disco music to renegotiate the self is due to the intrinsic parallel between beat and desire that allows the listener/dancer not just to hear the music but to perceive it at an inner level, inside the body. This process is a form of enslavement, as suggested by Grace Jones' hit 'Slave to the Rhythm', that begins with the lost of the social identity of the listener/dancer and its reconfiguration beside the black Diva and the machine that attracts him into the empire of the beat (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 151), transforming him in a human-machine hybrid.

Hence, this combination between the human and the machine, that introduces in the Dance scene the character of the cyborg, is generated by the computerization of the organic, which means the '(con)fusions of the organic with the technological' (Loza, 2001 p. 349). In her Manifesto, Donna Haraway (1991) gives a definition of cyborg as a 'kind of disassembled and reassembled postmodern collective and personal self', which transgresses boundaries with the purpose of recreating identities (Haraway, 1991 p. 205). In this process of technologization, the sexualisation of the cyberspace happens through the black Diva who, fused with technology, changes her condition from a sample of heterosexuality to a cybernetic organism that 'melts binaries, crosses genders, slips into other species and genres, samples multiple sexualities, and destabilises dance music with her stammered replies' (Loza, 2001 p. 351). Through her mechanic voice and the songs about romantic but also erotic relationships with men, the black Diva both rearticulated the racist construction of the black women, but also became a model for gay men who started identifying with her, in a new positionality with regard to the mainstream norm. To sum up, if it is undeniable that Disco



music gave spaces where non-hegemonic and queer categories could freely express their sexuality, it is also important to highlight that with its glittering clubs, its practices and also through the erotic lyrics of its songs, Disco generated a resolutely sexual environment (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 67).

3. Rave culture and the de-eroticization of the dance floor

The highly sexualized space of Disco music deeply contrasted with the reality of Rave spaces, where 'the ecstatic pleasure of dancing could be experienced according to terms which did not make the expression of sexuality as primary aim' (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 67). It is interesting to notice that the introduction of this new electronically produced type of music and its practices was accompanied by a change with regard to gendered behaviours; shift that was also partly promoted by the massive use of drugs—especially ecstasy, consumed at raves.

The use of drugs such as MDMA, LSD or ecstasy was not unfamiliar in the scene of Disco music, but in the context of Rave they constituted the cohesive element of the dance floor, since they helped to develop a non-violent, democratic and friendly environment. The importance that these synthetic drugs assumed in the Rave scene is strictly linked with the fact that the majority of the audience of electronic music comprehended white straight men, a category that usually did not practice dance, since it was considered not manly. Because ecstasy helped to remove this barrier of prejudice, white straight men were finally allowed to dance together in a way that did not reproduce the aggressive movements shown in Rock or Soul clubs, but with an enthusiasm that had always been associated with gay Disco men (Gilbert, S.d. p. 189). In raves the audience is immersed into a collective experience in which each individual loses himself in a 'shared ecstasy, whose medium is bass and rhythm; an experience of music not at all as an object of rational contemplation but as affect itself', whose mode of expression is a shared sense of connection and communal pleasure (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 60). This sort of liberating state was granted by the absence of a visual culture in Rave spaces: it did not matter what you were wearing or the way you were moving. What mattered was only your attitude. The liberating state was also fostered by the fact that meeting sexual partners was not the ravers' main purpose, because people went to Rave parties exclusively to dance (Gilbert, S.d. p. 189). These practices gave also to women ravers the possibility to get away from the pressure of the traditional social norms and to elaborate alternative constructions and expressions of their subjectivity, since 'with rave, different



conditions are in place—conditions which allow for the fabrication, embodiment, and exploration of very different fictions of femininity’ (Pini, 2001 p. 192). Indeed, rave parties and clubs were spaces where women actually felt safe to enact sort of ‘unfeminine conducts’ like the use of drugs, and also felt free to break with their traditional female roles and to act in a way that normally would not have been acceptable. In her work, Maria Pini (2001) focuses on alternative types of female subjectivities retaking the idea of Donna Haraway’s (1991) cyborg and Rosi Braidotti’s (1994) nomad, and she tries to associate them with the different kinds of subjectivities expressed by the female ravers who she interviewed. So, the connection of female ravers with the cyborg derives from the fact that ravers mingle one another through the technology that generates and invades rave spaces and with ‘their own bodies in a mind/body/spirit/technology assemblage that bears close resemblance to the technological assemblage of Haraway’s cyborg’ (Simonson, 2004 p. 88).

At the same time, the warm sense of community experienced by ravers through a shared temporary interconnection, similar to nomadic intense community, is not about stability or permanence. The experience of female ravers who escape from their ‘usual identity’ just for a night to take part of the rave community can be linked with the temporary identity of Braidotti’s (1994) nomad. Through the connection of these three alternative female subjectivities on the dance floor, Pini (2001) does not propose a fusion of them but explains that ‘drawing a flow of connections between the raver, the cyborg, and the nomad, is not about appropriating the raver into the arms of high theory as if suggesting that she was actually, or that she were somehow the same as Haraway’s cyborg or Braidotti’s nomad. Instead [...] it is about drawing an otherwise unlikely flow of connections intended to make manifest something about contemporary cultural visions and contemporary cultural fantasies about both the present and the future’ (Pini, 2001 p. 157)

The freedom of recreation and expression of subjectivity was also evident in the way of dressing that was related to Rave culture; ‘loose, asexual clothes’ were a manifestation of the shift in gendered behaviours that happened with the passage from Disco to Rave music. In conclusion, Dance music has always offered spaces in which gendered identities could be reconfigured and expressed in many possible ways, but what became evident in term of sexuality was that the condition of ‘whole-body eroticism’ typical of Disco music turned into a complete ‘de-eroticization’ of the dance floor, as displayed in rave parties and clubs (Gilbert, S.d. p. 189).

4. *The notion of 'jouissance'*

Dance cultures' aim is the pursuit of a liberating state that is identifiable with the poststructuralist concept of 'jouissance'—a supreme pleasure that corresponds to a transcendental state, a nirvana where there is neither desire nor sense of the self. The drug ecstasy, that was massively consumed at rave parties, took a fundamental role in the experience of the Dance music audience which developed a culture 'which places more emphasis in the pursuit of 'jouissance' than any other living memory' (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 65). This idea of 'jouissance' sends back to a moment of the pre-subjective, pre-gendered and pre-sexual experience that the individual loses in the moment in which he becomes 'human' and that cannot be regained. Gilbert and Pearson (1999) describe it as 'a type of extraordinary sensation which derives from the moment before the human child leaves its state of comfortable bliss [...] It is at the moment that it falls from this state of grace that the child enters into the symbolic order of social relationships, gender identity and language' (p. 64).

The attempt to recover this ecstatic state of physical and emotional pleasure was sought in the 'sense of immersion in a communal moment where the parameters of one's individuality are broken down by the shared throbbing of the bass drum' of Dance music (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 64). However, despite the typical association between 'jouissance' and pleasure, in his psychoanalytic theory, Lacan (1992) argues that in the moment in which the individual transgresses and goes beyond his pleasure principle, by exceeding in the maximum amount of pleasure he can sustain, 'jouissance' changes into suffering. Hence this other aspect of 'jouissance', experienced as an unbearable pain, can be associated with those 'sounds with harsh texture that are almost always unpleasant' and recurring in Rave music (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 65). Thus, the concept of 'jouissance' is the central experience of Dance music, since it allows liberating the individual from the symbolic order imposed by the societal normative discourse by contributing to the renegotiation of the self. This ecstatic experience provides 'partially and temporarily - an escape from gender itself, a return to a moment where there was no I and specifically no "male" or "female"' (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999 p. 66). Hence it is at this moment of asexualized jouissance and in this condition of absolute de-eroticization of the dance floor, that the individual feels free to renegotiate his inner self.



5. Conclusion

The potential of Disco music in the creation of new social practices and values, associated with its computerization and its evolution into Rave, made Dance music able to generate alternative sense of identity, through the direct experience of the body that it offered.

As demonstrated, the use of technology, combined with the consumption of drugs, in Dance music scene allowed the creation of mixed human-machine identities, whose final purpose was a temporary escape from the symbolic order, to achieve a liberating state—'jouissance'. The 'jouissance' is essential in the context of Dance music, since it is identified with the moment previous to the formation of individual sexual and gendered identity, a moment of purity in which there is no sense of the self and where it is possible to rethink and reformulate the inner self. In elaborating self-identity, dancers of Dance music did not affirm their femaleness/maleness or their sexual inclinations on the dance floor, but they renegotiated the relationship between gender and sexuality by breaking the social boundaries and expressing alternative identities.

Dance music also contributed to the construction of an experience that had an impact both on the subjective, but also on the collective identity. The production of an intense sense of community that embraced people from totally different backgrounds and that was not affected by any form of racism or sexism, is a proof of the cohesive power of Dance music and its ability to cross differences with regard to gender, sexual orientation, race, class, age and so on, with the purpose of determining places where people simply felt free. So, Disco clubs and raves were sites in which a wide range of different identities, including shifts in gendered behaviours, were experimented and this was possible through a process of reconstruction that transformed Dance music audience in an extension of the machines that generated the beat.



References

- Braidotti, R. (1994), 'Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory', New York, Columbia University Press
- Dyer, R. (1979), 'In Defence of Disco', *Gay Left*, Issue 8
- Gilbert, J. (S.d.), 'More than a Woman. Becoming-woman on the Disco floor', *Female Consequences*, Ed. Reitsamer Rosa and Weinzierl, Rupert, pp. 181–193.
- Gilbert, J. and Pearson, E. (1999), 'Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound', London, Routledge
- Haraway, D. (1991), 'Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature', London, Free Association Books
- Hughes, W. (1994), 'In the Empire of the Beat', *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, Ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, New York, Routledge, pp. 147-57.
- McClary, S. (2004), 'Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality', Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press
- Lacan, J. (1997), 'The Ethics of Psychoanalysis', London, W. W. Norton & Company
- Loza, S. (2001), 'Sampling (Hetero)Sexuality: Diva-Ness and Discipline in Electronic Dance Music', *Popular Music*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 349-357
- Pini, M. (2001), 'Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity: The Move from Home to House', Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan
- Simonson, M. (2004) 'Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity: The Move from Home to House' (review), *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, Vol. 8, pp. 86-92