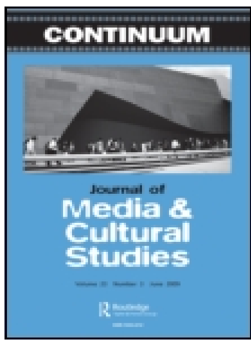

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Hearing queerly: Musings on the ethics of disco/sexuality

Ani Maitra*

Department of Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, Providence, RI, USA

Is the 'queerness' of disco 'mere nostalgia'? Does it make sense of to speak of a 'queer politics' of disco at a moment when disco's heterosexualization seems complete? What would be the valence of the 'political' in disco? This article takes on these questions by examining disco as an affective discursive construction across multiple sites – popular reception, cultural criticism, video, and film. If 'discophobia' connotes the unequivocally homophobic and racist response to disco's origins, I use the term 'disco/sexuality' more ambiguously to take into account both the liberating and repressive effects of the 70s disco industry on the lives of the sexually marginalized divided along the lines of race, class, and gender. The first part of the article explores some of disco's own contradictions by looking at the little known but provocative video *(Tell Me Why) The Epistemology of Disco* in relation to scholarship by disco scholars like Richard Dyer, Walter Hughes, and Jeremy Gilbert. The second part examines the possibility of a de-eroticized politics of the sensibility of disco through a schizoanalytic reading of Derek Jarman's film *The Last of England*.

> Disco's combination of romanticism and materialism effectively tells us – lets us experience – that we live in a world of materiality but that the experience of materiality is not necessarily what the everyday world assures us it is. Its eroticism allows us to rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materiality and the possibility of change (Dyer 1979, 23).

> Assemblages are becomings by their very nature; they are individuated as events. New assemblages, new modes of existence, can arise only when an assemblage becomes capable of affecting itself. Ethics studies such *askesis*. Becomings are singular and actual; they are individual events rather than general types or mere possibilities (Turetsky 2004, 143).

Introduction

The idea for this paper came from two news reports I read online in the autumn of 2008. A *BBC* website story published in October had the headline: 'Bee Gees hit could save your life'. It reported 'US medics have found the Bee Gees' 1977 disco anthem, *Stayin*' *Alive*, provides an ideal beat to follow when performing CPR on a victim of a cardiac arrest'. Just after Thanksgiving that year, one of the top stories on the *Buffalo News* website read: 'World's largest disco gains more national attention: Some of the 7,000 revelers at world's largest disco last year are indicative of the enthusiasm that will be evident Saturday'.

While both stories serve as reminders that disco 'lives on' and that its 'death' is but a myth, they also amply demonstrate that disco's heterosexualization is complete. If the gyrations of John Travolta to the beats of the Bee Gees' song 'Stayin' alive' in *Saturday*

*Email: maitra.ani@gmail.com

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Night Fever (1977) marked the beginning of the 'popularization' of disco by repressing its black and homosexual origins, then the crowning of that 'disco anthem' as an 'ideal beat' that 'saves' lives elides the faintest bit of queerness disco might have possessed. Of course, neither of these articles references any of the racism and homophobia that surround the complex queer 'phenomenon' that *was* disco.

Analysing my own reactions to the news stories, I am compelled to question my own nostalgia: is it worth hanging on to disco as a queer cultural critic in the US? Should I not interrogate my own attraction to the unwavering 4/4-meter of 'Rock DJ' in spite of its blatantly heterosexual flamboyance? Does it even make sense to speak of a 'queer politics of disco' anymore? Indeed, what would be the valence of the 'political' in disco?

These are some of the questions my essay attempts to tackle through a rather idiosyncratic approach. Since I am not a musicologist, I choose to look at disco from the more familiar vantage point of discourse analysis. Such an approach, in my view, does not do harm to disco as a 'form': as Richard Dyer famously pointed out in 1979, disco is 'more than just a form of music, although certainly the music is at the heart of it. Disco is also kinds of dancing, club, fashion, film – in a word, a certain *sensibility*' (151). Taking seriously this notion of 'sensibility', and in order to explore the political potential of disco as a sensibility, my essay thus looks at disco as an affective discursive construction across multiple sites – popular reception, cultural criticism, video, and film. If 'discophobia' is a relatively simple term that clearly hints at a homophobic and racist reaction to disco's origins, I use the term 'disco/sexuality' more ambiguously to take into account both the liberating and repressive effects of the disco industry in the 1970s on the lives of a heterogeneous group of queer people, divided along the lines of race, class, and gender. In the first part of the essay, I explore some of disco's own contradictions by looking at John Di Stefano's video *(Tell Me Why) The Epistemology of Disco* (1991) in relation to theorizations by cultural critics like Dyer (1979), Walter Hughes (1994), and Jeremy Gilbert (2006). I choose to analyse Di Stefano's video precisely because I see it as being more conscious of the limits of disco/sexual 'identification' celebrated by critics like Hughes. I suggest that disco cannot partake of a viable and relevant form of historically located politics today if the 'experience' on the dance floor is the only impact it has on queer thinking. I argue such disco/sexual 'identifications' (and even seemingly transgressive 'becomings') can continue to be remain enslaved to a phallic economy and desire.

The second part of my essay examines the possibility of a de-eroticized politics of disco through a reading of Derek Jarman's film *The Last of England* (1987). My analysis focuses on the central 'disco-death' dance sequence in the film, and here I turn to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) as a lens to read Jarman's queer initiation of a series of (minoritarian) 'becomings'. I trace 'rhizomatic' connections between the 'disco-death' dance and other performance pieces in the film to evaluate the filmmaker's overhaul of the 'assemblage' of disco. Jarman's film, I suggest, *appropriates* disco, to re-queer and re-interpret its rhythm as an ethical and political practice. Jarman's disco, I argue, attempts to defy the law of the phallus and to produce 'multiplicities' instead of solipsistic 'identifications'.

I realize that 'politics' is a multivalent term. Nevertheless, my critique wants to insist on the connections between at least three distinct strands when we talk about disco: the repressive as well as liberating economic and social effects of the disco industry on its producers and consumers; the queer politics of disco theorized by cultural critics from their individual ethical perspectives; and a larger political climate pertaining to issues of

governance that is not confined to disco but also shapes the ethics of some of us who want to think and write about the subject. My essay, as I have indicated, is divided into two parts. Each part opens by describing briefly the text being analysed, since neither the video nor the film has a well-defined narrative structure.

Part I

How does one write about disco in retrospect and for the historical present, neither idealize its political potential, nor forgetting the way it shaped contemporary perceptions of homosexuality, gender, race, and HIV/AIDS? From the point of view of a media studies scholar, Di Stefano's video raises this question in the early nineties, well ahead of later theorists and historians of popular music and culture (see, for instance, Lawrence 2003; Shapiro 2005; and, more recently, Echols 2010). And yet, surprisingly little has been written about it.[1]

Formally, Di Stefano's *(Tell Me Why) The Epistemology of Disco* is an eclectic text that at once makes use of and deviates from the conventional documentary style. The piece begins with video and stills of newspaper reports of the Stonewall riots, and then abruptly cuts to a scene from William Friedkin's *The Boys in the Band* (1970), the first mainstream feature film in the US with openly gay characters. What follows in Di Stefano's video has no clear narrative structure, and includes footage and stills from gay bars in the US in the 1970s, beefcake videos, clips from Friedkin's later controversial film *Cruising* (1980), and, finally, scenes from *The Boys in the Band* intercut with shots of ACT–UP demonstrations over the AIDS crisis in the late eighties and early nineties. *The Epistemology of Disco* thus patches together archival footage, (white) gay pornographic videos, still images, and film clips that only loosely correspond to the voice-overs of multiple narrators. In that sense, 'narration' in the video is also fragmented, switching between fictional excerpts and detached ironic commentary on the libidinal economy of disco culture. The quick editing of the images to the rhythm of the disco beat overwhelms the viewer, whose audio-visual experience is made busier by the use of fleeting 'mismatched' intertitles. These intertitles 'interrupt' the narration at strategic moments, exposing gaps in the video's own representation of disco. I discuss this contradiction between the 'seen' and the 'heard' in the video later in the essay.

Arguably, what binds all these disparate elements of the video together is the 'sensibility' of disco (in a cross-discursive sense) and its links with representations of gay male sexuality in the US in the 1970s and 1980s: Friedkin's gay 'boys' remember their dance on Fire Island[2] and jive to the 'Motown' music of 'Heatwave' by Martha and the Vandellas;[3] (white) pin-up men dance, strip, flex, and masturbate to popular disco tracks like 'YMCA' by the Village People and black artist Sylvester's 'You make me feel mighty real'; and the *Cruising* clips show actor Al Pacino dancing in an all-white leather bar in the West Village. Yet, as the scenes of violence from *Cruising* suggest, a representation of 'disco' is not just shorthand for male gay frolicking under the strobe. Through its final montage and dedication to gay men who died of AIDS, Di Stefano's video also makes clear the homophobia that connected 'infectious' disco with the AIDS crisis. *The Epistemology of Disco* thus ends by alluding to dominant homophobic representations of disco as a 'disease' and to the 'coincidence' of disco's 'death' being pronounced just as AIDS was making its presence felt in the US in the early 1980s.[4] It would therefore be a reductionist reading to see *The Epistemology of Disco* as only a 'celebration of homosexual libido and the vitality of 1970s gay men' (Straayer 1996, 227). Through my reading of some of the video's voice-overs, its reflexive semiotic manoeuvres and its

'mismatched' intertitles, I want to suggest that Di Stefano represents '70s disco' as a moment of contradictions and problematic 'identifications' within the gay male subculture, itself divided along the lines of race, class, and gender. My aim is to argue that the video is deeply self-conscious of the 'claims' of its own title and that, despite the answer proposed to the title question ('Tell me why?'), the 'epistemology' of disco can never be fully determined since some statements inevitably lie unuttered in its discursive representations.

The limits of disco/sexual 'identification'

In his famous 1979 essay, 'In defense of disco', Richard Dyer admits to the capitalist origins of disco, but he trusts the *emotions* engendered by the music to transgress the limits imposed by commodity culture. Dyer's emphasis is on possible strategies of enactment and appropriation that, in his reading, might outperform the capitalist mode of production targeting a demographically-defined consumer group. Dyer writes: 'Capitalism constructs the disco experience, but it does not necessarily know what it is doing, apart from making money' (1979, 153). In opposition to the 'phallic' logic of rock music, disco, in Dyer's analysis, generates an 'all-body eroticism' and 'romanticism' with its strong emphasis on physicality, repetitive rhythm, and dance. Disco therefore has the potential to allow gay men to come together in non-homophobic and non-commercial spaces. While Dyer's vision of disco is somewhat utopian in its 'promise to rethink the conditions of materialism in capitalist society', it is important to note that his essay does not advocate an alliance between a fixed disco form and a fixed, male 'gay' identity. Instead, he argues that 'the disco experience', and in particular its eroticism, might allow the participants to 'rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materiality and the possibility of change' (159). So, the 'experience' of disco, for Dyer, is a way out of the straightjacket of a monolithic, phallic gay identity.

Later theorists, such as Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson (1999), defend Dyer's approach arguing that it is the polymorphous sonic experience of disco that can undo the binaries of gender and sexual difference:

> 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. A music which organizes its pleasures through an interplay of elements 'masculine' and 'feminine', both and neither, might offer scope for modes of experience which would have potentially deconstructive implications for anybody, male or female, gay or straight (101–2).

While Gilbert and Pearson draw on Judith Butler's (1997) theory of gender deconstruction, they seem to take for granted the 'purity' of the constructed categories like 'masculine' and 'feminine' in their analysis of Dyer. That is to say, even as they invoke constructionist queer theory, they do not critique Dyer's approach through a Butlerian insistence on the 'interarticulation' of, and the situational inequities between, the categories of difference like race, gender, class, and sexuality.[5]

In a more recent essay, Gilbert (2006) returns to Dyer's 'In defense of disco' to emphasize the non-significatory potential of 'pure' disco's polyrhythmic timbre, the transgressive effect it has on the body, and its capacity to generate an affect of a polymorphous and Deleuzian 'becoming'.[6] Gilbert attempts to draw our attention to the 'political rigor' of Dyer's analysis and its desire to see 'types of practice which disrupt established and oppressive norms of embodied subjectivity' (2006, 119).

While I do not dismiss this speculative mode of theorization just because I have, personally, not experienced the subversive power of disco on the dance floor, I do believe that these readings of Dyer's work rest on an oversight that needs to be probed further.

The 'political' aspect of disco, in Gilbert's analysis, seems to be removed from any general notion of the representation of political change and struggle, and is confined to the dance floor functioning as a social laboratory of sorts, as a 'site of liberatory becoming' (Gilbert 2006, 119). However, by a 'general notion', I do not mean to prescribe a normative notion of politics and/or the political that *all* theorists should necessarily adopt. Instead, I want to argue that Gilbert's emphasis on corporeal experience and affective specificity in the discotheque seems to shy away from exploring fully the Dyerian notion of 'sensibility' that he himself reinvokes in his discussion of 'In defense of disco'.

Gilbert (2006) argues that Dyer's notion of disco as a 'sensibility' is useful because it is able to accommodate the affective dimension of disco in a way that the structuralist concept of 'discourse' cannot:

> Dyer's decision to name Disco as 'a sensibility' produced by a complex combination of elements seems closest to those formulations offered by [Raymond] Williams – for whom Disco might be a 'structure of feeling' – and Deleuze and Guattari, from whose perspective it might be conceived of an affective assemblage (115).

However, by making affect the mainstay of the politics of disco and by seeing affect as always being 'subversive', Gilbert does not allow the incongruities of that affective assemblage to surface in his analysis. Although he reminds us that disco as a sensibility is 'dispersed and produced across a range of sites' (115), none of these other sites appears in this scene of experiential transformation.

This is a particularly intriguing blind spot in Dyerian scholarship's invocation of the 'materiality' of the body: the argument seems to be that the very nature of disco music can (temporarily) allow the *re*materialized body on the dance floor to escape capitalism and patriarchy. The principal problem with this argument is that it risks reifying and universalizing the 'experience' of disco. Neither disco's black origins, nor the individual subjectivities of the dancing subjects, nor disco's dealings with contemporary forms of commoditization seem to pose any obstacle to this radical rematerialization.

Here, it is also important to underscore the tension that Dyer (1979) himself notes, between his own experience of disco on the one hand and its political and subversive possibilities on the other. Dyer is only too aware that an experience of full-bodied erotism on the dance floor is not synonymous with queer political struggles.[7] One could even argue that Dyer half admits that the subversive aspect is brought into being through a theoretical articulation, and that the theory is less of an avowal of the truth of disco and more of a wishful rhetorical performance of a disco-topia that Dyer would like to see:

> ... let one thing be clear – disco can't change the world or make the revolution. No art can do that, and it is pointless to expect it to. But partly by opening up experience, partly by changing definitions, art and disco can be used. To which one might risks adding the refrain, if it feels good, *use* it (23).

What does it mean to 'use' disco as an affective experience and to 'open up' experience beyond the discotheque? How might we use and open up not just disco music (its formal attributes) but rather its 'sensibility' to speak of a cluster of experiences that are contradictory, conflicting, and manipulable? While Dyer is interested in locating disco firmly within the contradictions of capitalism, 'In defense of disco' and its later readings do not really tell us what those contradictions look like.

Thus, conceding its queer potential, I find Dyer's argument both provocative and incomplete, not because his theorization of disco is 'subjective', but rather because he privileges one discursive 'fiction' over another: 'emotionalism' over 'capitalism', 'sexuality' over 'race'. It is for this reason that I find it useful to compare Dyer's construction of the potentiality of disco to a more ambivalent and self-critical representation by Di Stefano.

Di Stefano's video also deploys a rhetoric of emotionalism through voice-overs reading fictional excerpts.[8] Over the disco beat and shots of muscular men in blue jeans, the first voice muses:

> Why did I come out tonight?...I was so foolish to come out looking for someone tonight, but had I found someone to go home with, he might have been able to answer the question . . . Now, all I have recourse to is my consciousness, the string of my thoughts. Was I rejected because I failed to embody his illusion of love? Was my appearance not an adequate fulfillment of his fantasy? Maybe I should have added two more pounds to my bench-presses today. Maybe my jeans don't fit anymore. But the music was great tonight. Thank god for the music.

What emerges in this 'confession' is a combination of frustration and fulfillment on the dance floor: the disappointment of not having found a sexual partner is played off against the satisfaction derived from the disco beat/music that seems to have an erotic thrust of its own. As I have suggested above, I am not interested in representationalist realism and in reading this voice as that of an 'authentic' (gay) discophile. Rather, I see Di Stefano contributing to Dyer's reading of disco that encourages an affinity between (homo)sexual desire and disco music: being sexually frustrated, the gay dancer appears to seek (emotional) solace by boogieing to the rhythm. Unlike Dyer, however, Di Stefano's dancer does not gloss over the connections between phallic masculinity, capitalism, and homosexual desire. Disco/sexuality, as an 'emotional response', is unabashedly linked to an idealized athletic body and to the gay man's jeans that eroticize and commoditize his body further. Disco/sexuality is thus tied both to the time of capital and to the rhythm of the beat.

The links between phallic masculinity, male homosexuality, and capitalism are explicitly taken up with greater detachment and irony by the second 'narrator' in the video:

> Between the hours of one and five, the gay male dons his pair of 501s shrink-to-fit jeans in order to find a sexual partner. 501 is the talisman of the male homosexual. Homosexual desire must take the phenomena of 501 into account. Why do so many gay men wear these good luck charms? The letter Y is the answer to Why.

The 'explanation' undertaken by this narrator becomes a humorous parody in semiotics where '5' stands for the roman numeral 'V' formed by the crotch of the jeans; '0' stands for the vagina 'or' the anus; and '1' for the male organ also representable as 'I'; thus 501, as VOI, is finally (if humorously) interpreted as the combination of the male and female genitalia that lie below the surface of the jeans. However, the video immediately suggests that this 'equality' in representation of the sexes may well be deceptive. The linguistic jugglery only reinforces the overwhelming or ruling presence not of genitalia in general, but that of the phallus: over the shots of a (white) man flexing his muscles, the voice-over reminds us that the letter 'Y' (which, we are told, is the 'the answer' to 'Why', or to the question posed in the video's title *Tell me why*) is after all the letter 'λ' (lambda) only when *erect*:

> From the depths of a 501 emerges a Y, that mimicry of a dangling limp penis. One's ecstatic erect organ perverts that letter Y into a λ, the Greek alphabetical symbol which gay liberationists have made the insignia of their resistance. And yet, to find a friend at the *Y* [the *YMCA*], one must first look like the letter Y.

The 'inversion' of the Y into a λ is thus also an appropriation, a masquerade of the phallic signifier as an emblem 'shared' by LGBT liberation groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Through the 'semiosis' of the label 501 associated with gay men of a particular scene, Di Stefano thus alerts his viewers to the larger politics of disco/sexuality beyond the dance floor. Here, the 'dangling limp penis' could be looked upon as an ironic reference to the LGBT movement being dominated by *gay men* in the 1970s.[9] Similarly, the voice-over's repeated reference to the gay man's desire *to resemble* the Y (by spending hours on the bench press to make sure that the chest is wider than the waist) alludes to the kind of body fascism that is associated with the rise of hypermasculine 'macho-clones', the male homosexual's passionate attachment to what is culturally coded as 'masculine'.[10] Disco/sexuality, the video seems to suggest, is inseparable from a kind of disciplining of the gay male body.

Here, it is interesting note that in theorizations of disco in the early nineties, the effects of the subjection of the body to a kind of rhythm or pattern include two distinct but linked forms of 'identifications': first, a gay male identification with disco-as-machine; and second, a gay male identification with the black disco diva. I will end this section by pointing out the problems and limits of both these models of identification.

Drawing on the work of Dyer (1979), Walter Hughes (1994) approaches the first kind of identification by focusing on the interpellating nature of disco music. Like Di Stefano, Hughes also posits an 'implicit parallel between beat and desire'.

He writes:

> Disco foregrounds the beat, makes it consistent, simple, repetitive. The origins of disco music have been traced back by historian Anthony Thomas to late sixties DJs in mostly gay, black clubs, who spliced together the faster soul songs into a continuous dance 'mix' that provided a predictable, unbroken rhythm conducive to a long spate of dancing. ... Dancing becomes a form of submission to this overmastering beat (148–9).

For Hughes, disco is a disciplinary discourse that, paradoxically, both binds and liberates the dancing subject. Following Leo Bersani's (1987) reading of anal sex as a form of self-discipline and self-explosion, Hughes interprets disco as a regulatory erotic practice that defines the gay man: 'By submitting to its insistent, disciplinary beat, one learns from disco how to be one kind of gay man: one accepts, with pleasure rather than suffering, the imposition of a version of gay identity' (Hughes 1994, 148). Again, like Dyer, Hughes' emphasis seems to be not on a 'singular' gay identity, but rather an *askesis* of sorts, an emotional response to and an individuation of 'meaningless' music.

Indeed, an important part of Hughes' argument is his Benjaminian insistence[11] on the *mechanical* nature of disco music and its effacement of the idea of a composer or 'author'. Hughes points out that, as a combination of a repetitive beat and 'vacuous' lyrics, disco drains itself of any potential for 'meaning' and 'authenticity':

> Language is subjugated to the beat ... almost all traces of syntax or structure are abandoned, reducing language to the simplest sequential repetition, a mere verbal echo of the beat itself.
>
> This emptying out of language parallels the refusal of narrative structure in the song overall ...
>
> The process of dissolving musical, linguistic and narrative structures that disco dramatizes reflects a similar unmaking of the artist. Critics point out the hopelessness of identifying the actual creator of a disco song: is it the composer, the lyricist, the singer, the producer, the arranger or the DJ? One is encouraged to entertain the fantasy that disco music is nothing but a beat generated, recorded and broadcast entirely by machines, a rhythmic signifying chain that may link any number of people on its way from the recording studio to the dance floor, but that originates with no one and arrives nowhere in particular (149).

Thus, for Hughes, disco becomes an aleatory[12] and non-teleological terrain where the gay man can fashion his identity by embracing the machine to become a 'man-machine', 'a dancing machine', or a 'love machine' (151). In Hughes' essay, identification with the machine thus becomes a mode of resistance, an expression of a transgressive hybrid identity of the disco/sexual man.[13]

Di Stefano's video, however, subtly reveals the limits and dangers of such an identification made with the disco beat that cannot really be separated from the disco 'assemblage'. Here, I borrow the concept of 'assemblage' from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) to suggest a play between structure and contingency, organization and change. Disco is an 'assemblage' because it links together several elements like music, homosexual desire, and capitalism *in shifting relations*. As I have pointed out, Gilbert also evokes the notion of 'assemblage' in his reading of disco and speaks of the importance of contingency. Yet, the 'purity' of the sonic experience of disco remains fixed in his analysis. [14] My argument is that any ethical and political 'identification' with disco cannot evade the question of the heterogeneity of the assemblage. That is not to suggest that *The Epistemology of Disco* disputes this power wielded by the repetitive disco beat. In fact, a voice recalls 'the tantalizing process by which the DJ laid a solid foundation of slow songs and then subtly built you up to the catharsis'. However, the video also reminds us that this catharsis, in itself, need not be politically progressive. [15] Explicating the gay man's identification with the phallic signifier 'Y' at yet another level, Di Stefano's 'semiotician-narrator' notes:

> Gay clubs usually feature loud disco music and play to clientele that invariably wears 501 Levis to shape their bodies into a Y. No less significantly, the music that is played there requires a diamond stylus to sound out the grooves of the records in the shape of a V. *These bodies, in the shape of a 'V' or, more accurately a 'Y'* assume the same general configuration of a V-shaped diamond stylus. Now that gay men desire to enlarge their chest and narrow their waist into a V shape, they also desire to look like the stylus they dance to. This mimicry of a diamond stylus stems from identifying so strongly with the music to the point that one becomes the very instrument that produces such enjoyable sound in the sloping contours of the developed physique. Having a . . . body that resembles a sound producing diamond gives the sound saturated dancer a visual representation for what can otherwise only be heard. The invocatory drive, that is the desire to hear, is inevitably accompanied by the scopic drive, that is the desire to see. (My emphasis)

The gay man's 'mimicry' of the diamond stylus in Di Stefano's video echoes Hughes' image of the 'man-machine'. But there are significant differences between the two representations. For Hughes (1994), the gay man's identification with 'the machine', his transformation into a 'gay body electronic' is a transgression of what is defined as 'natural'.[16] Di Stefano's representation of this identification, however, is more ambivalent and less homogenizing: first, the ironic humor of the voice-over in its camp parody of semiotic theory (where theory itself becomes a kind of 'disciplinary machine') undermines any serious notion of machine-gay man identification in disco. And second, *The Epistemology of Disco* is less optimistic about placing the machine *outside* the economy of the phallic signifier. The stylus, as a part of the disco assemblage, also signifies capitalist (mechanical) reproduction and is therefore embedded in the 'stratum'[17] of capitalism.

Furthermore, even as the voice-over 'celebrates' this man-machine transformation through an identification with the Y-shaped stylus, the video demonstrates an acute awareness of the *racial dimension* of the phallic signifier, through the use of apparently unrelated intertitles. Unlike the previous intertitles that match or mimic the voice-over, two 'unrelated' intertitles visually intervene at this point and appear in opposition to the vocalized description of the (white)-gay-body-as-stylus. As the voice describes 'these

bodies, in the shape of a "V" or, more accurately a "Y"', two intertitles 'Why' and 'Why the lightness of skin?' appear consecutively. The intertitle 'Why' plays on its 'erect' homonym 'Y', thereby questioning the dominance of the phallus. And the second intertitle's sudden reference to race compels the viewer to realize the 'invisible' predominance of whiteness in the phallic signifier 'Y' and therefore the video's own questioning of the media images that it has used to represent disco. As the voice draws out the analogy between the (black) stylus and the (implicitly white) gay body, the intertitles thus literally articulate the gap between what we see and what we hear in the video. But, at the level of discourse, the intertitles also allude to the foreclosure of the gay black man and woman from these visual representations of disco.[18] That is to say, within the visual regime of this scene of homosexual desire, the prerogative of visual representation of what can otherwise only be heard (which is, in fact, not the black stylus but the displaced black artist) is, for the most part, available to the 'Y-shaped' white gay dancer in the form of his self-image.

Di Stefano's video thus reveals the ethical risks of an uncritical 'identification' with the machine and the transformation of the dancer into the 'man-machine' valorized by Hughes or even the 'becoming' advocated by Gilbert.

The issues of race and gender in disco come up directly in the other kind of identification that Hughes outlines in his essay. Influenced by Wayne Koestenbaum's work on the relationship between gay identity and the female voice, Hughes (1994) argues that, since the most popular disco tracks are those sung by black women, disco fosters an unlikely linkage between the gay man and the black disco diva:

> Just as it coerces him [the gay man] to abandon the privileges attendant on masculine identity, the disciplinary beat compels him to occupy the position of the racial and sexual other, to accept as an almost ascetic gesture, her 'minority' status. As in the example of the machine, submission and identification are simultaneous, even synonymous in the discotheque (152).

Arguably, Hughes' account of this vacillation of the gyrating gay man (whose whiteness is never questioned in his essay), from an 'experience' of 'the machine' to the subjectivity of the essential category of the 'black woman', is problematic. While it grants the gay subject a refuge from the pressures of heterosexual masculinity, such a process of identification leaves unanswered the question of its impact on and its relationship to actual black women artists and black women as well as its import on the identifying self.[19]

The commoditization of the black voice in the disco industry has generated a considerable amount of critical debate that is not addressed by Hughes' theory of disco. Several scholars like Sue Steward and Sheryl Garratt (1984), Nelson George (1988) and Ricky Vincent (1996) argue that the use of black female vocalists by (mainly white, male) producers has often been perceived as the use of black female sexuality in the service of capitalism. Jaap Kooijman (2005) argues that because their albums sold well, record companies pressured both female and male African-American artists into singing disco. For critics like George, this meant that music originally written for disenfranchised black youths was 'reduced' to disco and depoliticized to make it palatable for white audiences. Others, like Brian Ward (1998), argue that smooth crossover acts like Lionel Richie catered to a particularly urban, educated black experience while darker funk and deep soul continued to attract lower-class black adults.

Again, Di Stefano's video addresses this mutation of the 'black voice' (that perhaps meant both a selling out and a divide within the African-American community) by hinting at the 'the double articulation' or double-bind of the 'assemblage' of 'dark disco' (referring to a particular type of music and musical themes, not ostensibly to race). The nostalgic voice-over of the video laments the appropriation of 'dark', wholly libidinal disco by its

'light' sanitized, heterosexualized version: 'Dark disco was our fado, our flamenco, our blues . . . it spoke of things in a voice partly melancholic, partly bemused by life. Dark disco was a song you sang to yourself . . . Now lightness is everywhere'. Although the voice could be seen to link 'darkness' to a 'pure' homosexual libido, an unfiltered *jouissance*, and the 'machinic' interpellation of the beat, the video's reflexive treatment of 'lightness' (through the earlier intertitle) alerts the viewer to the racial implications of 'dark disco'. Such a reading is, in fact, reinforced by the visuals that are used to 'match' the 'dark disco' voice-over. Disco's 'darkness' is thus also 'represented' through the still images of black singers Melba Moore and Gloria Gaynor. The ironic use of these stills can be compared to the earlier use of disruptive intertitles. Like the silent questions ('Why?', Why the lightness of skin?'), these images also problematize disco/sexuality's obsession with 'darkness'.

Epistemology as uncertainty

Di Stefano's *The Epistemology of Disco* thus at once sympathizes with and questions the disco/sexual man's 'identification' with the 'transcendental' (white) phallic signifier. Through the use of multiple points of view, polysemy and semiotic wordplay, the video constructs the 1970s disco scene in the US as a conjuncture of contradictory forces. Indeed, the video is Di Stefano's tribute to disco, where disco becomes a space for self-expression and fantasmatic identifications for gay men. Simultaneously, the piece also seems to question the larger political consequences where disco/sexuality appears to be appropriated by a heterosexist phallic economy: the 'Y' is not just the chiselled gay body, but becomes a complex/compound signifier for a primarily white, phallocentric economy within which gay male desire is expected to operate. Even as gay men fight homophobia by creating their discotopias, these spaces themselves are defined through the exclusion of queer women, non-white queer men and women and those who do not fit oppressive models of (homo)masculinity.

This struggle to grasp what disco was is clearly reflected in Di Stefano's title that alludes to that well-known essay by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In 'Epistemology of the closet', Sedgwick (1990) argues that 'the closet' is not a space that a gay/lesbian liberationist emphasis on 'coming out' can easily banish from discourse. Sedgwick's aim, here, is to show how 'the closet' has *always* functioned and continues to function as a structuring device, operating as a regime of an 'open secret', so that 'living in and coming out of the closet are never really matters of the purely hermetic' (80). In Sedgwick's argument, 'knowledge' of sexual orientation and/or preference (or indeed knowledge of all kinds given the way that knowledge is bound up with sexuality and vice versa) is invariably linked to asymmetrical power relationships and silences that continue to circulate and increasingly make 'the closet' a weightier presence, as well as a site of indeterminacy. Di Stefano's video, I want finally to suggest, represents disco/sexuality much like Sedgwick's 'closet' insofar as the closet is both a refuge and a repressive apparatus whose 'epistemology' is anything but certain.

Although Hughes is not really interested in exploring the ethical burden of his theory of identifications, his conclusion is, nevertheless inflected by a similar awareness of the complex homophobic and racist history of disco:

> the evolution of disco is one of both appropriation and integration, both exploitation and empathy; the negotiation between usually straight black women and usually white gay men seemed to open up and make visible all the various subject positions between these previously polarized identities. Since the actual author and audience of any disco song are both

> indeterminate, disco's racial, sexual and gender identity cannot be finally fixed as 'black music', 'women's music' or 'gay music'. The violence I have argued it does to fixed identity results in a doubling, slippage and transference of black and white, male and female, gay and straight subject positions (153).

Thus, like Dyer, Hughes is interested in preserving in disco/sexuality a possibility and a potential for 'multiplicities' by exploiting the indeterminacy of the subject position through apparently multidirectional subjective identifications. I have tried to demonstrate the limits of this model by pointing to its unidirectional nature, lack of reciprocity, and its complicity with a phallocentric discourse. In the second part of my paper, I explore the ethical implications of what I read *as an alternative* model of 'disco/sexual askesis'. The 'assemblage', however, is not disco music, but rather cinematic practice and specifically, Derek Jarman's *The Last of England* (1987). My analysis focuses on the ethical impulse behind the central but little discussed 'disco-death' dance in the film.

Part II

In his critique of strategies of subcultural appropriation, Alan Sinfield (1998) astutely argues that queer re-appropriations are not necessarily or permanently subversive – since subcultural re-significations of the norm might, in fact, end up buttressing the norm and/or create new oppressive norms. He also alerts us to the tension at the heart of his own project: 'One of my leading ideas calls for more determined subcultural work; the other calls for a recognition that the kinds of subcultural cohesion that we have developed since Stonewall are losing effectiveness' (Sinfield 1998, 6). In other words, the task of the cultural critic is to construct as well as interrogate the limits of subcultural myths that shape identities and discourses. In this context, Sinfield identifies Derek Jarman as a filmmaker who uses, abrogates, and hybridizes cultural forms and allows his viewers to see 'how the negotiation between deference and appropriation has worked' (39). In this section of my paper, I read Jarman's *The Last of England* as a film that at once deploys and shakes up the subcultural myth of disco. I argue that Jarman uses disco as a sensibility that is not confined to the dance floor but one that affects and is affected by his filmmaking practices and political views.

In his book, *Derek Jarman and the lyric film*, Steven Dillon (2004) places the British filmmaker's work in the larger tradition of politically charged 'lyric films' (13),[20] suggesting that Jarman's films 'repeatedly negotiate the territory between "I" and the community, between the individual, suffering speaker and political activism' (14). This is particularly true of *The Last of England* where Jarman uses his own poetry and himself appears as a 'character' at several points in the film. Yet, he 'disperses' his own presence in and through his other anonymous 'characters' who people this enigmatic collage of image and sound. Thus, in spite of its autobiographical tendency (the film also incorporates home movies shot by Jarman's father), as an entirely non-narrative text that defies generic identification, the poetic and subjective 'I' in *The Last of England* is elusive and impossible to fix. This constant movement or mediation between the subjective 'I' and a larger scene of marginalization might remind us of Hughes' (1994) discussion of identification in disco and of my reading of Di Stefano's video. However, before I examine Jarman's use of disco (and sound and music in general) in *The Last of England*, a schematic description of the film will be necessary.

Jarman himself calls the film a 'mental image' that emerged from a feeling of stagnation, poverty, and discrimination in Margaret Thatcher's Britain, stating that it does not attempt to represent 'reality': 'In dream allegory, the poet encounters personifications

of psychic states' (Dillon 2004, 163). When asked what the film is about on another occasion, Jarman replies with a quote from Oliver Cromwell's angry address to Parliament on its dissolution in 1654: 'For a day of vengeance is in my heart and the year of my redeemer is come. ... And I will tread down the people in mine anger, and make them drunk in my fury' (O'Pray 1996, 159). Anger and frustration are thus major emotions in this film. But these emotions are, as we shall note, inseparable from genders and sexualities that become conduits for their expression.

In the first sequence of *The Last of England*, a handsome half-naked man alternatively stomps and masturbates on a discarded copy of Caravaggio's painting 'Profane Love'. This 'character', ironically called 'Spring', this man appears to be a punk vagrant who wanders aimlessly through urban rubble. As the voice of Nigel Terry recites the first of the four poems used in this section, we see Spring breaking windows, shooting up in an abandoned building, smoking, and falling asleep:

> ... We pull the curtains tight over the dawn, and shiver by empty grates. The household gods have departed, no one remembers quite when. Poppies and corncockle have long been forgotten here, like the boys who died in Flanders, their names erased by a late frost that clipped the village cross. Spring lapped the fields in arsenic green, the oaks died this year. On every green hill mourners stand, and weep for the last of England.

The last line of this poem (and the film's title) is proleptic of the political mood of the entire film. As we see Spring 'ravaging' the Caravaggio, himself trapped, as it were, in Jarman's apocalyptic 'mindscape', Terry's voice-over identifies Spring as one of the destitute survivors in a repressive British state. But this critique of post-colonial England is complicated by an ironic allusion to the state's 'glorious' colonial past: for *The Last of England* is also a mid-nineteenth-century painting by Ford Madox Brown, depicting a (heterosexual) couple leaving England at the height of emigration to the colonies. Jarman's dream allegory thus creates a space where 'the poet encounters psychic nation-states, a visionary response to the contemporary state of England' (Dillon 2004, 165). Simultaneously, however, this post-colonial critique of politics and society is also 'timeless', in that it contains no deliberately contextualized representation of history and very few references to Thatcher's regime. The three other poems in the first section similarly articulate the poet's general frustration with 'malevolent bureaucracies', 'half truths spilling from a minister's case', and '101 years of middle class assurance'. And the characters that appear in the film after Spring are equally abstract and hard to define and place.

After the fourth poem and the end of the first section, the film's focus moves from Spring to the 'character' of Spencer Leigh. Like Spring, Leigh also wanders through the ruins like an outcast, crying intermittently rather than violently hacking and wrecking. Masked figures dressed in balaclavas appear next. But their identities, again, remain ambiguous. Presented simply as members of a repressive state apparatus, these torch-bearing and dancing figures hover and render unclear the distinction between 'terrorists' and government representatives. A sequence of the 'terrorists' dancing around a bonfire is followed by the central 'disco-death' sequence: here, a man dressed as a ballerina dances to a beat that blends with the firing of the machine-gun and the speech of Adolf Hitler. The next stylized piece is that of a fully-dressed and masked 'terrorist' and a naked man making love on the Union Jack. The execution of Leigh Spencer by a firing squad is then intercut with shots of a woman in a field, played by Tilda Swinton. The scene then switches to a group of huddled figures (who could be either refugees or prisoners) preparing to sail, thus visually alluding to (and simultaneously taking an ironic distance from) Brown's painting. Jarman then abruptly cuts to a sequence of a naked and homeless

man eating a raw cauliflower. Next, the terrorists return, and this time they are more clearly aligned with imperial power: their images are juxtaposed with archival footage from British India. A funeral sequence follows, where women dressed as mourners are heard supporting the soldiers and their efforts in the Falklands.[21] The last sequence of the film includes a wedding and a 'dance of death': at the wedding, Swinton and Spring play bride and groom. But the wedding's heterosexuality is immediately undermined by the presence of three 'bridesmaids' who are men in drag. The wedding 'celebrations' finally end with Swinton's climactic performance next to a bonfire: at once agonized and rebellious, she tears off her wedding dress with shears, bites off and chews it to pieces. And the last shot of the film is that of a boat escaping with half a dozen people, one of whom carries a burning torch.

As I mentioned in the introduction, my interest in the film stems from the 'disco-death' sequence. Why, indeed, is it called the 'disco-death' dance? How is it related to the other performed pieces and to the politics of the entire film? How might we see Jarman's film, its understanding of 'disco/sexuality', to be 'practising' or deviating from the kind of 'identification' that Dyer (1979) and Hughes (2004) suggest in their readings of disco? These are some of the questions I attempt to answer through a closer reading of the images, the soundtrack, and Jarman's poetry.

Disco and **The Last of England**

To begin with, let us look at the two explicit references to disco in the film. The first comes in the second poem recited by Terry in the Spring sequence:

> My teacher said, there are more walls in England than in Berlin, Johnny. What were we to do in those crumbling acres, die of bore-dom? – *or recreate ourselves, emerging from the chrysalis all scarlet and turquoise, as deathbeds from gyp plants, moths of the night, not your clean-limbed cannon fodder for the drudgy nine-to-five, sniffing glue instead of your Masonic brandies. We fell off the cogs of misfortune, out to lunch in 501s, notching up the pricks in the disco, we heard prophetic voices*. (My emphasis)

While there is nothing to indicate that Jarman privileges a homosexual 'identity politics' in this poem or in the film, sexuality or sexual behaviour does become a dividing line that separates the non-heteronormative first person 'I' and 'we' from the 'straight' second person of 'your Masonic brandies'. Like Di Stefano in *The Epistemology of Disco*, Jarman also links 501 jeans to a particular class and scene of gay commodity culture. Admittedly, the film does not make the kind of wild semiotic detour in which Di Stefano's video revels. And yet, the reference to the economy of the 501 anticipates the phallic dance ('notching up our pricks') under the stroboscope. Simultaneously, however, disco/sexuality also performs an oracular function of speaking to the poet in 'prophetic voices'. What prophecies are these? What impact do they have on Jarman? And can these voices be 'heard' in *The Last of England*? I want to answer these questions by taking on the second reference to disco in the film, in the title of the male ballerina's dance.

Surprisingly little has been written about the form and content of this piece in Jarman's film, given its intriguing name and its deployment as an extremely powerful and self-conscious cinematic device. However, Dillon provides a helpful description of the dance:

> This 'performance video', ... *the most extended set piece so far, is an entirely self-reflexive enterprise, since the genre into which many viewers would most readily situate* The Last of England *is that of the rock video*. ... The disco sequence itself is a kind of hallucinatory antivideo played to dance music that seems to arise out of machine-gun fire. ... This male ballerina has a horn on his head and dances as if amidst flames. *We cut in overly fast and*

> *distorted splices to naked terrorists who wear only their masks, dancing in red light*. Again there is the impression that this video is being dreamt**,** *insofar as images from other parts of the film creep in, from both earlier passages as well as later ones*. The sequence, with its remarkably 'synchronous' sound ... *seems to be its own self-sufficient artefact, but at the same time, it is not, since other images find their way into the mix. ... The ballerina is the hallucinatory embodiment of what art remains, at the end, in* The Last of England. *Imagination has been confined; the music is repetitive and loud; the images are distorted*; they are only the slightest remnants of civilization (Dillon 2004, 176, my emphasis).

This account, albeit a helpful starting point, is inadequate for our purposes unless we analyse the form of Jarman's 'antivideo' through its content and vice versa. Technically, 'Disco-death' is also the name of the track composed by experimental rock artists Mayo Thompson and Albert Oehlen for this dance sequence in Jarman's film. While it is true that the music is closer to punk drum loops (with a more solid 'groove') than it is to the 'lighter' disco beat, the genre of this piece of music is ultimately unidentifiable as it blends with gunshots at one end and Hitler's voice at the other. The name of the track also raises a number of interesting possibilities. On the one hand, 'Disco death' could evoke 'the death' of disco: that is to say, the homophobic repression of its black, homosexual origins beginning in the late seventies. On the other hand, the visual representation of the 'death-dance' of a horned transvestite to a loosely punkish beat could be seen as being transgressive, since it 'corrupts' the heterosexual 'phallic' dimension presumed to define the genre of rock music. Such an approach is also in contrast with the distinction that Dyer (1979) and other theorists make between 'phallic' rock and 'emotional' disco.[22] Furthermore, the cutaways of the dancing 'terrorists' under the red light evoke memories of the disco floor, thereby making problematic 'connections' between the dancer, the punkish beat, disco, and the 'terrorists'. The quick editing done to the beat to juxtapose the dancer and the naked terrorists thus evokes a crossing of boundaries, a blurring of distinctions between 'the pure' and 'the corrupt'. This idea of a 'corrupting connection' is also noted by Dillon (2004) when he speaks of other images 'creeping into' the dance. In other words, one could argue that the disco-ballerina, as 'a hallucinatory embodiment of what art remains', is itself a 'corruption', a catachrestic appropriation or hybridization of disco/sexuality.

But to what ends? Once again, perhaps unwittingly, Dillon (2004) shows the way by linking the dance to two other performance pieces in the film:

> The terrorists' dancing around their bonfire transitions directly into the disco sequence, which is a kind of dance video from hell. The disco sequence has some affinities with the performance pieces later (eating the cauliflower, cutting up the wedding dress) (176).

In his analysis of the film, William Pencak (2002) also reads a similar 'affinity' between the ballerina and Tilda Swinton: 'These bitter comic dance scenes foreshadow a far more powerful one near the film's end. A young bride, mourning her husband's death at the hands of the soldiers, performs a 'powerful dance of death' and shreds her wedding dress' (148). In this way, both Pencak and Dillon note (but do not explore the disco/sexual implications of) these 'connections' or 'affinities' conveyed through the figure and performance of the disco-ballerina. In the following section, I expand specifically on this relationship between the two death dances using Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of 'becoming'.

Becoming-woman, becoming-disco

In their collaboratively authored philosophical treatise, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) analyse cinematic, literary, and

psychoanalytic texts to begin theorizing the anti-mimetic, transformative process of 'becoming'. Critiquing the inherent anthropocentrism of psychoanalysis and Freud's interpretation of 'becoming wolf' of the Wolf-Man,[23] Deleuze and Guattari write:

> A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. *But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification.* ... To become is not to progress or regress along a series. ... Becoming can and should be qualified as becoming-animal even in the absence of a term that would be the animal become. The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not. ... This is a point to clarify: that the becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but that it also has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which co-exists and forms a block, with the first (262–3).

Here, it is important to remember that in Deleuze and Guattari's definition, all 'becomings' are minoritarian. That is to say, although the emphasis is on the process or movement of 'becoming' and not on an identifiable, fixed 'product' or entity to be transformed into, one strives toward 'becoming' that which is usually oppressed or ignored by the 'molar' powers.[24] Thus, the processes of 'becomings-woman' and 'becomings-child' occupy a special position in Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual schema (1987, 248). Secondly, while 'becomings' involve *symbioses* or alliances between totally disparate entities (238–9), it is crucial to note that 'becoming' cannot be equated with 'identification' with that which one intends to 'become'. In that sense, 'becomings' are radically opposed to the kind of 'identification' that Hughes (1994) struggles to define in relation to disco: a 'becoming-black woman' does not mean an attempt to 'occupy the position of' or turn into a 'psychic equal' of a black woman. 'Becoming' is also not a filial process. It is a non-evolutionary and non-productive rhizomatic 'involution' that resists genealogical and familial classification. 'To involve' is to form a 'block' that runs its own line 'between' the terms in play (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 239).

Before moving to Jarman's film, I also want to make a distinction between Gilbert's (2006) and my uses of 'becoming' from Deleuze and Guattari. In his analysis of Dyer's 'In defense of disco', Gilbert sees unadulterated disco music as presenting a possibility of 'becoming-African' on the dance-floor:

> In Deleuzian terms, we might say that IDOD understands rock as territorializing black music, ordering its physicality according to the laws of the phallus, while disco, quite to the contrary, could 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 (Gilbert 2006, 118).

So this becoming is made possible because of disco's 'innate' properties, where the music's 'blackness' is not appropriated by the consumer but rather overpowers the consumer with a force akin to that behind the mythical St. Vitus' dance. However, what Gilbert does not tell us is the impact that such becomings have on the constructions of disco, black music, and Africanness. In other words, given that for Deleuze and Guattari 'becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself' (1987, 262), what is missing from Gilbert's theorization is a reciprocal perturbation of the 'truth' and 'purity' of these subcultural myths that initiate becomings via the disco beat.

In contrast with Gilbert, I would like to invoke a different scene of becoming from *The Last of England*. Here, I am emphasizing not just the transformation of the dancer but also of disco as a subcultural sensibility.

If disco is an oppressed 'assemblage' threatened by molar powers of heterosexuality, then the blurring of boundaries (between man/woman, rock/disco) effected by the death

dance of Jarman's disco-ballerina could, in fact, be looked upon as a 'becoming-disco', or as a 'becoming-woman'. Thus Deleuzian-Guattarian 'becoming', in my reading, is also markedly different from Hughes' (1994) notion of 'man-machine' or 'gay man-black woman' 'identification' and pulls and tugs at all Dyerian discotopias in general. If we follow the schizoanalytic interpretation of 'becoming', this 'disco' dance is a form of involution that *produces nothing identifiable or generically classifiable*. The performance of the ballerina can only form a 'block' that is neither man, nor woman; neither rock, nor disco. It is a *new* disco 'assemblage' created through a 'becoming' – one that looks at disco/sexuality in entirely new ways.

Homosexuality in *The Last of England* thus takes a radically different form when viewed through the notion of 'becoming-woman': it is possible to argue that the scene of homosexual desire between the soldier and the man, immediately following the 'disco-death' sequence, is also rhizomatically 'infected' by Jarman's re-vision of disco/sexuality. Within Jarman's psychic 'discotopia', – a discotopia *sous rature* – the homosexual union between a 'terrorist' and a defenceless civilian is also a dream of a 'becoming-woman', a 'line of flight' that momentarily defies the phallic molar state's exploitation of the 'terrorist'. Here, Jarman 'hallucinates' another act of 'disco-defiance' through his vision of non-erotic homosexual sex on the patriotic emblem of the Union Jack. Thus, homosexuality in *The Last of England* is, in fact, an anti-phallic and anti-erotic manifestation of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call the 'war-machine':

> Sexuality brings into play too great a diversity of conjugated becomings; these are like n sexes, an entire war machine through which love passes. This is not a return to those appalling metaphors of love and war, seduction and conquest, the battle of the sexes and the domestic squabble ... What counts is that love itself is a war machine endowed with strange and terrifying powers. Sexuality is the production of a thousand sexes, which are so many uncontrollable becomings. *Sexuality proceeds by way of the becoming-woman of the man and the becoming-animal of the human:* an emission of particles (278–9).

The indeterminacy of the 'terrorists' can thus be further explained within this particular schema of (homosexual) love as a war-machine. Arguably, the 'terrorists' are a part of the molar state apparatus. But in Jarman's 'dream' they also bear the (homosexual) potential to be dancers carrying torches of hope: shots of the dancing terrorists are therefore inserted as cutaways in the 'death-disco' sequence. This is a moment when Jarman wishes away the state's powers, transforming the 'terrorists' into his very own 'disco dancers'.

A reappraisal of the 'disco-death' dance as a 'becoming' also allows us to unpack this scene's 'affinities' with the other performance pieces in the film. One could argue that the performance of the disco-ballerina forms *rhizomatic alliances or symbioses* with that of the man eating a raw cauliflower, with the disruptive 'grotesque' presence of the bearded transvestites at Swinton's otherwise molar wedding, and finally with Swinton performing her 'death-dance' after the wedding. All three sequences suggest a move from the molar to the molecular, a gesture that defies the molar construction of 'being human' and its imposition of the law of the phallus.

At this point, and before a closer analysis of Swinton's dance, it is important to clarify that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are not interested in engaging with either a social construction of 'gender', or in biological notions of being 'male' or 'female'. That is to say, 'becoming-woman' has nothing to do with the molar experience of being a 'real woman'. Deleuze and Guattari write:

> Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it. We are, however, not overlooking the importance of imitation, or moments of imitation among certain homosexual males, much less the prodigious attempt at a real transformation on the part of

> certain transvestites. *All that we are saying is that these indissociable aspects of becoming-woman must first be understood as a function of something else: not imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce in us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman. We do not mean to say that a creation of this kind is the prerogative of the man, but on the contrary that the woman as a molar entity has to become-woman in order that the man also becomes- or can become woman.* It is of course indispensable for women to conduct a molar politics, with a view to winning back their own organism, their own history, their own subjectivity (275–6, my emphasis).

Thus, Deleuze and Guattari do not deny the fact that female impersonation and/or homosexual drag can be a subversive exercise that expose(s) the construction of 'femininity' through mimicry and emulation. However, the process of 'becoming-woman' does not partake of that economy of mimesis primarily predicated on phallic desire. The bearded transvestites at Swinton's wedding demonstrate 'becomings-women' precisely because they appear to be asexual, 'ridiculous', and outside the logic of the phallus.

Similarly, by ignoring the material circumstances of the molar woman, Deleuze and Guattari do not intend to disregard the importance of the notion of sexual difference in feminist debates. They are more interested in formulating a position that finally transcends both the Oedipal law of the phallus and the notion of sexual difference.[25]

Furthermore, unlike the unidirectional identifications that Hughes (1994) describes, 'becomings' rely on the woman to initiate the process. It is the molar woman who has to begin becomings-molecular and defy the transcendental signifier. The man follows the woman's 'becomings-woman'.

In light of this rethinking of the stakes of self-transformation, I want to suggest that Swinton's 'death-dance' in the final sequence of Jarman's film also expresses desire for the initiation of such an anti-phallic 'becoming-woman'. Given that the sequence also uses the voice of performance artist Diamanda Galas, the schizoanalytic links between 'becoming-woman', 'becoming-music', and death will be particularly useful in this context.

In his introduction to *Deleuze and music*, Ian Buchanan (2004) points out that, for Deleuze and Guattari, both the form and expression of music are inseparable from (the threat of) death:

> Death, as the moment when we confront the point where the line of flight meets the line of abolition, is a necessary dimension of music, or the sound assemblage. Music doesn't awaken a death instinct, that isn't why it gives us a taste for death; it confronts death and stares it in the face (15).

Here, it is important to remember that what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call 'music' is that which 'deterritorializes' the familiar 'refrain'. For them, the refrain, as the familiar, symmetrical repetitive 'block', is really 'anti-music' associated with the molar powers. In other words, music that 'confronts death' and that is 'becoming-molecular' or 'becoming-woman' is asymmetrical and improvised, composed in opposition to the refrain. The 'Disco death' track with its unclassifiable, asymmetrical music is thus also an instance of 'becoming-music'. At the same time, the music of the 'disco-death' dance also finds its rhizomatic symbiont in the voice of Diamanda Galas in the Swinton sequence. As Swinton performs 'becoming-woman' by ripping off her wedding dress, twirling against the sunset and flames, Galas' non-melodic voice hums and cries over Swinton's 'dance'. Dillon (2004) writes: 'A conventionally optimistic melody this is not; if anything, this voice performs the storm itself, shrieking with the cold winds. But these cries and shrill

shrieks are also a response to the violence, a moan, a yell that emerges from a female figure rather than a man' (176).

The voice, however, is more than that of a (molar) 'female figure'. The music used is from Diamanda Galas' 'The mask of red death', a 'Mass[k] for a Time of Plague' (Pencak 2002, 148) where Galas appears topless and covered with spots to simulate (a person with) AIDS and to protest against the apathy and homophobia oppressing PWAs. Through the intervention of Galas' voice, Swinton's performance piece is thus also a 'becoming-(a person with) AIDS'. Furthermore, if we recall the homophobic conflations made between AIDS and disco/sexuality in the early eighties, Swinton's angry performance, finally, is also a 'becoming-disco'. Seen through the Deleuzian-Guattarian framework, Jarman thus both retains and radically alters disco in his film. It is this *misappropriation* that, I want to suggest, reinvents and renews disco's queer politics.

Conclusion

> *Aeon:* the indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too-early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened.
>
> *Chronos:* the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form and determines a subject (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 289).

This paper has 'dreamt' of rescuing the ethics and politics of disco from the clutches of *chronos* or 'pulsed time', from the easy heterosexual interpellation of the all-too-familiar refrain of Robbie Williams's 'Rock DJ', and from the 'power over life' with which the Bee Gees' 'Staying alive' has been now gifted. Through my readings of cultural texts and criticism from the late seventies and eighties, I have tried to show how a queer politics of disco/sexuality cannot be articulated and defended through the ambiguous and one-sided processes of identification experienced only on the dance floor. My reading of Jarman's *The Last of England* has thus moved away from this model of privileging the sonic experience at the expense of the larger sensibility of disco. Using the Deleuzian-Guattarian notion of 'becoming', I have tried to show how Jarman re-appropriates disco beyond recognition to articulate an alternative politics of alterity that is not based on identification, but rather on rhizomatic connections and affiliations. In my epigraph, Phil Turetsky (2004, 143) describes the process of 'becoming' as a form of *askesis* and therefore as a willed and conscious ethical exercise. Let me finally propose that this Deleuzian-Guattarian 'becoming' in Jarman be seen in conjunction with Michel Foucault's 'becoming homosexual'.

In a now-famous interview, which appeared in the French magazine *Gai Pied* in 1981 and was later published as 'Friendship as a way of life', Foucault (1997) approaches homosexuality specifically through an *askesis* that he hopes will destabilize notions of a fixed homosexual 'identity':

> Another thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of 'Who am I?' and 'What is the secret of my desire?' Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, 'What relationships, through homosexuality, can be established, invited, multiplied, and modulated?' The problem is not to discover the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that's the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are (136).

In the same essay, Foucault also attempts to forge a link between classical philosophical *askesis* and contemporary homosexual *askesis*. 'Becoming homosexual,' Foucault argues,

can be effected only if we 'work on ourselves and invent . . . a manner of being that is still improbable' (137). While Foucault comes close to suggesting that it is possible to strive toward 'becoming' a homosexual without being a homosexual, issues of sexual preference, race, and gender remain unaddressed in what could be called the beginnings of a theory of homosexual *askesis*. However, with its emphasis on 'affective and relational virtualities', Foucauldian *askesis* seems to want posit a subjectivity that builds a relationship with the social other by transcending identity politics and social categories.

I want to suggest that Jarman approaches 'becoming' from a similar angle – as a form of queer *askesis* of the filmmaking-self – but by being more articulate (than the ethical Foucault) about the specific arenas of politics that concern him; arenas through which something like a 'collective experience' can perhaps be more effectively imagined than in the discotheque: post/colonialism, Thatcherism, and AIDS. As in Foucault's notion of homosexual *askesis*, the schizoanalytic 'becoming' in *The Last of England* is thus also an engagement *with the difference of the other* – the 'woman', the 'terrorist', the 'transvestite' – but without any assumptions about comprehending or fixing the other's otherness. 'Becoming-disco' in Jarman, unlike 'identification' in Hughes (1994), thus requires both a Foucauldian 'care of the self' as well as an unambiguous movement beyond the self. 'Becomings' in Jarman's film thus makes cinematic art an 'abstract machine'[26] where disco/sexuality produces 'multiplicities' instead of 'identities'. In my reading, then, Jarman's 'disco-death' and its rhizomatic deployment become an ethical practice that resists the mythification and stratification of the disco beat and articulates an alternative politics of disco. I should reiterate that Jarman's *askesis* does not idealize queer ethics (and in that sense does not 'precede' politics) but formulates it in relation to the artist's reading of a larger political landscape.

Coda

To end with something that was a very pleasant surprise to me while reading and researching for this article: in his essay, 'For the love of Lacan', Jacques Derrida also invokes the disco beat to elucidate how he can both hear Jacques Lacan's didactic voice even after his death and yet possess the freedom to interpret Lacan's words as he pleases. Derrida (1998) writes:

> He [Lacan] left me the greatest freedom of listening and interpreting, as he added soon afterwards: 'To the father who said it to me, from here to hear me or not' (Au père qui me l'a dit d'ici m'entendre ou non) (this didici is magnificent; I can hear it in Latin, as in the night of a disco, this time and not of a dance, a disco where the old professor cannot bring himself to give up (n'arrive pas à renoncer) the combined compulsion of the future perfect (future in the past) and didactics – didici, I will have told you, will have taught you) (51).

Here, *didici* sounds like a repeated, pulsed disco beat to Derrida. But interestingly, the beat no longer 'means' or is interpreted as pulsed time. As Derrida points out, *didici* in Latin will be translated as 'I will have taught you', suggesting a move away from the limits of chronic time to the eternity of the future in the past. My essay has attempted something similar in trying to 'interpret' (and thereby alter) the pulsed time of the disco beat: Jarman's 'interpretation' of the disco beat, I have tried to argue, involves transforming pulsed time to the 'aeonic' beat that will continue to teach, queer, and encourage minoritarian 'becomings'.

Notes

1. I could only find two short descriptions of the video while researching for this paper. See Straayer 1996 and Olsen 1996.

2. Fire Island, and in particular Cherry Grove and the Pines, were established early in the twentieth century as gay resorts close to New York City.
3. Motown was the first record label owned by an African-American that primarily featured African-American artists. In the 1960s, Motown and its soul-based subsidiaries became well known for 'The Motown Sound', a style of soul music with a distinct pop influence. Friedkin's 'boys' thus dance to what could be called 'early' disco.
4. Gillian Frank (2007) provides an excellent historical analysis of the connections between homophobia, the pronouncement of the 'death' of disco in 1979, and heterosexual responses to the AIDS crisis in the United States. Frank, however, is perhaps too quick to see 1970s disco as a 'queer cultural aesthetic that provided a possibility of bridging racial, gender and cultural divides' (Frank 2007, 306).
5. For her discussion of the logic of interarticulation, see Butler 1997, 117.
6. My essay also draws on Deleuze to think through the implications of using disco as a form of political critique but interprets 'becoming' in a way that resists the essentialization of disco as a form.
7. Gilbert and Pearson (1999) also admit that this political potential of disco is not easily achieved. See Gilbert and Pearson 1999, 107.
8. Excerpts used in the video are from Holleran 1995 [1979].
9. For a discussion of the divisions between lesbians and gay men in the 1970s gay and lesbian liberation movement, see Johnston 1973.
10. For a discussion on male homosexuality's ambivalence toward phallic masculinity, see Bersani 1987.
11. I am here referring to Benjamin's (1936) notion of the disappearance of 'authenticity' and 'aura' of art with the advent of the machine and a capitalist mode of production.
12. I use the word 'aleatory' also in the sense of improvised music. Improvisation is a concept I return to later in the essay.
13. Gilbert (2006) reads disco in Dyer's essay as a 'machinic mode of (Deleuzian) becoming' (114). Although Gilbert does not discuss Hughes' notion of identification, I would argue that their approach to disco's machinic interpellation is similar.
14. Although there is a significant difference between 'identification' and 'becoming' in Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Gilbert (2006) does not take on that distinction in his use of 'becoming'. For his use of the concept, see Gilbert 2006, 114.
15. Robert Fink (2005) also points out that this notion of disco as a 'release' need not mean that repetitive music like disco is absolutely 'non-teleological'. Neither should an absence of structure and teleology be taken as being inherently politically reactionary since such a stance completely ignores how the music is produced as well as how it is popularly consumed.
16. Hughes, in fact, compares this 'identification' to Donna Haraway's feminist definition of 'cyborg identification' for women. See Hughes 1994, 152.
17. This is another term that I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to suggest a messy realm of double articulation that one constantly needs to 'destratify'. The strata, as the bedrock of all existence, contain the assemblages and are organized into external and internal milieus. See Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 39. See also the 'Introduction' in Buchanan 2004, 6.
18. Lawrence (2006) notes how queer men and women of colour flocked to the hidden and abandoned loft space called the Loft in New York, while Studio 54 emerged as the most exclusionary venue of the late seventies. Alice Echols (2010) warns us against the idea of a 'universal' experience of disco and provides interesting anecdotal accounts of racial and gendered discrimination at a disco in Ann Arbor where she DJed as a graduate student. In her chapter on the role of women in disco, Echols is interested in a feminist reading of the music of performers like Chaka Khan. However, she admits that the importance of divas notwithstanding, the disco space was not necessarily congenial to women, and that their prominence did not usually translate into real power. See Echols 2010, xix–xxi, 71–120.
19. Class is another category that is easily elided here. Black women belonging to different classes cannot be collapsed into the 'figure' of the black disco diva.
20. Dillon (2004) argues that the 'lyric film' is hard to define. But he places Jarman's style and his antipathy for narrative cinema in affiliation with that of Sergei Paradjanov and Pier Paolo Pasolini.
21. The Falklands War was fought in 1982 between Argentina and the United Kingdom over the disputed Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and the South Sandwich Islands. The War started on 2

April 1982 with the Argentine invasion and occupation of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, and ended with the Argentine surrender on 14 June 1982.

22. Judith Peraino (2005, 178) uses the term 'discosexuality' to explain how disco came to be seen as a 'feminizing' and 'infectious' influence on rock. Note that I use 'disco/sexuality' in a more ambivalent and discursive sense.
23. Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 31) critique Freud for reducing the multiplicities of 'becoming-wolf' into the logic of one, for a systematic reduction to the One.
24. In Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) realm of 'schizoanalysis', 'the molar' represents the 'external milieu' to which the individual belongs and is part of a larger set. The 'molar' would then roughly correspond to the Lacanian Symbolic with its familiar institutions like the family, career, and conjugality. The 'molar' is opposed to the 'molecular', which Deleuze and Guattari define as the 'interior milieu'. The 'strata', in their theoretical system, are complex (discursive) double articulations constituted by both molar and molecular powers. 'Destratification', or the move from the molar to the molecular is thus constantly desired for its liberatory effects. For an excellent discussion on key concepts of the theoretical apparatus of Deleuze and Guattari, see Buchanan and Swiboda 2004, 1–19. For a discussion on (disavowed) links between Lacanian psychoanalysis and schizoanalysis, see Jagodzinski 2005, 7–31.
25. Jagodzinski (2005, 17–18) argues that in spite of their anti-psychoanalytic stance, Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) model of 'becoming-woman' is quite close to Jacques Lacan's formulae of sexuation. Lacan's model is also a rhizomatic web of connections that does not privilege sexual difference.
26. The operation of an 'abstract machine' is defined by 'deterritorialization'. Cinematic art, as an 'abstract machine' used by Jarman, opens the disco 'assemblage' to new forms: it enables disco to become other than what it is. For a useful description of art as an 'abstract machine', see Buchanan and Swiboda 2004.

Notes on contributor

Ani Maitra is a PhD candidate in the Department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. His areas of research and teaching include queer theory, critical race theory, and psychoanalysis. Ani has published articles in journals such as *Camera Obscura* and *South Asian Popular Culture*.

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