

IN DEFENCE OF 'IN DEFENSE OF DISCO'

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Happily, 'In Defence of Disco' today needs no defending. Richard Dyer's landmark intervention, a short essay published in 1979 in the journal *gay left*, defending disco music from left-wing hostility, is now widely acknowledged as a classic of its kind. Nonetheless, when I was first approached by Jaap Kooijman with an invitation to contribute to a special edition of the *European Journal of Cultural Studies* marking the essay's 25th anniversary, I could hardly refuse. Dyer's essay, which I first encountered as an undergraduate, at about the same time as house music, had been a remarkable influence not just on my academic work but on my whole way of conceptualising my relationship to the world and the cultural/political assumptions which informed it. When I found, back in the early 1990s, that Ecstasy, Irigaray and the later Roland Barthes were turning on its head the macho and puritanical universe of post-punk avant-gardism which I had grown up in, this essay written 14 years earlier seemed to tell me why. It is perhaps excusable, then, that I responded to Jaap's invitation with what amounts to (let's be honest) a rather long elegy to one short piece of writing. In the process I hope I make a reasonable point, however. Looked at in the broader history of cultural theory in the Anglophone world and in France, 'In Defence of Disco' is a remarkably prescient and concise statement of a theoretical and political position which has been struggling to emerge from various sources ever since, a position which puts an analysis of the corporeal at the centre of experience without collapsing into aestheticism or romanticism.

For various reasons the proposed issue of *EJCS* fell through, and all that was left of it was a review essay by Jaap himself covering a range of relevant literature.¹

Undeterred, and even with the 25th anniversary of IDOD passed, I decided to press on with the business of paying the essay its proper respects, and the board of *new formations* were delighted at the suggestion that we give space to this project in the journal, and were very positive about the essay that I had written. It was never supposed to be a piece that stood alone, however. We were therefore very lucky to be able to invite Tim Lawrence, who had just published the definitive history of New York's 1970s disco scene, *Love Saves the Day*, to contribute as well.² Lawrence's 'In Defence of Disco (Again)' locates the essay in a broader history of writing on and of disco and crucially identifies the anti-disco reaction of the later 1970s with the political rise of New Right.

Overall, then, these two essays seek to locate and explain the importance of IDOD as a singularly perceptive, theoretically advanced and politically astute piece of writing, the full validity of which has only been demonstrated

1. See Jaap Kooijman, 'Turn the beat around: Richard Dyer's "In Defence of Disco" revisited', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8, 2 (2005).

2. Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2004.

by the subsequent two-and-a-half decades of intellectual and cultural history. We present them here alongside the original essay as a testament to just what cultural criticism can be when it is both politically committed and unafraid to challenge dogma and received prejudice, even about something as seemingly trivial as disco.