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## ‘Le Freak, c’est Chic’: Decadence and Disco

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The optimistic beats of 1970s and 1980s disco might seem a strange comparison to the decadent tradition’s obsession with rot. Decadent legacies are, however, to be found in disco, with the acknowledgment that decadence after the fin de siècle is difficult to explicitly label. This article investigates the influences of decadence on disco. It does so by exploring similarities between the two cultures: how they were conceived alongside ideas of decline, how they were both criticized as ‘other’, the relationship between nineteenth-century dandyism and late twentieth-century popular culture, and how both movements put emphasis upon refinement. This analysis builds upon existing studies that link decadence to twentieth-century popular culture, and sets itself apart by specifically examining decadence’s relationship to disco, a topic that remains largely undiscussed. Overall, this article suggests that, although it was a distinct culture with utopian elements, disco incorporated aspects of decadence and disseminated these into mainstream American society.

### **Decadence comes to America**

The Victorians widely believed the historical theory that ancient Rome’s fall was due to its success; a lack of obstacles enabled the Roman elite to complacently degenerate towards effeminacy, weakness, hedonism, and corruption. With an emphasis upon classical learning at European educational institutions, such as schools, museums, and universities, the Roman empire was considered a past parallel to contemporary European empires. Rome served as both an inspiration (in administration, architecture, sculpture, etc.) and a warning to European elites about becoming lax with imperial successes. Mainstream beliefs about art were related to such notions; it was widely believed that art should maintain societal discipline and function to morally educate people.

Decadent art, and the transgressive lifestyles of decadents, were a refusal of this. The decadents viewed contemporary European powers as already old and exhausted civilizations that were in terminal decline; there were even some artistic sentiments that the world itself would soon end. In highlighting decline, they sought to embrace it. Decadent artists rejected bourgeois Victorian values of industriousness and moral conviction, instead emphasizing apathy, overindulgence, aristocratic refinement, and Victorian notions of perversity including unconventional sexuality.

Decadent attitudes were not confined to Europe. While traces of American decadence were found in Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942), recent studies have highlighted the impact of decadent artists such as Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Joris-Karl Huysmans on literature in America.<sup>1</sup> In *Decadent Culture in the United States* (2008), David Weir argues that European decadent ideas were transported into American society and circulated through a commercialized popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Weir has suggested that decadence had a particular influence on the cultures of America's large cities, such as New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. He has noted: 'whatever coloration decadence takes, it is typically the expression – the projection – of urban experience'.<sup>3</sup> Similar to its European manifestations, this included emphasis on hedonism, flamboyance, sexuality, and moral transgression.

It is difficult to definitively label American expressions of decadence. Kate Hext and Alex Murray have noted that 'decadence' is a broad and slippery term: 'decadence after the fin de siècle is even more difficult to detect and ultimately define than it was at the fin de siècle. [...] Decadence was not a movement as such after the imprisonment of Wilde'.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not manifestations of decadence in American popular culture were decadence per se, influences could be observed in the urban cultures of 1920s America, such as in opulent jazz parties.<sup>5</sup> Murray has argued that the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald were indebted to decadent influences and that he 'saw in the model of European decadence a presentiment of the decline of the American culture that had for so long considered itself the antithesis of old Europe'.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Alice Condé has argued that:

every decadent moment of Western cultural anxiety is accompanied by a subculture of almost nihilistic hedonism encompassing sexual licence, self-obsession, and fascination with degeneration. [...] The pleasure-seeking excess of the Roaring Twenties was a reaction to the economic prosperity and modernity after The Great War.<sup>7</sup>

### **New York, 1970s Declinism, and Disco**

Similar anxieties could be seen in the 1970s. Despite being the undisputed western superpower of the later twentieth century, to many Americans the 1970s seemed a period of decline of the nation's power, stability and morals.<sup>8</sup> The Vietnam War which ended in 1975 seemed a decisive defeat for the military, and many people felt that atrocities committed in the conflict had undermined America's international reputation as a moral nation. At the tail-end of the post-war economic boom there were energy crises and strained labour relations as well as high rates of inflation and slow economic growth. Politically, discontent was expressed through popular protest such as the anti-Vietnam War movement. Violent groups such as the Black Panthers existed, and the Watergate scandal undermined the integrity of the presidency.

America's urban centres were depicted as the failure of America's post-war optimism and the epitome of a perceived moral decline. Numerous films of the decade portray New York as a dangerous hellscape where traditional values of respect and stability have been replaced by crime, corruption, and substance abuse. These include *Shaft* (1971), *Serpico* (1973), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), and *The Warriors* (1979). The 1981 sci-fi classic *Escape from New York* would even imagine New York as a city so infested with crime that in the future it would be abandoned by law enforcement with a giant wall being built around it, turning it into one giant prison roamed by violent and lawless gangs.

These depictions had real-world parallels. Since the 1960s there had been talk of New York as being an 'ungovernable mess'.<sup>9</sup> Years of 'white flight' of affluent citizens towards the suburbs had resulted in a lack of tax revenue for the centre. The city had lost manufacturing jobs, making more citizens dependent on welfare.<sup>10</sup> It had colossal debts and could not afford to pay police officers, the fire brigade or for trash collections.<sup>11</sup> In 1975, when the city was near bankruptcy, the

police and firefighter unions produced a nightmarish pamphlet for their members to distribute to tourists. The cover featured an illustration of the Grim Reaper and was titled ‘WELCOME TO FEAR CITY’, with the subtitle, ‘a survival guide for visitors to the city of New York’.<sup>12</sup> Advice included not leaving the Manhattan area, never using public transport (‘you should never ride the subway for any reason whatsoever’), and staying off the streets after 6pm.<sup>13</sup> This was politicized and exaggerated propaganda, but it played into existing anxieties about the city’s condition.

Although New York was often portrayed as an urban nightmare, the city was culturally energetic, producing punk and hip-hop in the same decade. It was also from this environment that the dance scene which would later be labelled ‘disco’ emerged. New York’s dance scene was influenced by David Mancuso’s parties in The Loft, beginning in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> Mancuso was inspired by the writings of Timothy Leary, who advocated psychedelic drugs as a form of emancipatory experimentation, capable of helping people discover a higher state of consciousness. Mancuso tailored The Loft in appearance, sound, and audience (it was invite-only) so as to create an environment of inclusivity. Tim Lawrence has described Mancuso’s parties as being a type of experimental socialism: ‘it was social, and contained the possibility of collective politics’.<sup>15</sup> This utopianism can be contrasted with decadence’s pessimistic obsession with decline. There were, however, similarities in the creative confidence that fin-de-siècle decadence and 1970s disco encouraged. The collective security of The Loft, as would be seen in discotheques across New York that replicated its success, created space for self-expression. While drugs would often assist the experiences of dancers, the music and shared experiences of the crowd in themselves would enable the sort of emancipatory self-realization that Leary attributed to psychedelics. Against the backdrop of hardship in inner city New York, togetherness was especially important for self-expression.<sup>16</sup> The city was a cultural melting pot in which discotheques were inclusive spaces where people from different backgrounds could come together and dance without persecution. While this included male heterosexual dancers, it was particularly emancipating for women. One sociologist’s opinion on the appeal of disco later in the decade was that: ‘it talks to women. It tells

them you'll be okay; that you'll survive; that you can be a "Bad Girl" if you want to'.<sup>17</sup> It was also especially liberating for those who would have been considered to be outside the white and heterosexual 'norms' of mainstream America, such as African Americans, Latin Americans, and homosexuals. Although disco is sometimes associated with elitist clubs such as Studio 54, these were more the exception than the rule.<sup>18</sup>

While disco exhibited self-expressive aspects of decadence, it was in many ways different from it. While both decadence and disco were conceived alongside ideas of urban, and more generally, western decline, they had distinct responses to it. Decadence focused upon self-expression alongside decay, and with it, a more individualistic cure for the sickness of civilization.<sup>19</sup> Disco was more focused upon utopian self-realization, and by extension, renewal on the dance floor. It was fundamentally optimistic, and rather than passively accepting the world as exhausted, it encouraged dancers towards energetic dancing. In nineteenth-century decadence, time seemed to be coming towards an end. In disco's beats of extended twelve-inch records, and in the reality-distorting lights and sounds of discotheques, the party never stopped; time itself was disrupted. While Wilde's *Dorian Gray* believed that 'life is a great disappointment', for which hedonism and aristocratic refinement are of some comforting distraction, disco's reaction to the struggles of life were collectively and personally invigorating.<sup>20</sup> A clear rejection of *Dorian Gray*'s opinion, Patrick Hernandez's 'Born to Be Alive' (1979) insists by repetition: 'It's good to be alive!'.<sup>21</sup>

### **Criticisms of Disco**

While there were differences in overall outlook, as with decadence, criticisms of disco often stemmed from the 'otherness' of its participants and it was similarly lambasted as having no artistic value. In 1979, Robert Vare wrote in *The New York Times*:

The Disco Decade is one of glitter and gloss, without substance, subtlety or more than surface sexuality [...]. In the 1960's, of course, Americans would have given anything for something as mindless and impersonal as disco, an escape hatch from the social responsibilities [...]. Now we have found the answer. All we have to do is blow dry our

protein-enriched hair, anoint ourselves with musk oil, snort another line of cocaine and turn up the volume.<sup>22</sup>

There were also feelings among some in the rock community that disco was an existential threat to the values and commercial dominance of rock. In a 1979 issue of *Voice*, Frank Rose interpreted the backlash against disco as a rebellion of heterosexual white rocker kids against disco's mainstream acceptance:

What rock fans really hate about disco [...] is that it's so 'plastic'. The office workers, business people, singles, Perrier drinkers, and jogging enthusiasts who have embraced disco's sexy package of hedonism, narcissism, materialism, and escapism are the same people who, in a simpler age, would have settled for Pat Boone and Connie Francis and a nice home in the suburbs. Now they wear coke spoons.<sup>23</sup>

Disco was, for many of its critics, evidence of what Tom Wolfe labelled the "'Me' Decade' in which individualistic self-obsession had replaced meaningful collective values.<sup>24</sup> Vare labelled the 1970s 'the disco decade', which he contrasted with the 1960s, believing musicians in the 60s had been more sincere in their pursuit to change the world: 'after the lofty expectations, passions and disappointments of the 1960's, we have the passive resignation and glitzy paroxysms of the Disco 1970's. After the poetry of the Beatles comes the monotonous bass-pedal bombardment of Donna Summer'.<sup>25</sup> The first issue of *Punk Magazine* declared that disco was 'the epitome of all that's wrong with Western civilization'.<sup>26</sup> In these narratives, disco became a symptom of cultural decline, exhibiting artificiality and moral decay; it was decadence in the pejorative sense.

Historians of disco, such as Tim Lawrence, Peter Shapiro, and Alice Echols, have redressed many of these criticisms. While much of the mainstream disco that followed the release of the blockbuster film *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) was heavily commercialized, they have investigated core principles in the culture, such as inclusivity and self-expression. Historians of disco have also found that criticisms of disco were often directed towards the 'otherness' of the culture. In the post-war period, New York had become a metropolis for America's gay community, and the disco scene was largely incubated in homosexual discotheques.<sup>27</sup> Frank Gillian has written that in anti-disco discourses, the culture was presented as 'queer, gender transgressive, elitist, and socially

threatening'.<sup>28</sup> Leader of the 'disco sucks' movement, radio jockey Steve Dahl, often lisped the word 'disco' in his broadcasts to stress its associations with male homosexual culture.<sup>29</sup> His recorded single 'Do You Think I'm Disco?' (a parody of Rod Stewart's 1978 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?'), which ridiculed disco as being artistically meaningless, featured the lyrics: 'do you think I'm disco? Am I superficial? Looking hip's my only goal'.<sup>30</sup> Gillian has argued that

the violent backlash against disco in 1979 transformed disco from a socially acceptable form of music and culture to one that was highly stigmatized. However, the backlash was directed not simply at a musical genre but at the identities linked to disco culture.<sup>31</sup>

Besides homosexuality, this included associations with commerciality (and by extension, inauthenticity), non-white ethnicities, and women; essentially, disco seemed 'other' to the musical authority of rock music, which was generally thought of as being more white, heterosexual and male.

These criticisms, many of which were homophobic, would have been familiar to fin-de-siècle decadent artists who were ridiculed for being superficial, vainglorious, and effeminate; for their 'otherness' to mainstream Victorian society.<sup>32</sup> One illustration in *Punch* mocked the Aesthetic man as removed, pompous, and unintelligent, depicting him effeminately posed beside a fireplace with dustpan in hand and the inscription: 'the dilettante De Tomkyns complacently boasts that he never reads a newspaper, and that the events of the outer world possess no interest for him whatever'.<sup>33</sup> As a celebrity, Wilde was particularly subjected to satire for his eccentricity and suspected homosexuality (he was tried for 'gross indecency' in 1895). Thomas Nast labelled Wilde an 'aesthetic sham' in a caricature depicting him as the self-obsessed Narcissus [fig. 1].<sup>34</sup>

Similarities between the criticisms of decadent artists and criticisms of disco are no coincidence. Decadence has a longstanding influence on the performances of LGBTQ+ cultures. Weir has noted: 'decadence has enjoyed a considerable afterlife in that over-the-top culture known as camp'.<sup>35</sup> While it is true that disco was often denounced for being over-commercialized, much of the criticism had a more political dimension. Disco was considered threatening because it subverted societal expectations of what was 'normal'.<sup>36</sup>

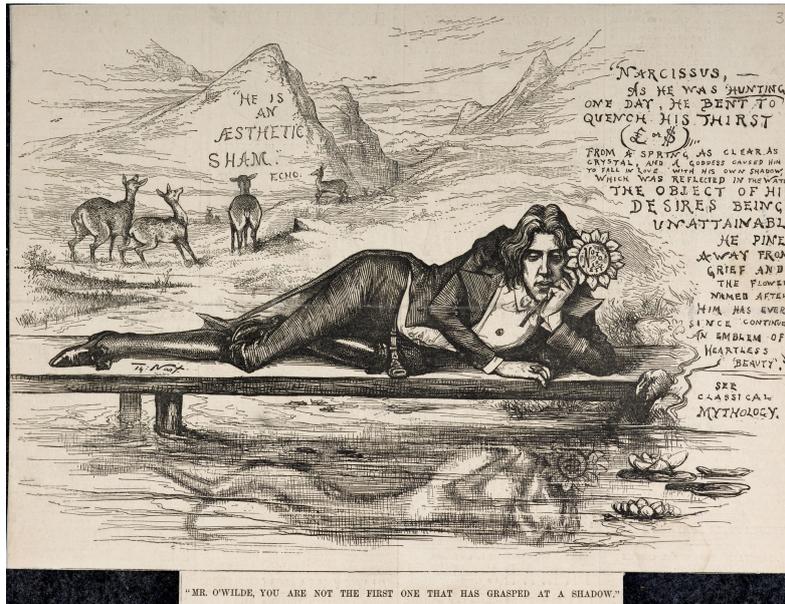


Fig. 1: Thomas Nast, 'Oscar Wilde as Narcissus' (c. 1894).

### Dandyism and Late Twentieth-Century Popular Culture

One notable aspect of nineteenth-century decadence was its rejection of nature in favour of artificiality. The motto of Aestheticism (of which decadence might be considered a branch), 'art for art's sake', philosophized that art should not have a moral purpose. This thinking was explored in Huysmans's *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), in which the main character rejects society by choosing to explore a world of his own artistic creation. Celebrating moral inversions of what Victorians believed to be 'natural' could mean embracing supposedly deviant sexualities such as homosexuality. If searching for artistic beauty and creativity is paramount, societal condemnation of sexuality can be disregarded. Peter Jeffreys has noted:

not only was decadent aestheticism linked to homosexuality because of the sexual tastes of so many of its key advocates, but the arguments regarding amorality in art and literature were frequently thinly veiled attempts by fin de siècle homosexuals at justifying same-sex relations.<sup>37</sup>

Many decadents would experiment with clothing that was unfashionable. There were men who would dress in effeminate clothing and women who would dress in masculine clothing. Dandyism placed emphasis on the refinement of physical appearance, language and activities. Holbrook Jackson once described the dandy as 'an artist whose media are himself and his own personal

appearance’, adding that ‘the art of the Dandy is the art of putting forward the best personal appearance, of expressing oneself in one’s clothes, in one’s manners, in one’s talk’.<sup>38</sup> Jackson observed that clothing was ‘only the outer envelope of dandyism’, and that it was part of a wider artistic outlook of self-expressive elegance through lifestyle.<sup>39</sup> Scholars such as Condé and Rhonda K. Garelick have suggested that dandyism had a legacy in late-twentieth-century cross-dressing. This could be seen in drag act communities and in glam rock acts such as KISS and Marc Bolan. Garelick has noted that in the 1980s Prince often appeared in sexualized purple outfits, including a frilled shirt, which mimicked the clothing of the nineteenth-century dandy. Garelick writes, ‘Prince appears keenly aware of his debt to nineteenth-century dandyism’.<sup>40</sup> In 1993, Prince even dandyishly replaced his stage name (i.e., his musical identity) with a ‘love symbol’ that was a combination of the gender symbols for man and woman.

Condé has examined decadent influences in artistic culture in 1960s and 1970s New York, observing that an ‘outsider art rock scene began to take shape in New York City, formed of the various creative figures who congregated around the Hotel Chelsea and The Factory, the studio of pop artist Andy Warhol’.<sup>41</sup> Condé suggests that we might observe decadent legacies here: ‘these two locales represented the depth and superficiality of post-war American decadence. The emptiness of it all’.<sup>42</sup> Warhol and the artists he collaborated with, such as The Velvet Underground, explored the links between culture, media and celebrity, with a decadent emphasis on experimenting with identity.<sup>43</sup>

New York also had a longstanding drag ball community and by the 1970s it also had a newly-empowered LGBTQ+ community willing to protest and even riot for its right to exist. Historian and sociologist Tina Fetner has written that activist movements such as women’s rights, Civil Rights, and the anti-Vietnam War movement created ‘a culture of political upheaval and a sense of imminent change’.<sup>44</sup> Although same-sex sexual relations would remain technically illegal until 1981, New York’s prohibition of same-sex dancing ended in 1971 following protests such as the 1969 Stonewall riots.<sup>45</sup> These successes emboldened the community; while homosexual bars

had previously been illegal and secretive, discotheques became areas of assertive self-expression where LGBTQ+ participants could explore and experiment with their identities without harassment.<sup>46</sup> Many discotheques did maintain aspects of secrecy, such as being ‘members only’ clubs or prohibiting photography, but besides mystique, this was intended to add a sense of community and security to these discotheques so that dancers could express themselves without photographic evidence.<sup>47</sup>

As a scene grounded in the LGBTQ+ community, disco artists often played with identity in decadent ways. Through its discourse of ‘realness’, disco echoed the Aestheticist emphasis on artificiality. This could – perhaps paradoxically – be heard in Cheryl Lynn’s ‘Got to Be Real’ (1978) and Sylvester’s ‘You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)’ (1978).<sup>48</sup> As disco historian Alice Echols put it, disco liked to ‘revel in the pleasures of the artificial’.<sup>49</sup> ‘To be real’ was to express oneself more authentically on the dancefloor.<sup>50</sup> The seeming artificiality of celebrating ‘otherness’ was in fact, considered more ‘real’ than the mainstream and every day; theatrical performances including drag and energetic dancing were expressions of a true self unfixed by societal expectations. Chic’s Nile Rodgers has reflected: ‘back in my hippy days, we talked about freedom and individuality, and it was all bullshit [...] we conformed to our non-conformity. As the celebratory phase of the struggle, disco really *was* about individuality. And the freakier, the better.’<sup>51</sup>

An example of ‘realness’ and dandyish experimentation can be found in the artist Grace Jones, who was androgynous in her appearance and performance.<sup>52</sup> Experiences in New York’s underground clubs inspired her creativity with identity, and she in turn contributed to the culture.<sup>53</sup> In the Paradise Garage, ‘a disco space shaped by a primarily black and Latino gay aesthetic’ in the late 1970s and 1980s, her singles ‘Pull Up to the Bumper’ and ‘Slave to the Rhythm’ were on the Top 100 DJ list.<sup>54</sup> The former of which, repeating the confident (and plosive heavy) imperative: ‘pull up to my bumper baby!’, was a rallying call to homosexual participants for unrestrained sexual exploration.<sup>55</sup>

Her gender bending and blending was displayed in a poster for the James Bond film *A View to A Kill* (1985) in which she starred. In this advertisement, Jones was presented both as a typically sexualized 'Bond girl' in a swimsuit, and as a muscular and masculine serious-looking enemy, sizing up Bond with the question: 'HAS BOND FINALLY MET HIS MATCH?'.<sup>56</sup> The poster suggested Jones was both a woman and just as much a man as Bond, being equally formidable to him. Bennett Brazelton has observed how Jones intersects many identities considered 'other' to white heterosexual America: 'her performances are a complex blend of robotic, alien, futuristic, diasporic, Afro Caribbean, sexual, queer, Black, feminine, masculine, dominating, intimidating, androgynous, humorous, depressed, dystopian, dispossessed'.<sup>57</sup> Brazelton believes that this multifaceted identity challenges the status quo: 'these multiple streams of identity, resistance, and reaction coalesce into provocative performances which disturb dominant modes of being/thinking'.<sup>58</sup> Miriam Kershaw notes that discotheques were spaces in which 'participants could construct an identity in opposition to external heterosexual norms'.<sup>59</sup> Jones, like many decadents of the past, embraced this eroticism and camp theatricality: '[the] erotic, fashionable outfits with the gender ambiguity of her intentionally androgynous look met with admiration in this willingly experimental and sexually explicit context'.<sup>60</sup>

### **Disco and Refinement**

Dandyism, and decadent art in general, was often associated with aristocratic refinement. In the late twentieth century, cultural movements like rock and disco, although significantly less aristocratic and more inclusive of the masses, had artists who explored decadent styles of refinement. David Bowie, for instance (who was more associated with rock), did this while experimenting with identity as something malleable; his refinement of multiple performative identities suggested that his life was itself a work of art. This was similar to the dandyism of Wilde, who argued in *De Profundis* (1897) that 'every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an

image'.<sup>61</sup> For Bowie, this included gender bending. He appeared lying effeminately in a dress with long curly hair on the British cover of his album *The Man Who Sold the World* (1971).<sup>62</sup>

Bowie rejected societal conformity, and switched between personas he wanted to artistically pursue, telling fans in 1974 that 'one isn't totally what one has been conditioned to think one is'.<sup>63</sup> While the cosmic Ziggy Stardust is his best remembered guise, his European aristocrat persona The Thin White Duke arguably best encapsulated many aspects of nineteenth-century dandyism and decadence. Like Bryan Ferry and Japan's David Sylvian, he emphasized refinement; his hair was slicked, and his suits were expensive and debonair. Bowie's Thin White Duke lifestyle was hedonistic; he consumed excessive amounts of cocaine and was extremely thin, exemplifying the decadent idea of self-destructive decay. The character, as with many decadent artists, portrayed himself as intrinsically empty and at times nihilistic, with songs about romance seeming a failed attempt to express emotion or meaning; as one paper put it, his 'passion' was 'studied' and 'his fire as cold as ice'.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Bowie played the role as if artistically independent of society's moral restraints when making numerous statements that were sympathetic to fascism. In a 1975 interview for *NME* he said: 'the best thing that can happen is for an extreme right government to come. It'll do something positive at least to cause commotion in people and they'll either accept the dictatorship or get rid of it'.<sup>65</sup> In the same interview, Bowie displayed awareness of the decadent influences on his role whilst condemning mainstream morality: 'I think the morals should be straightened up for a start. They're disgusting. This whole particular period of civilisation [...] it's not even decadent. We've never had true decadence yet. It borders on Philistine, really'.<sup>66</sup> After receiving criticism, Bowie, in decadent fashion, insisted that these were the views of an artistic expression of the character and not himself.

While The Thin White Duke made Nietzschean 'beyond good and evil' statements about morality, many disco acts embraced refined quasi-aristocratic styles without the outspokenness. In its glamour, partying, and the often-extravagant outfits of its participants, disco was reminiscent of the urban jazz culture of early twentieth-century America, which itself had had decadent

influences.<sup>67</sup> Chic, for instance, deliberately marketed themselves as cultured, their band name suggesting genteel trendiness. Their guitarist, Rodgers, has written of being artistically inspired by the alter egos of glam rock bands: ‘we created believable alter egos: two men in impressively labeled but subtle designer business suits which effectively gave us the anonymity of KISS. We put sexy girls on our cover, which was suave like Roxy Music.’<sup>68</sup> Additionally, the bold text of ‘Chic’ on their cover sleeves was rendered in Art Deco style (disco often fetishized fashions from the early twentieth century).<sup>69</sup>

Other disco artists also gravitated towards themes of refinement in their music. Norma Jean sang her aspirational rags-to-riches song ‘High Society’ (1979), while Gladys Knight & the Pips sang the deprecating ‘Bourgie, Bourgie’ (1980), about people who ‘hold the pose, turn the nose’.<sup>70</sup> In this, the goal of becoming middle class is to pompously achieve an almost aristocratic level of sophistication and leisure: ‘you keep us cool | with attitude. | Never have to work too hard | face is your credit card’.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, whether it was the sexual ‘voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?’ [do you want to sleep with me tonight?] in LaBelle’s ‘Lady Marmalade’ (1974), or Chic’s disco-summarizing, ‘le freak, c’est chic’ [the freak is chic], the occasional usage of French words and phrases in disco songs added to the idea of aristocratic and splendidous sophistication, as well as sexiness associated with the French language.<sup>72</sup>

In having refined aspects, disco was largely self-conscious in its impersonation of high culture, making it catchier to the masses. An epitome of this is Walter Murphy and the Big Apple Band’s ‘A Fifth of Beethoven’ (1976), which adapted Beethoven’s ‘Symphony No. 5’, transforming it into a danceable 4/4 disco beat.<sup>73</sup> It removed much of the original work, reducing it to its most memorable parts and repeating these. This made it in many ways less musically complex, but also more accessible. The title of the song itself turned Beethoven’s symphony into a pun about a liquor measurement. Many disco songs feature orchestral instruments, giving them luscious and fantastical soundscapes with cultivated associations, but as with ‘A Fifth of Beethoven’, these songs, due to the danceable nature of disco, are more inclusive than classical music.<sup>74</sup> While disco

may have incorporated aspects of high culture into its style, it was primarily a music and culture for ordinary people. High culture simply added to the fantasy and glamour.

### **Decadence to a Catchy Beat?**

Echols has argued that disco covertly remade America by exposing the public to marginalized peoples who were typically denied a voice. Despite the backlash of the ‘disco sucks’ movement of the late 1970s, the enduring catchiness of its beats were part of a slow process of making America more tolerant:

The hotness of seventies’ disco doesn’t just refer to its raunchiness or its rhythmic drive; it also signifies its politically incendiary quality [...]. Disco was the opportunity for people – African Americans, women, and gays in particular – to reimagine themselves and in the process to remake America.<sup>75</sup>

This article has identified decadent tendencies in disco through its presence alongside ideas of societal decline, similarities in how both movements were criticized, and in performances of dandyism and refinement. It has also identified differences between the cultures in decadence’s preoccupation with decay and disco’s more utopian optimism. This is not an exhaustive comparative analysis, and there is scope for further study. Hedonism in both cultures for instance, has not been investigated in depth.

Although decadence after the *fin de siècle* is difficult to define, similarities indicate decadent legacies in disco. If this argument is accepted alongside Echols’s, it would suggest that disco was a means by which decadent ideas, typically associated with the margins of society, were proliferated into mainstream American culture. This is not to say that it spread decadence in its *fin-de-siècle* form. Hext has reflected that decadent legacies in popular culture are not necessarily decadence as such:

As decadent culture metamorphosed in the twentieth century, the semblance of a core movement became lost, even whilst elements of its principles and styles came to influence the broader culture. Decadence in the new century became not so much a tradition as a spirit that helped to define camp style and operated to signify a defection from bourgeois values and sexual propriety.<sup>76</sup>

With that considered, a line from an early autograph manuscript of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* (1895), 'one's true character is what one wishes to be, more than what one is', would not have felt amiss in disco.<sup>77</sup> As the cross-dressing Sylvester put it in 'Dance (Disco Heat)' (1978): 'dancing's total freedom, be yourself and choose your feeling.'<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Murray, 'The Dance of Death: Fitzgerald and Decadence', *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 63.3 (2016), 387–411 (p. 389).

<sup>2</sup> David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Hext and Alex Murray, 'Introduction', *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 1–26 (p. 11).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Jeffreys, *Reframing Decadence: C. P. Cavafy's Imaginary Portraits* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Murray, 'The Dance of Death', p. 389.

<sup>7</sup> Alice Condé, 'Decadence and Popular Culture', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 379–99 (p. 380).

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