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Dancing at the Empty Discotheque: Two retro-disco music videos shot during COVID-19

Jaap Kooijman

In an article published in *The Guardian* on 17 December 2020, Alexis Petridis proposes an explanation why retro-disco songs in general, and Kylie Minogue's *DISCO* album in particular, are so popular during "the strangeness" of COVID-19:

As a genre, disco is lavishly escapist, but the best of it invariably comes with a curious undertow of melancholy. It is music that celebrates the transportive hedonism of the dance floor without ever entirely forgetting that there is something out there you're keen to be transported from.¹

Obviously, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the dance floor was not located in the closed clubs but in people's own homes. The two music videos of retro-disco songs that I discuss in this audiovisual essay return to the club's dance floor, yet in noteworthy different ways: while one presents an escape from COVID-19, the other reminds us of the devastating effect that the lockdowns have had on club culture.

Kylie Minogue's music video "Magic" was released on 24 September 2020; Sophie Ellis-Bextor's "Crying at the Discotheque" on 27 October, one month later. The music videos have much in common. Both are videos of retro-disco songs, shot in empty clubs and venues in London during the COVID-19 lockdown. "Magic" was shot in the London club Fabric, while "Crying at the Discotheque" was shot at seven different London clubs and venues: St Moritz, Omeara, Bush Hall, Heaven, Clapham Grand, Apollo Theatre, and the O2 Arena. Both are performed by popular female pop singers. Both in sound and image, the music videos not only refer to these performers' own retro-disco successes at the turn of the century, but also to 1970s disco culture. "Magic" is an original composition; "Crying at the Discotheque" is a cover of a 2000 hit single by the Swedish Eurodance group Alcazar, which uses a sample of the 1979 French disco song "Spacer" by Sheila and B. Devotion, composed by Nile Rogers and Bernard Edwards of Chic.

Another similarity is that both music videos were directed by Sophie Muller, one of the most prolific yet understudied music

video directors. During the last four decades, Muller has directed more than 300 music videos, including works for Annie Lenox (both solo and with Eurythmics), No Doubt, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, Maroon 5, and many others.² She has directed all of Sophie Ellis-Bextor's videos so far and several videos for Kylie Minogue. Quite surprisingly, there is little scholarly literature on Muller's work. Prominent music video scholar Carol Vernallis only mentions her once; not without irony, she merely states that Muller is "underrepresented."³ This audiovisual essay focuses on just two music videos, and therefore cannot do full justice to Muller's oeuvre, but it hopes to stand as an invitation to further exploration of her work.

This comparative audiovisual essay recognizes the similarities between the two music videos, but most of all highlights one significant difference. While "Crying at the Discotheque" emphasizes the club's emptiness, "Magic" conceals it. The audiovisual essay focuses on the different techniques used, particularly where cinematography and montage are concerned, to either emphasize or conceal the emptiness of the disco club. For example, the camera movement in "Crying at the Discotheque" explores the seven different locations, through tracking shots, steady cam shots, and crane shots, making the viewer not only aware of the largeness of space, but also of the absence of people beside the performer. This is reinforced by the point-of-view shots from the performer's perspective, which forces the audience to share her perspective on the empty dancefloor. Here a connection can be made to the "Sound of Silence (SOS)" photo series by the Dutch photographer Joram Blomkwist, portraying the empty dance floors of eighteen Amsterdam dance clubs during COVID-19 lockdown.⁴ This emptiness remains out of focus in the Kylie Minogue clip: the one club space in "Magic" is never shown in full, as the view is obstructed through tilted shots, the strobe light effect, and the superimposition of colorful images. Moreover, while the editing of "Crying at the Discotheque" is relatively slow, thus inviting the viewer to explore the club's emptiness, the rapid editing of "Magic" has a disorienting effect, again obstructing a clear view of the space.

Throughout the audiovisual essay, I have used the opening bars of "Crying at the Discotheque" (the melody of "Spacer") as a soundtrack, but I have distorted them through reverberation to mimic the muffled sound of an empty space; I also have looped them to echo the repetition characteristic of the retro-disco sound. By disconnecting both music videos from their original soundtracks, I place a stronger emphasis on their visual techniques, which is where they differ most radically.

With these two music videos, director Sophie Muller presents two quite different retro-disco perspectives on club culture during COVID-19. The dance floor of "Magic" is a colorful, throbbing, and lively space, providing a much-needed escapism, while the dance floors of "Crying at the Discotheque" are cold and dead spaces, a clear reminder of what was lost during the COVID-19 epidemic.⁵ However, one should keep in mind that this is predominantly a visual difference (even enhanced by my manipulation of the soundtrack). Both songs also work as retro disco in the sense that they provide a musical escape from COVID-19, yet without forgetting the dire situation that we needed an escape from. While the "Magic" music video enhances the escapist dimension, "Crying at the Discotheque" reminds us of the reality it allows us to escape from; together, they showcase the two sides—one melancholy, one hedonistic—that are

constitutive of the continued cultural force of retro disco.

Notes

- ¹ Alexis Petridis, “Pop in 2020: an escape into disco, folklore and nostalgia,” *The Guardian* (17 December 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/dec/17/pop-in-2020-an-escape-into-disco-folklore-and-nostalgia>
- ² Emily Caston, “Interview: Sophie Muller,” *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 19 (2020): 211–218, <https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue19/HTML/DossierMuller.html>
- ³ Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 263.
- ⁴ Joram Blomkwist, “Sound of Silence,” 2020: <https://www.blomkwist.com/portfolio/sound-of-silence/>
- ⁵ This observation is informed by a discussion with Maria Pramaggiore about a previous draft version of this audiovisual essay.

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