

ARTICLE

‘A straight heterosexual film’: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in *Saturday Night Fever*

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ABSTRACT

Underpinning *Saturday Night Fever*'s representation of masculinity is a seeming paradox, exemplified in Pauline Kael's disclaimer that 'it's a straight heterosexual film' despite the obvious similarities to *Scorpio Rising*'s gay bikers. While Tony Manero is represented as a sexist, homophobic, and racist heterosexual man, he also indulges in the traditionally feminizing activities of disco dancing and self-grooming. This article explores the construction of Tony Manero's masculinity by taking a closer look at these two activities and situating their cinematic representation in the American cultural context of the late 70s. In the case of disco, a distinction between disco's gay origins and subsequent entry into mainstream culture explains *Fever*'s hetero-normative version of disco. The article subsequently turns the attention to the film's grooming scene, which poses less easily redeemable challenges to Tony's machismo through intertextual and contextual references to homosexuality. I extrapolate between possible explanations, drawing on Richard Dyer's work on representation and the discourse on the 70s men's liberation movement. In the article's final section, I turn the attention to the connections between masculinity and ethnicity, examining how the 70s revival of ethnicity proposed a historically specific a model of the Italian-American man, unencumbered by the requirements of new masculinities. I argue that *Fever* replicates this model to infuse into the representation of Tony Manero styles and behaviours that would have otherwise signified homosexuality.

KEYWORDS

Masculinity, disco, sexuality; *Saturday Night Fever*, Travolta, ethnicity, Italian-Americans

Introduction

In her review of *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), Pauline Kael (1977: 59-60) notices in John Travolta's portrayal of Tony Manero, 'a feeling of the sexiness of young boys who are bursting their britches with energy and desire [...] which recalls Kenneth Anger's short film *Scorpio Rising* (1963)'. Kael immediately proceeds to clarify that, whereas *Scorpio Rising* is a 'homoerotic fantasy of toughness', *Fever* is a decisively 'straight heterosexual film'. Kael's disclaimer represents a common tendency in academic and popular discussions of the film to acknowledge the seemingly obvious signifiers of homosexuality in the representation of Tony Manero, while simultaneously insisting that these signifiers do not perform their expected function.

While agreeing with Kael's description of *Fever* as a 'straight heterosexual film', I want to problematize the often unstated assumptions underpinning this conclusion. The usual argument posits that Tony Manero's heterosexuality is somehow rescued by counterbalancing signifiers of homosexuality with a youthful and often violent brand of heterosexual machismo (for example, Auster and Quart, 1978; Kael, 1977; Nystrom, 2009; Yanc, 1996). This argument, however, risks implying that deciphering the representation of his masculinity is a perplexing and demanding process. Rather than seeking to discover how suggestions of homosexuality are remedied or balanced, I attempt to situate them as intrinsic parts of a homogeneous masculine identity. The analysis that follows negotiates the limitations of a purely textual approach and examines *Fever*'s representation of masculinity in the context of late 70s American culture. I consider intertextual connections embedded in the film as well as connections to contextual knowledge circulating in the public sphere, including evidence from primary sources on 70s men's movements and John Travolta's star persona.

I concentrate specifically on Tony Manero's two favourite activities, disco dancing and self-grooming, which are usually cited as evidence of challenges to his heterosexuality. In the case of the former, the assumed link between disco and homosexuality does not withstand historical scrutiny. In the case of the latter, Tony's narcissism and erotic display of his body fit uneasily with both heterosexual and homosexual masculine models of the late 70s. They can be reconciled, however, by considering the interrelation of masculinity and ethnicity, which the film presents in terms of geography, a difference between Brooklyn and Manhattan. I argue that Tony Manero exemplifies a historically specific representation of Italian-American

heterosexual machismo. Ethnicity allows the film not only to incorporate in the representation of Tony Manero styles and behaviours that would have otherwise signified homosexuality, but also to render the outcome plausible and believable.

Setting the record straight

If there is single lasting image that encapsulates the disco fever of the 70s, this is arguably John Travolta on the disco floor, dressed in his white three-piece suit and black body shirt. Disco has not only defined *Fever's* place in popular memory, but it has also posed the greatest challenges to Tony's heterosexuality. Discussions of the film often rely on the assumption of an inherent link between disco and male gay audiences. Echoing Kael's disclaimer, Derek Nystrom (2009: 114) begins his recent analysis of the film with the observation that 'the importance of disco to gay male self-understanding in the 1970s is well established' and proceeds to explore how the film overcomes these 'hurdles' and manages to 'craft a heterosexual narrative'. Such assumptions, however, do not adequately appreciate the trajectory that disco traversed through the 70s, from underground gay clubs at the beginning of the decade to mainstream discotheques at the time *Fever* was released.

Disco was at beginning of the 70s a marginalized form of music associated with cultural difference. A 1979 article in *The Washington Post* (Darling, 1979: H1) traces its origins back to 'the bayous and backfields of the cultural landscape, the gay clubs and black clubs where long nights of nonstop motion counterpointed the long days of getting by'. Under the mesmerizing, repetitive beat, disco dancers could declare freedom and cultural centrality. Attempting to locate disco's appeal to gay audiences, Richard Dyer (1979: 22) discovers in disco a 'whole body eroticism' that is distinctly different from rock's eroticism, which he indicatively describes as 'thrusting', 'grinding', and 'indelibly phallogentric'. Whereas rock music is a predominantly live medium, with an emphasis on the relationship between the performers and the audience, disco is organized in terms of dancers and recorded, deejay-performed music. Disco's repetitive beat and lyrics also contribute to the centrality of the dancer's body. Lyrics are often reduced to bite size syllables that hark back to the primal quality of the voice as an index of corporeal existence. Even full words are often intoned in a physical way, as in Grace Jones's raunchy vocals in 'I Need a Man' and Donna Summer's incessant moaning in 'Love to Love you Baby'. Whereas 'rock's repeated phrases trap you in

their relentless push,' Dyer (1979: 22) explains, disco 'releas[es] you in an open-ended succession of repetitions'.

Nevertheless, to associate disco with 'an openness to sexuality that is not defined in terms of cock' in 1979, a time when *Fever* epitomized disco culture, must have undeniably been a bold argument for Dyer to make. It is hard to imagine a more phallogocentric dance or a more overt performance of heterosexuality than Tony Manero's experience of disco in *Fever*. Tim Lawrence (2011: 241) has recently held *Fever* responsible for almost single-handedly turning disco into 'a space for straight men to display their prowess and hunt for a partner of the opposite sex'. Tony's solo dance for 'You Should Be Dancing' provides an indicative example of disco's entry into the hetero-normative mainstream. The song has all the qualities that Dyer (1979: 22) finds conducive to 'whole body eroticism'—repetitive beat, falsetto vocals, and a primal cry of 'yeah' after every lyric. Yet, Tony constrains the song's liberating potential into a calculated and purposeful choreography meant to impress female onlookers. His dance combines the flashiest disco moves with imitations of easily recognizable acts, such as combing his hair and wiping sweat off his forehead, which suggest a conscious preparation to put his body on display. Tony never misses a chance to strike a pose, flirt with girls, and nod in affirmation of his own skill. With lips slightly pursed and minimal facial expressions, he constantly keeps his cool and never compromises the performance. In fact, Tony's move that receives most attention involves the rhythmical 'thrusting and grinding' (Dyer, 1977: 22) of his hips in an imitation of sexual penetration.

Dyer's 'In Defence of Disco' defends a very particular version of disco that is clearly reflected in the title of the periodical for which he is writing, *Gay Left*. Dyer defends disco's liberating potential against the common Marxist position equating pleasure with capitalist infiltration. His defence, however, applies to the early days of the strictly non-mainstream, non-bourgeois disco that played in gay clubs. By the late 70s, this version of disco had already been overwhelmed by a commercialized version. On one side of the spectrum were the gospel-charged disco of the black divas and the sequined gay falsetto of Carl Bean's 'I Was Born this Way'. On the other side were the Bee Gees and John Travolta's Tony Manero projecting an image of whiteness and heterosexuality that, in *Newsweek's* estimation, provided 'disco's ticket to respectability' (Graustark *et al.*, 1979: 56).

The Village People, formed in the same year that *Fever* was released, provide an indicative example of disco's journey from the margin to the centre. The group remains today

the most readily available example of disco's ties to the increasingly vocal gay communities of the 70s. Nevertheless, their meticulously choreographed performances and manifestly phallogocentric costumes could not diverge further from Dyer's argument for instinctual corporeality and whole body eroticism. 'It depresses me', Dyer (1979, 22) admits, 'that such phallic forms of disco as Village People should be so gay identified'. Drawing on Dyer's essay, Lawrence usefully suggests a distinction between queer and normative disco to replace the common gay-straight dichotomy. The Village People provide an indicative example of hetero-normative, gay-themed disco. Their pseudo-autobiographical film *Can't Stop the Music* (1980) does not present homosexuality as a social category or even as a sexual identity, but simply as an exuberant and somewhat silly style. The film reduces gay liberation to a few vague lines of dialogue on tolerance and acceptance, allowing straight audiences to indulge safely in its de-politicized overdose of gay machismo.

As disco crossed over into the mainstream, American culture also experienced a virulent rise in homophobia, the supporters of which readily pointed to the popularity of disco as evidence of a spreading gay threat. The backlash culminated in what became known as disco demolition night on 12 July 1979, a massive destruction of disco records during a baseball game between the Chicago White Sox and the Detroit Tigers. Clad in images of heterosexual machismo towering over disco, the event was led by rock radio deejay Steve Dahl, who drove into the field in a military jeep and set off explosions that destroyed disco records. The disco demolition night was hardly a spontaneous and isolated event. Frank (2007) considers it to be the most expressive and evocative articulation of a pervasive homophobia in the late 70s. Coming on the heels of a widespread legislative and electoral backlash against gay civil rights, the backlash against a form of sexual and musical expression marks 'the conscious evacuation of gays from popular culture' (Frank, 2007: 279). Considered in retrospect, the rise in homophobia through the 70s belongs to same set of developments as the backlash against feminism and African-American's civil rights. Though comprising disparate and often extreme events, these changes collectively serve as evidence of America's gradual shift toward the right by the end of the 70s, which would find its clearest expression in Reagan's election and the rise of neo-conservatism.

Fever was released at that opportune time after disco was commercialized, but before the radical backlash against it had peaked. This was a time when WASP disco dancers could escape from the margins of suburbia and their corporate cubicles and claim cultural centrality

on the dance floor. As Norma Jean's 1978 hit 'Saturday' spells out, disco was a reward and a remedy for a boring job: 'All I do is work. I'm no robot. Let's go disco'. Published in the same year, *The Official Guide to Disco Dance Steps* promises to turn anyone into a disco dancer with 'easy-to-follow diagrams'. The guide's illustrations, furthermore, invariably portray heterosexual couples, exemplifying Lawrence's argument that the dilution of disco's queer potential can be traced in the gradual shift from the individual dancer to the dancing couple. Despite including an entire chapter on the history of disco, the closest the guide comes to mentioning disco's gay origins is through the appeasing affirmation that 'disco dancing and all its trimmings are no longer the exclusive domain of an avant garde few' (Villari and Villari, 1978: iii).

Those bold enough to apply their newly acquired skills from lessons and guidebooks on the dance floor may not have opted for the most respectable Saturday night outing, but neither did their choice warrant the immediate suspicion of homosexuality that it did at the beginning of the 70s. Tom Wolfe succinctly captures the status of disco for middle-class WASPs in his contribution to the November 1978 issue of *Harper's*, a sketch of an elderly man in a suit dancing frantically on the disco floor. Wolfe (1978, 79) accompanies the sketch with a poem for a caption, which ends

I grow old the 1970s way:
Deaf, but from a Max Q octaphonic beat,
Stroked out, but on my own two feet,
Disco macho!—for you, my New Cookie.

A heterosexual man's visit to the disco may have been frowned upon, but it was hardly an indication of him coming out of the closet. On the contrary, it is considered a macho, albeit desperate, attempt to impress his 'new cookie'.

While *The Official Guide* and Wolfe's sketch exemplify the hetero-normative version of disco that dominated mainstream culture at the time of *Fever's* release, they do not quite correspond to Tony Manero's experience of disco. In Brooklyn's Italian-American neighbourhood of Bay Ridge Tony is the undisputed king. Disco is not an escape from a boring office job or a remedy for growing old, but the defining element of an all-encompassing subculture. *Fever* borrows the distinction from the source material of its screenplay, Nik Cohn's essay 'Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night', published in *New*

York magazine. Cohn (1976: 31) structures his essay as a pseudo-ethnographic guide, written from the perspective of a neophyte to Brooklyn's tribal rites. 'Over the past few months', he writes

much of my time has been spent in watching this new generation. Moving from neighborhood to neighborhood, from disco to disco, an explorer out of my depth, I have tried to learn the patterns, the old/new tribal rites. [...] Everything described in this article is factual and was either witnessed by me or told to me directly by the people involved.

The film incorporates Cohn's outsider's perspective in a brief scene in Pete's dance studio. As Tony walks in for his usual practice before the competition, Pete leads a class of budding middle-aged dancers, who stand in line and follow his instructions with equal amounts of eagerness and clumsiness. Pete's students belong to the same demographic as the readers of guidebooks on disco steps and the man in Wolfe's illustration. Seeking a break from their WASP routine, they take a trip to the exotic world of ethnic Brooklyn for a taste of disco fever.

As Cohn revealed on the film's twentieth anniversary, his claims to authenticity were blatant lies. A British music journalist fresh to New York, Cohn needed a subject for his first story and, after a brief visit to Brooklyn, made up the story of Vincent (the film's Tony Manero) and his disco escapades. Cohn (1997: 48) filled in the details based on his childhood experience of witnessing a gang fight in his hometown of Derry and his familiarity with London's Mods. Cohn's may be an extreme example of a fiction being embraced as the reality of Brooklyn's Italian-American culture (and, following the film's immense success, shaping the legacy of an entire decade), but it usefully highlights the cultural valence of Italian-American ethnicity in the 70s and its ability to open up a space for suspending disbelief. I return to examine the contribution of Tony's ethnicity to the representation of his masculinity in the final section, before turning first to consider another threat to his heterosexual virility.

No sexual representation without male liberation

If Tony's fascination with disco is not enough to immediately signify him as gay, his narcissistic obsession with self-grooming seems to pose less easily redeemable challenges to his heterosexuality. Susan Bordo (1999: 198) sums up the possible threats to Tony's

machismo in her comment that ‘never before *Saturday Night Fever* had a heterosexual male movie hero spent so much time on his toilette’. Bordo’s observation belongs to a long list of comments specifically on *Fever*’s grooming scene. For a film that has overall attracted little interpretive interest, the grooming scene in particular has received considerable attention (for example, Allen, 1978; Bordo, 1999; Yanc, 1996).

The attention is not surprising. *Fever*’s grooming scene seems to reverse Hollywood’s long-held binary in representations of gender. Following Laura Mulvey’s (1975) canonical thesis, Hollywood perpetuates patriarchal hegemony by equating the masculine position with power and the feminine position with passivity and objectification. This binary is most pronounced when it comes to erotic displays of the body, with men being the active owners of the erotic gaze and women the passive recipients. The male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of looking without upsetting this order. ‘It is one of the fundamental reasons’, Steve Neale (1993: 19) explains, ‘why the erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed’.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Far from repressing the erotic display of the male body, *Fever* does everything possible to highlight it. With the Bee Gees singing ‘Fever Night’ in their signature falsetto vocals,

Fever presents Tony's preparation for Saturday night as an elaborate grooming ritual. The scene begins with the image of Tony's hand holding a hairdryer in what could have easily been an advertisement for the product (figure 1). Framing the hairdryer in close-up, with the brand and model clearly visible, the camera gently moves leftwards to frame Tony's face in the centre and reveal the hairbrush in his other hand. The inherent connotations of effeminacy in the activity of hairstyling are accentuated by a series of stylistic devices meant to emphasize the beauty of Travolta's face. The soft lighting, the out-focus background, the near perfect symmetry of the composition, the frontal angle of the camera, and the inclusion of just a hint of Travolta's bare shoulders in the frame create an image that resembles an advertising beauty shot (figure 2). As the camera moves from the hairdryer to its user, Tony himself becomes the object on display. Following this dramatic opening, the rest of the scene unfolds as a series of fetishizing shots of Travolta's body: his hairy chest as he puts on his golden chains, his biceps as he flexes and poses, and his crotch as he pulls up his zip (figures 3-4).

To be sure, *Fever's* insistence on the naked male body as spectacle does not immediately code Tony Manero as gay. Neale (1993: 19) expands Mulvey's thesis to include representational strategies that 'denigrate or deny' implications of homosexuality in erotic displays of the male body. In fact, Neale mentions *Fever* in a parenthetical reference as 'a clear and interesting example' of the male body 'unashamedly put on display', insinuating, as does Kael, that Tony's heterosexuality withstands the apparent challenges. Dyer (1992) offers more insight into the preservation of heterosexuality in erotic displays of the male body. Drawing on examples of male pin-ups, Dyer locates one such strategy in the male model's refusal to acknowledge that he is being looked at, often by looking upwards and suggesting a preoccupation with loftier concerns. Bordo (1999: 198) concurs that men 'may display their beauty only if it is an unavoidable side effect of other "business".' In other instances, male models are portrayed under physical duress, holding their bodies taut and tightening their muscles to suggest some form of activity that counters the passivity of being looked at (Dyer, 1992: 270). Even accounting for such representational strategies, *Fever's* grooming scene resists a 'straight' reading. Tony shows none of the heterosexualizing casualness and unawareness in displaying his naked body, but voluntarily participates in the process. When he does flex his muscles and pose, it is not in a spontaneous manifestation of his masculinity, but in a conscious imitation of the Bruce Lee poster on his wall. Cutaway shots to the

discotheque during the grooming scene remind us that the goal of the entire preparation is to turn his body into an alluring image and display it on the dance floor.

A historical approach to *Fever's* depiction of the male body offers a more promising—but, as we shall see, equally problematic—means of negotiating the film's representational inconsistencies. Whereas Mulvey draws her examples from Classical Hollywood, *Fever* was released at a time when patriarchy was facing increasing pressures to negotiate the bounds of hetero-normativity, most famously expressed in the development of a nascent male liberation movement. Quickly dubbed men's lib to counterbalance women's lib, the movement championed a new model of masculinity, unencumbered by traditional masculine norms. In 1970, Jack Sawyer, a young psychologist and former anti-war and civil rights activist, published 'On Male Liberation', in which he defines the movement as a call 'for men to free themselves of the sex-role stereotypes that limit their ability to be human' (25). Warren Farrell refashioned Sawyer's doctrines in the popular self-advancement language of Erhard Seminars Training in *The Liberated Man*. Borrowing Betty Friedan's language, Farrell (1975: 3) sees men as trapped in the 'masculine mystique' and diagnoses their 'emotional constipation'. His prescribed remedy is for men to embrace their feminine side and free themselves from their roles as protectors and breadwinners.

Men's lib offered its followers the benefit of adopting behaviours and styles that had previously carried the stigma of effeminacy. In the name of liberation, for example, a heterosexual man could abandon the traditional standard requiring him to be indifferent about his appearance and begin paying attention to his clothing and grooming. 'Male narcissism', *The Washington Post* observed in 1978, 'has more than come out of the closet. It has prospered, burgeoned, bloated, overborn' (Allen, 1978: 21). While feminism trained heterosexual men to appreciate narcissism, gay liberation allowed them to do so without being suspected for sexual deviance. With the increased visibility of gay men and the development of distinct gay cultures and communities since the 60s, the threat of homosexuality assumed a more concrete identity. It stopped being an indeterminate otherness, hidden in potentially every man. Liberated men could display their refined taste, indulge in self-grooming, and opt for fashionable dress, while remaining strictly within the boundaries of heterosexuality.

Nevertheless, liberated masculinity came at that cost of embracing feminism and rejecting homophobia. A man could confidently indulge in narcissism under the explicit condition that he understood and accepted the sources and requirements of this freedom.

Whether genuinely believing in gender equality or simply trying to disassociate themselves from the evils of patriarchy, liberated men were always self-proclaimed feminists. The image of the liberated man found its epitome during the 70s in the public persona of Alan Alda. A proud friend of the women's movement, Alda confessed to *Ms.* magazine in 1976 that 'where men work without women, there is just a little less warmth, a little less laughter, a little less relaxation'. Men's liberation, on the other hand, makes for happier men, even allowing them to garner 'the courage to stick a flower on their desks' (Alda, 1976: 93).

Far from Alda's presumed feminism, Tony Manero has no qualms in publically declaring that all women can be neatly divided into 'good girls' and 'cunts'. Tony spends whatever time is left in-between dancing and styling his hair to displays of white bigotry and violent machismo. In a scene that is otherwise completely unconnected to the plot, Tony and his gang bully two stereotypically effeminate gay men. The gang's exaggerated display of prejudice interrupts their discussion of sexual adventures, as if to re-affirm heterosexuality through homophobic machismo. Tony's sartorial choices, furthermore, push the boundaries of his narcissism beyond what would even be permissible for liberated men. Men like Alda expressed in their stylistic choices the refinement and sensitivity of being in touch with their feminine side. They opted for pale hues, knits, and the ubiquitous earth-tone polyester, a sharp contrast to Tony Manero's preference for bold, contrasting colours, frilly lapels, and oversized platform shoes.

Much more than what Tony wears, it is what he does not wear that accentuates insinuations of closeted homosexuality. For much of the grooming scene Tony wears only his black bikini briefs, which sit low on his hips and contour his body. Dyer (1985: 112) explains that 'the first thing to say about the symbolism of male sexuality is that it is overwhelmingly centred on the genitals, especially the penis'. The penis, however, is seldom shown but mainly evoked through the phallus, which looks strikingly different from the penis. Phalli are unbending, sharp, sword-like, and seldom made of flesh and skin. They resemble nothing of the soft and imprecise form of the penis. As Dyer (1985: 112) succinctly puts it, 'the penis isn't a patch on the phallus'. Following the same reasoning, D.A. Miller (1992: 28) explains that the middle-class, heterosexual man's preference for boxer shorts reveals an attempt to conceal 'the penis, which disappears into a cool rectangularity that [...] only apotheosizes it as the phallus'. Similarly, Chris Holmlund (2002: 45) notes that, for all their focus on the naked male body, pumping iron films of the 80s avoid focusing on the male crotch. 'The

camera never focuses on the bulge in Arnold's or Lou's bikinis or pans their naked bodies in the shower: to look might reveal too much or too little'.

Though *Fever* does not actually show the penis, and hence avoids the box-office suicide of full frontal nudity, it evidently disregards Dyer's, Miller's, and Holmlund's precautions. The extremely low camera angles draw constant attention to Tony's bulging crotch. Though briefs are still Hollywood's choice of male underwear in the 70s, both the colour and cut of Tony's briefs set him apart from the heterosexual norm. Before what Dyer (1989: 124) calls 'the revival of the boxer shorts', white, high-rising, Y-front, cotton briefs used to be the epitome of men's underwear. Their design combined support and functionality through the frontal opening while their colour and material allowed for hygienic care. Tony's tight, low-rising, black briefs sacrifice (masculine) practicality for (feminine) style. More importantly, they draw attention to what they are supposed to conceal, the penis. When Tony awakens on Sunday morning, he moves the sheets out of the way and reaches into his underwear to scratch himself (figure 5). This crude handling of his body would signal in Dyer's (1985: 125) reasoning an alignment with the gay male 'refusal [...] to closet our bodies'. Thus, instead of implying the power of the phallus through physical activity, averted gazes, or any other of the aforementioned strategies, *Fever* ascribes pleasure to the actual penis and toys with homoeroticism.



Figure 5



Figure 6

The film, furthermore, seems to be pushing us to question Tony's machismo by including intertextual references to homosexuality. When Tony catches a glimpse of his *Serpico* poster the morning after his disco adventures, he remembers a girl's comment that kissing him felt like kissing Al Pacino. He celebrates the compliment by prancing around in his underwear, chanting 'Al Pacino, Al Pacino' and 'Attica, Attica' (figure 6). His imitation of

Pacino does not refer to Frank Serpico, a heterosexual police officer, but Sonny Wortzik, the bisexual protagonist of *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) who robs a bank to pay for his lover's sex change operation. Pacino's cry 'Attica, Attica' in *Dog Day Afternoon* is yet another reference to the 1971 Attica Prison riots following the shooting of a radical African-American inmate. When Tony Manero repeats the line in *Fever*, inspired by a woman's compliment on his kissing skills, his intended celebration of white heterosexual virility is undermined by a network of intertextual references to blackness, queerness, and left radicalism.

In addition to textual and intertextual suggestions, the grooming scene can assume contextual homoerotic meaning that is historically specific to the late 70s. In the same shot of Tony scratching his genitals, clearly visible on the dresser next to his bed are his hairdryer and a construction worker's hard-hat (figure 5). Viewing this image through an ahistorical lens, one can find both challenges and affirmations of Tony's heterosexuality. The hard-hat could be seen as a reference to male physical labour and the upward pointing hairdryer as an obvious phallic symbol. In the light of Dyer's analysis, these two objects would be interpreted as representational strategies that counter the objectification of Travolta's naked body. While his nakedness and the visual emphasis on his penis objectify him, his heterosexual phallic power is simultaneously rescued on the left side of the frame.

In the context of 1977, however, the coupling of a naked young man and a hard-hat cannot but evoke the subculture of the gay clone. In Martin Levine's (1998: 58) description, gay clones are those post-Stonewall gay men who 'embrace[ed] the presentational image of the butch style, modifying it into a more stylized uniform'. Exemplified in the image of the Village People, clones 'favored the hood, athlete, and woodsman looks for everyday leisure attire. They wore the Western, leather, military, labourer, and uniform looks for going out or partying' (Levine, 1998: 60). While reacting against the stereotype that associated homosexuality with the effeminacy and feebleness of an aristocratic upper class, clones also rejected the traditional male nonchalance about appearance. They opted for carefully trimmed facial hair, evenly toned bodies, and well-tailored costumes. The hard-hat on Tony's dresser carries the same connotations of calculated machismo. It appears unworn and, based on what we already know about him, completely useless in his work at the hardware store.

This almost playful juxtaposition of signifiers of homosexuality and heterosexuality reaches its climax in an indicative sequence of images at the end of the grooming scene. A shot of the Bruce Lee poster on Tony's wall (figure 7) cuts to a reverse shot from the

perspective of the poster as Tony looks in the mirror and imitates the same pose (figure 8). This is followed by yet another dramatic low angle shot of Tony's crotch (figure 9). However, just when the narcissistic display of Tony's body threatens to challenge his heterosexuality, the film cuts to a poster of Farah Fawcett (figure 10). Her wide smile, presumably at the sight of Tony's penis, affirms its heterosexual use. Immediately afterwards, when Tony's father comes into the room, threats to heterosexuality surface once more, as the onlooker is no longer a poster, but another living man. We first see his father through his reflection in the mirror, next to Tony posing in his new shirt (figure 11). In the context of a scene constructed around the fetishization of Tony's body, his father's gaze could even signify incestual homosexuality. In the following shot, however, Farrah Fawcett's poster appears next to the father to claim his gaze and rescue heterosexuality (figure 12). Not only does he turn to look at the poster, but the camera even assumes his point-of-view for a close-up of Fawcett's cleavage. In a textbook-like example of the Mulveyian male gaze, Tony's father becomes the subject of the film, the heterosexual masculine position, and Farah Fawcett's body is objectified and fragmented under his gaze.

Fever assembles these contradictory signifiers and references with a playful and almost provocative lack of subtlety, as if confident that Tony Manero's heterosexual machismo is not actually threatened. Reviewers and interpreters seem to share this confidence. It underpins Neale's (1993: 19) unqualified comment that the film provides an 'interesting example' of an erotic display of the heterosexual male body. Similarly, Yanc (1996: 39) elaborates on 'the objectification of Travolta's body', but insists that his heterosexuality is 'rescued'. The same confidence surfaces in Kael's (1977: 59) suggestion that the film is a heterosexual version of *Scorpio Rising*. Attempting to explain what makes *Fever* different from Anger's film, Kael (1977: 60) asserts that Tony is simply unaware of his conflicted masculinity, what Nystrom (2009: 127) identifies as 'a perceived disparity in critical self-consciousness' between Tony and the film's audiences. Tony's sexism does not derive from hostility toward feminism, insofar as hostility presupposes knowledge. Rather, he simply remains oblivious to the demands of feminism and the constraints of male liberation.

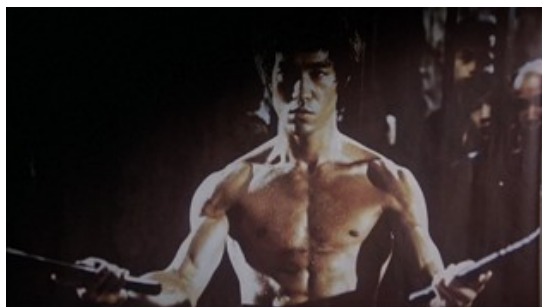


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12

This unselfconsciousness renders Tony's amalgam of masculinities qualitatively different from the homoeroticism of *Scorpio Rising*'s bikers, the costumed performances of the Village People, the overconfident feminism of Alan Alda, and especially the more recent parodies of 70s masculinity in films like *Starsky & Hutch* (2004) and *Semi-Pro* (2008). In all these cases masculinity is a deliberate performance; it acknowledges the process of its construction and displays its mastery over the source material. Tony Manero, on the other hand, embodies his patchwork masculinity with a certain nonchalance, unaware of its seams. He can stare in the mirror for hours fixing his hair while remaining a sexist alpha male or borrow Pacino's 'Attica, Attica!' to celebrate a sexual compliment, but lacks a critical perspective on what each part of his hybrid masculinity signifies and how uneasily they all fit together.

‘Welcome to Brooklyn’

The question that remains unanswered is what exactly allows Tony Manero the privilege of this unselfconsciousness. Kael (1977: 60) suggests that it is a by-product of youthful carelessness, Tony’s belonging to ‘the post-Watergate working-class generation with no heroes *except* in TV-show-biz land’. Kael’s explanation corresponds with descriptions of *Fever* as a ‘coming of age story’ (Keeler, 1979: 167) or a ‘tale of maturity’ (Kupfer, 2007: 171). Tony begins the film as the undisputed disco king and ends up giving up disco, resigning his job, and settling down in a monogamous relationship with Stephanie. Tony’s personal growth, however, also involves a spatial and social relocation, from Brooklyn’s Italian-American Bay Ridge neighbourhood to WASP Manhattan. In this section I argue that Tony Manero’s hybrid masculinity is similarly rooted in social geography. Until the film’s final minutes, Tony does not inhabit the world of men’s liberation, feminism, and gay clones, but the ethnic universe of Brooklyn. It is his identity as a white ethnic man that allows him to pick and choose elements of 70s masculinities, ignore any compromises to his heterosexuality, combine them with more traditional masculine traits, and nonchalantly embody them as a believable masculine identity.

Men’s liberation was from the start a strictly white, middle-class phenomenon. In one of the movement’s earliest accounts, *Life* magazine describes the liberated man as ‘a healthy and intelligent young white American male’ (Farrell, 1971: 50). As the movement gradually took shape, the connections between its constituency and politics also became clear. Beneath the feminist surface, men’s liberation reveals a distinct attempt to counter accusations of white patriarchal supremacy. From the very beginning, men’s liberation walked a tightrope between two antithetical goals. ‘There were obvious strains and tensions from the movement’s attempt to focus simultaneously on men’s institutional power and the “costs of masculinity” to men’ (Messner, 1998: 256). Men’s liberation used the idea of oppression in a politically neutered sense, as a free-floating general condition that affected everyone equally, on a personal rather than a social level. Farrell’s diagnosis for masculine emotional constipation, for example, provides an ideal discursive package for promoting feminist ideas to men and lessening the guilt involved. Avoiding the question of patriarchal power discrepancies, Farrell can claim that men are as much the victims of patriarchy as are women.

In its attempt to associate masculinity with victimhood, men's liberation was not an isolated phenomenon in the 70s. From the uncontested cultural hegemony, middle-class, heterosexual, white men found themselves answerable for the repercussions of their hegemony. The civil rights and women's movements were the first to launch their attacks in the 60s with accusations of racism and sexism. Gay liberation soon followed with charges of homophobia. As *Life* put it, 'not only was black beautiful and sisterhood powerful—now it was also groovy to be gay' (Farrell, 1971: 53). The elderly, the disabled, the vegetarians, the nudists, and several other groups followed their lead through the 70s—not all with equally valid claims to victimhood. By asserting that patriarchy had symmetrical costs on men and women, men's liberation allowed middle-class, heterosexual, white men to 'join blacks, gays, and women in the ranks of the oppressed' (Kimmel, 2006: 174).

In this climate, Italian-American men found themselves in an advantageous position, with ethnicity offering a readily available means for disassociating themselves from white privilege. After decades of trying to assimilate into WASPdom, descendants of Italian and other European immigrants abandoned the melting pot and joined in what became known as the 70s revival of ethnicity. By embracing their ethnic heritage, Italian-Americans could simultaneously plead their innocence to the actual and symbolic charges facing white America. The revival shared with men's liberation the tendency to equate all forms of oppression, claiming for white ethnics the same formative experiences in America as those of African-Americans and Native Americans. Michael Novak (1971: xx), a Polish-American leader of ethnic revival, captures succinctly the movement's politics in *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. In an indicative anecdote, Novak recalls his response to a Native American's reminder of 'what [Novak's] ancestors did to *his* ancestors'. Novak explained to him that his grandparents 'escaped serfdom barely four generations ago—almost as recently as blacks escaped slavery'.

There is, however, one significant distinction between ethnic revival and men's liberation. The former enjoyed what was perceived to be a more legitimate claim to victimhood. Whereas liberated men appealed to psychological self-advancement, the revival literature invested in the popularity of biological determinism in the 70s. Using the evocative language of ancestral roots and unbroken bloodlines, revived ethnics conceptualized the relationship between birthplace and ethnicity as analogous to that of genes and racial physiognomy. 'Italian ethnicity', explained Richard Gambino (1974: 375), 'comes with the

blood if not through it. Its components are unique and strong'. Biological determinism offered Italian-Americans a strong cultural privilege. They could enjoy all the benefits of whiteness and simultaneously claim an inalienable, primordial right to a guilt-free shade of whiteness. Micaela di Leonardo (1994: 177) finds in ethnic revival 'a distinct flavor of a Three Bears analogy'

White WASPs were 'too cold'—bloodless, modern, and unencumbered—and blacks 'too hot'—wild, primitive, and 'over'cumbered—white ethnics were 'just right'. For a hot minute in the 1970s, Italian-Americans commandeered Baby Bear's chair.

Fever invests in Tony's command of Baby Bear's chair to construct his hybrid masculinity. Foreshadowing di Leonardo's argument, Joey, one of his friends, spells out the benefits of Italian-American ethnicity more crassly in the comment, 'I look as sharp as I can without turning into a nigger'. Tony and his gang can draw upon their hyphenated ethnicity to combine their epithet-infested language with the flamboyantly macho strutting and clothing popularized in the stereotypical 'pimp' representations of 70s blaxploitation films. When Marsha Kinder (1978: 40-41) criticized the film for being unable to decide if 'Tony's style is a matter of personal expressiveness or racial identity', she was unwittingly identifying that very ambivalence that makes his style possible. In the context of a culture that conceptualized Italian-American whiteness as biologically distinct from WASP whiteness, Tony's style reflects precisely this racial in-betweenness.

The same in-betweenness can also explain Tony's adoption of styles and behaviours that would have otherwise challenged his heterosexuality. To paraphrase Joey's comment, Tony can style his hair, display his naked body, and imitate Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon* without turning gay. Whereas these behaviours have their referents in 70s white, middle-class models of masculinity, Tony's ethnic masculinity gives him the privilege of an unbroken connection to earlier models of aggressive heterosexual machismo. In his description of Italian-American youth, Cohn (1976: 31) conjectures that 'this generation's real roots lie further back, in the fifties'. Though Cohn probably has London's Mods in mind, his comment effectively captures the cultural valence of Italian-American ethnicity in the 70s. Tony can enjoy the behavioural and sartorial benefits of liberated men and gay clones while preserving the racism, sexism, and homophobia of a 50s alpha male. It is not surprising that Travolta's next Italian-American

character, *Grease's* (1978) Danny Zuko, actually goes back to the 50s to create a similar pastiche of 50s and 70s masculinities (Dika: 2003).

While *Grease* locates Italian-American masculinity in the past, *Fever* represents its distinctness in geographical terms. The film opens with extreme long shots of the two bridges that connect Brooklyn to Manhattan and Staten Island, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Appearing right after the Paramount logo, the two opening shots give the impression of a prologue that precedes the actual beginning of the film. The first shot shows Brooklyn Bridge in the foreground, with the iconic Manhattan skyline in the background (figure 13). This is the view of Manhattan as the city of shiny tall buildings, fast changes, and new possibilities, the cityscape view of Manhattan from Brooklyn's distant 'out there'. Apart from the basic narrative function of setting the story in Brooklyn, the film's opening also offers a very particular view of Brooklyn, as an enclosed, intermediary space between sophisticated Manhattan and suburban Staten Island. As audiences, we are being transported from the city and the suburbs to an exotic world where a hardware store employee can become disco king.



Figure 13



Figure 14

The slow retracting motion of the camera and low ambient noise are suddenly interrupted by the much louder sound of a train as it passes diagonally across the frame. The introduction of 'Staying Alive' begins in the soundtrack and Travolta's credit is superimposed against the background of the train arriving in Brooklyn (figure 14). Though Travolta's only other film credit in 1977 was a small part in *Carrie* (1976), his name was already a recognizable as the star of the television series *Welcome Back, Kotter* (1975-79). The greeting in the title refers to Gabe Kotter's return to Buchanan High in Brooklyn to teach a group of underachievers known as the sweatshops. An ex-sweathog himself, Kotter is welcomed back as

a facetious but well-meaning teacher who realizes the sweatogs' true potential. Travolta's wisecracking Vinnie Barbarino is the leader of the sweatogs and the school's heartthrob. Vinnie Barbarino is only the first articulation of John Travolta's persona that elevated him to stardom in the late 70s. It takes little effort to notice, as *Fever's* contemporary reviewers invariably did, that Tony is essentially an R-rated version of Vinnie after graduation. Vinnie comes from an Italian-American Catholic family and often quotes his mother as a saint; he has the least academic potential from all the sweatogs, but his classmates admire him for his sexual exploits. *Time's* review of *Fever* describes Travolta as ideal for the role of Tony Manero because 'as TV's Vinnie Barbarino [...] he draws more soulful sighs from the teenybopper set than any other star in the country'. The review sums up Travolta's talents in a cluster of ethnic and masculine stereotypes: 'He swaggers like Mussolini in his platform shoes, struts like Schwarzenegger in his black bikini briefs, and dances like Greco in his white suit' (Rich, 1977: 69).

Audiences expecting to see John Travolta's debut as a cinematic lead encounter not only a familiar character, but also a familiar space. The imagery of bridges and transport in the film's opening bears a striking resemblance to the opening titles of *Kotter*, which begin with a shot of a roadside sign 'Welcome to Brooklyn' (figure 15). Images of trains, roads, and bridges are interspersed with travelling shots of Brooklyn shops and houses, presumably filmed from the window of a car or a train (figure 16). In this respect, *Fever* assumes further meaning through what Klinger (1989: 7) calls audience digressions, 'intertextual activations on reading that exceed intrinsic control'. Whereas the aforementioned intertextual reference to Pacino is incorporated in the text, the connection between Brooklyn and Italian-American masculinity is reinforced through contextual knowledge of Travolta's role in *Kotter*. Like *Fever*, *Kotter* does not present Brooklyn as a place in our midst, but as a place one has to travel toward and warrant the greeting 'welcome' upon arrival. As the credits appear on screen accompanied by the theme song 'Welcome Back', every image emphasizes the idea of physically going to Brooklyn. The song's lyrics, furthermore, welcome Gabe Kotter back to the place from which '[his] dreams were [his] ticket out', suggesting that Brooklyn is a somewhat limiting place, conducive to cultivating your dreams or inspiring others to dream, but not for actually fulfilling your dreams.



Figure 15



Figure 16

Tony Manero ends the film in precisely this position, leaving Brooklyn to pursue his dreams in Manhattan. Though I have not focused on Tony's character development in this article, it ought to be noted that *Fever* is not just about dancing and hair-styling. The film's most memorable scenes may take place on the dance floor, but its narrative is in fact carried forward by a series of dramatic and often violent events that force Tony to give up disco and leave Brooklyn. Unlike Vinnie in *Kotter's* sitcom universe, Tony ventures outside high-school in the R-rated *Saturday Night Fever* and encounters the less welcoming side of Brooklyn. Outside the discotheque and Tony's room, Brooklyn is infested with gang fights, unemployment, and obstacles to upward social mobility. At the end of the film Tony realizes that his disco lifestyle is a dead-end and takes the midnight train out of Brooklyn. The final scene finds Tony and Stephanie in a borrowed Manhattan apartment. They sit by the window and hold hands, silhouetted against the light of the dawning new day. Tony seems determined to find a job with higher prospects and agrees with Stephanie to remain just friends, while the melodic 'How Deep Is Your Love' suggests the appeasing possibility of romance.

This conclusion seems to shatter the social and geographical foundation of Tony's masculine privileges. In the context of a film that has defined the interrelation between ethnicity and masculinity in a rigid geographical binary, Tony's Italian-American masculinity will have to pay the price of his social elevation in Manhattan. A monogamous relationship with Stephanie will signal the end of his sexual adventures; a white-collar job will limit his time for dancing and grooming; sophisticated Manhattan friends will gradually tone down his racism and homophobia. Overall, Tony's hybrid masculinity will collapse and 'then he'll be just like all the other male narcissists, and nobody will even notice him' (Allen, 1978: 21). For white, middle-class, male audiences in the 70s, this must have been both a comforting and an alarming realization. On the one hand, the suggestion that even Brooklyn's disco king aspires

to their lifestyle affirms middle-class ‘superiority over their working-class characters’ (Nystrom, 2009: 128). On the other hand, this conclusion also eliminates the pleasure in watching, and possibly identifying with, a 70s white man unaffected by contemporary challenges to masculinity. Nevertheless, the brevity and romantic mood of the final scene conceal these implications. As the end credits begin to roll, the film makes certain that nobody contemplates too much on its conclusion by switching from ‘How Deep Is Your Love’ to the upbeat ‘Staying Alive’. ‘I’ve been kicked around since I was born’, the Bee Gees sing in their signature falsetto, echoing the darker side of Tony’s life in Brooklyn. The following line, however, offers an assurance that could apply equally well to the male character in the film and the male viewers watching the film: ‘Now it’s all right. It’s OK. And you may look the other way’.

Conclusion

I borrowed the title for this article from Pauline Kael’s (1977: 60) comment that *Fever* is ‘a straight heterosexual film’. Kael’s assertiveness and unwillingness to provide significant qualification to her claim reflects an almost instinctive reaction to what she perceives as an obvious fact: Tony Manero is a heterosexual man. Her comment, however, also serves as a disclaimer against the equally obvious threats to Tony Manero’s heterosexuality. While Tony is represented as a sexist, homophobic, and racist heterosexual man, he also indulges in the traditionally feminizing activities of disco dancing and self-grooming. This seeming paradox has understandably attracted the interest of the film’s reviewers and interpreters, usually reaching the conclusion that *Fever*’s visual strategies rescue Tony’s heterosexuality. Nevertheless, attempts to delve deeper into this paradox from a purely textual perspective carry the risk of unwarrantedly attributing more complexity to the film’s representation of masculinity and ignoring the ‘obviousness’ of Tony’s heterosexuality.

My purpose in this article has been to explore the historical discourses that underpin *Fever*’s visual strategies and to problematize the hypotheses that have guided their interpretation. The association between disco and homosexuality does not withstand historical scrutiny. By the time of *Fever*’s release, disco had already entered into the hetero-normative mainstream. Tony’s narcissistic attention to his appearance, on the other hand, cannot be justified as the expression of a 70s liberated man. Tony may benefit from developments that

opened the doors of narcissism to heterosexual men, but he does not share their presumed feminism. Neither does the film employ any of the usual heterosexualizing techniques in displaying Tony's body as erotic spectacle. Immediately offset against Tony's hybrid masculinity is his intriguing unawareness of its inconsistencies. This combination of hybridity and unselfconsciousness can be reconciled by locating Tony's masculinity as a historically specific brand of Italian-American heterosexual machismo. The 70s understanding of white ethnicity as a primordial identity allows Tony to combine seamlessly the styles and behaviours of new masculinities with an older brand of aggressive heterosexual machismo. It is Tony Manero's identity as an Italian-American man that warrants the unequivocal description of *Fever* as 'a straight, heterosexual film'.

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