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The 70s and *Saturday Night Fever*:

The Limitations of Hollywood

Famous for bell-bottoms and the rise of disco, the 1970s was also an era of economic struggle and cultural change. Starting in the 60s, women, African Americans, homosexuals and other marginalized people continued to fight for equality. It is in this decade that we start to see Hollywood breaking the mold, testing its limits, and revising genres. It was a time where Americans wanted to see their progress on screen as a form of reinforcement for the changes they had made. *Saturday Night Fever* is an iconic movie that was released in the midst of this excitement and unrest. At the release of the movie, music, fashion trends, and all things disco were ignited. Once an underground experience accepted mostly by homosexuals, disco became a mainstream phenomenon that maintained popularity well into the following decade. However, behind all the buzz, lies a raw and gritty story of a boy who becomes infatuated by a woman and the idea of a better life across the Brooklyn bridge. Told from the perspective of an atypical white, working-class male, the movie acts as a mirror, reflecting the issues are gender and race in relation to class. The social movements occurring at the time are shown not to have touched the working class. Very much embodying the spirit of its age, *Saturday Night Fever* attempts at social commentary, encouraging upward mobility and liberation from conservative standards of both masculinity and femininity.

The opening shots of the movie immediately illustrate the tension that will unfold. The iconography of the Brooklyn Bridge is the connection between Brooklyn and Manhattan, the working class and the middle class [see fig.1]. It the only link between these two worlds

that are so close and yet so far apart. The accompaniment of the Bee Gees as Tony, the lead male, struts down the streets of Brooklyn both introduces the contagious beats of disco as well as the harsh reality of merely “Stayin’ Alive” in this world. Set in the working class, the movie paints Tony’s life as somewhat dull and heavy. He works a dead-end job, gets badgered by his lifeless parents, and spends time with his friends who don’t seem to be going anywhere in life. The only colour in his life is when he is dancing in the clubs on Saturday nights. John Badham clearly paints the working class as continuous struggle. Upward mobility, or crossing the bridge, seems to be the only viable option of which only Tony recognizes.

The female lead, Stephanie, acts as advocate for upward mobility and the middle class. She is able to hold her ground against the desires of men. She “transcends Tony’s sexist classification of women as either virgins or whores” since she is sexually involved with an older man, yet refuses the advances of Tony (Jordan). She is portrayed as the “tamer” of Tony, the working class man, and a spokesperson for the more sensitive masculinity of the middle-class versus the “boyish machismo” of the working-class (Jordan). At the close of the movie, Stephanie offers to be Tony’s friend rather than his lover, highlighting her independence as a woman, in correlation to the ongoing feminist movement, which forces Tony to reconsider his class-bound perceptions of the world.

The new definition of femininity, through Stephanie, is contrasted to the conservative views of women still present in Brooklyn. Annette, a doting female infatuated with Tony’s charm and dance moves, is nothing more than just that. She plays no major role except to glorify Tony; she is merely an accessory on Tony’s flashy outfit. The rather gritty rape scene reinforces the traditional idea of men’s entitlement to women’s bodies. The contrast of these two characters reinforces the disparity between the working and middle classes. Stephanie’s ability to break free from the constraints of a domineering patriarchal society is owed to the

second, commonly seen as stronger, wave of feminism. While Annette's inability to do so is because of her class. Stephanie, also originally from Brooklyn, advancement from this not only praises upward mobility but also illustrates the limited reach of the Feminist movement in the 60s and 70s.

Tony is a definite anomaly to the average working class male represented in the film. John Travolta is known for strutting into the disco in his flamboyant, all-white suit, obsessing over his finely-crafted hair, and smoothly dancing with such authority [see fig. 2]. Prior to the release of this film the average man would not have worn such clothes for fear of being titled 'homosexual'. Chris Jordan, an associate professor of film studies at St. Cloud State University, explicitly states "the key to male liberation was the destruction of sex-role stereotypes", specifically the taking on of more "androgynous dress styles" which is "paralleled by the homosexual community's establishment of norms that in some ways freed heterosexual men from a fear of being labeled homosexual" (Jordan). In order to understand how Tony is able to adopt this progressive style, Joseph Kupfer, professor of philosophy at Iowa State, claims that Tony's "integrity, honesty, and openness to learn from other people" is what gives him the rare opportunity to "break away and take some chances in the hopes of a more interesting, rewarding life". Kupfer contrasts Tony to his friends who have "no self-awareness or sense of capacity to create narratives for their own lives" (172). Here, Tony's ability to advance is credited to his personality.

Tony's moral superiority is most notable when he refuses the prize at a dance competition after believing it to be rigged in his favor. The overt racism in this scene once again reveals the detachment of the working class. However, not only does this highlight prevalent racial inequality, it also reveals Tony's ability to transcend his environment. We are made to assume that he has had very little interaction with the outside world, beyond the Brooklyn bridge, thus this level of progressive thinking and morality is not only notable, but

also somewhat unrealistic. The director chose to put a budding middle class man into the body of a working class man. In accordance to Kupfer, Jordan adds that the movie makes the near-to-impossible chance at upward mobility possible by “redefining social mobility as personal growth rather than material success” (Jordan). In reality, we know that even the best of people will not make it to the top. It’s a combination of connections, wealth, and timing. Which is why we are lead to ask the question: why does the movie present this idea to us? For the answer, we must turn to Hollywood.

As a money-making industry, Hollywood itself is constrained to the limitations of society. To sell tickets, directors and producers must create a piece of pop culture that may comment on society but primarily pleases the audience. In *Saturday Night Fever*, the redemptive story of a ‘boy looking for a better life’ is much nicer than a ‘boy stuck in his dead-end world’. The ideas of the American Dream and upward mobility prevail in the film. Dr. J. Emmett Winn, a Professor of Communication at Auburn University, claims that this is not a coincidence, but rather “the resilient myth” is still around “because American Dream is alive and well in popular American culture”. He goes on to say that by “moralizing mobility” we attribute upward mobility and personal success to personality over anything else (127). As stated, Tony’s level of morality allows his to break free from his class and write his own narrative. The individual story of Tony Manero shines a Hollywood-inspired beacon of hope into an otherwise dark situation.

However, the questionable actions of Tony towards the end of the film as well as the ambiguity of the ending take us back to a more representative lens. Although Tony is able to turn down the prize, he then proceeds to attempt to rape Stephanie, idly stand by as Annette is gang raped, and watch his friend fall to his death. These events really highlight Tony’s flawed character. They take him off this pedestal and throw him back to reality. After riding the train all night, Tony ends up in Manhattan with Stephanie. The vacancy behind this

decision, as if he is not fully present, removes the ‘hero’ mindset from the audience [see fig.3]. Instead, we are merely relieved that he is able to make it out of Brooklyn, no matter how. The events at the end of the film make it seem like more than just a cliché piece of pop culture created solely to keep the American Dream alive and audiences happy. The film attempts to depict the harsh reality of life in the working class to a large extent, avoiding clichés of the ‘perfect hero’ and the ‘perfect happy ending’, however the limitations of Hollywood are very present. These constraints are most notably shown in Tony’s character, a superior being whose ‘modern man’ characteristics will eventually lead to a better life, a reality for very few outside of Hollywood.

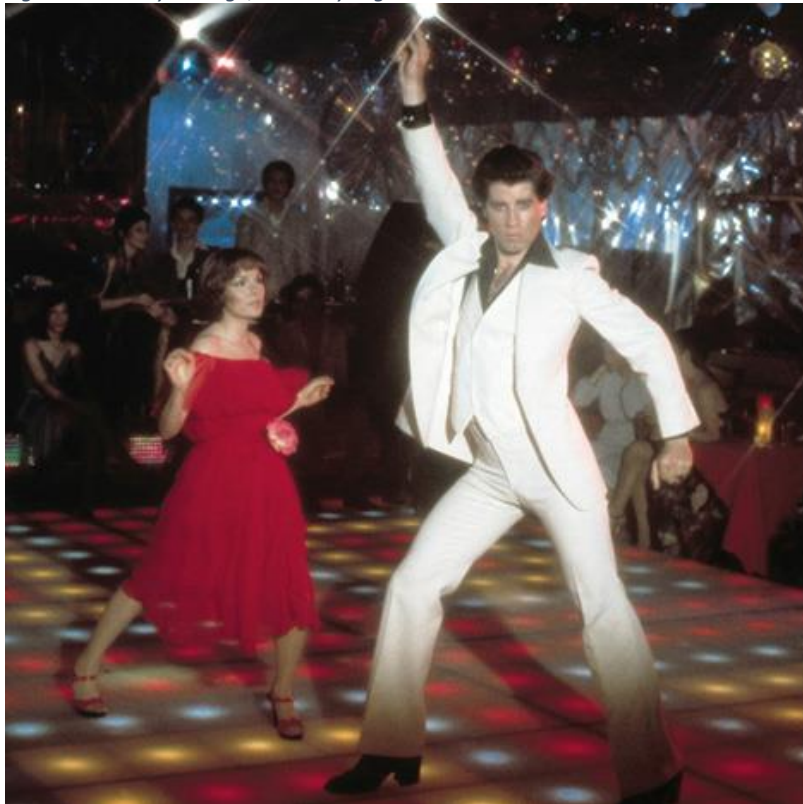
Yet, despite all the chaos, unrest, and even relief, there is one thing that people will always remember: the disco. When it’s all said and done, the timeless soundtrack, the innovative dance moves, and the eccentric new trends are what truly made an impression. No matter what the intended function of the movie was, whether to address social issues or to keep the American Dream alive, it was the music that made it timeless. Although not overly merchandized, Hollywood definitely capitalized on John Travolta’s flair. People either wanted to date him or to be him. His new style, with the help of the gay liberation movement, became *the* style. The Bee Gees topped the charts for weeks (Bee Gees). Going to the disco became the thing to do. In 1977, Roger Ebert, a film critic, in a favourable review, claimed the film gave an understanding to the “lure of the disco world” (Ebert). So despite truly addressing the issues of its day the film’s popularity stems from the glamour and glitz.

Released at such a turbulent time, *Saturday Night Fever* definitely attempts at social commentary. It encourages upward mobility by painting the working class as repressive and stunted versus the progressive middle class. Amidst the excitement of disco, the film successfully shines a light into the dark reality of the 70s working class, reflecting the extreme highs and lows of the time period. However, the film remains a piece of pop culture

created for the satisfaction of audiences across the nation. When people go see a comedy, they want to laugh. When they go see a horror, they want to scream. And when they go see a movie about disco, they want to dance. *Saturday Night Fever* will always be remembered for, and has been made timeless by, its soundtrack and style. The film both reveals the troubles of the past, but more importantly, kick starts the future of disco.



*Figure 1: Brooklyn Bridge, Saturday Night Fever 1977*



*Figure 2: Travolta White Suit, Saturday Night Fever 1977*

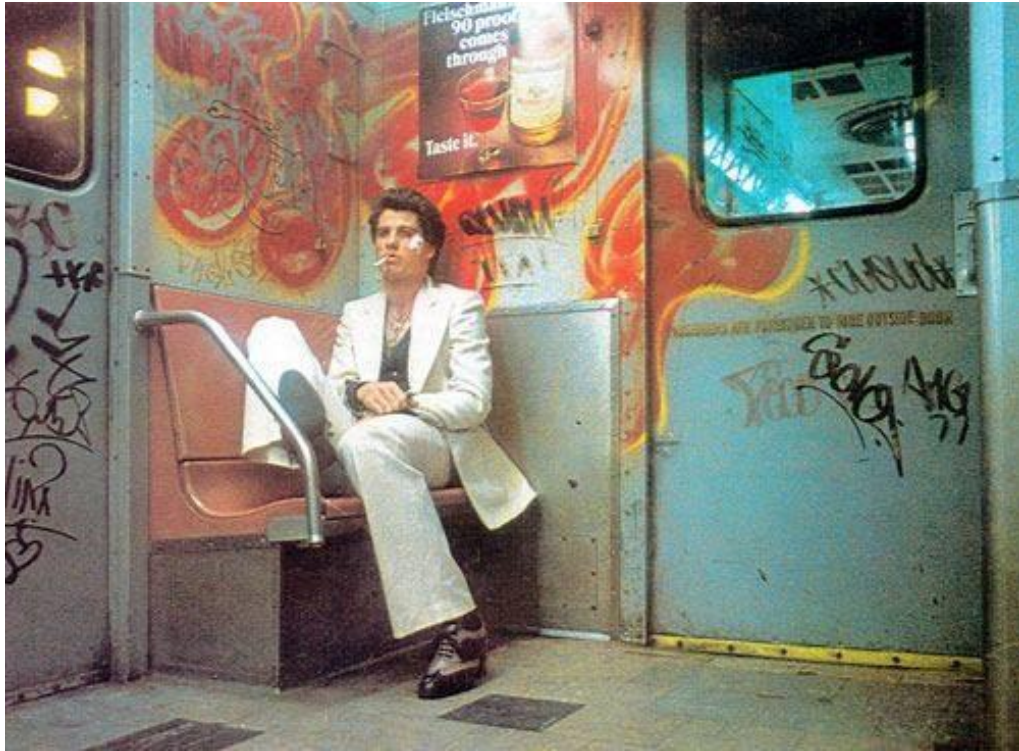


Figure 3: Night Train, Saturday Night Fever, 1977



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