

Civil Discobedience: ‘Bad environmentalism’, queer time and the role of popular music’s past in Extinction Rebellion

CATHERINE STRONG

On 9 and 11 October 2019 members of Extinction Rebellion (XR) took to the streets of Melbourne for the first iterations of the ‘Disco Disruption’ – a climate protest that involved progressively occupying various intersections throughout the CBD and performing a choreographed dance to the Bee Gees’ song ‘Stayin’ Alive’. The event caught the imagination of XR protesters worldwide, with a video of the action being watched over one million times on Twitter. On 6 December that year a ‘Global Discobedience’ event was held where the protest was reproduced in over 20 countries on the same day. This paper will present an exploratory examination of why the Discobedience has struck such a chord and become so popular within the movement, using the event as a lens through which to explore the possibilities offered by the mode of protesting it represents. It will use the concept of ‘bad environmentalism’, as developed by Nicole Seymour, to frame the action as one that offers a potential destabilisation and queering of time and makes thinking differently about the future possible in new ways. It will argue that the musical choice of ‘Stayin’ Alive’, and the cultural memories it evokes, are central to this possibility.

KEY WORDS: Extinction rebellion, popular music, civil disobedience, disco, flash-mob, environmentalism, environmental activism.

One cannot speak of a democratic state without linking it to a democratic community. The democratic state involves a set of institutions designed to allow for the expression of the ‘will’, or wills, of the people, while at the same time providing the widest possible latitude for persons to conduct their own lives as they see fit. The ancient Greeks understood this, and allowed for personal experimentation and even eccentricity. They did not impose sanctions on people being themselves, unless of course they were interfering with the liberties of others, or engaging in criminal activity.

During the week of October 7, 2019, Extinction Rebellion (XR) Victoria held the ‘Spring Rebellion’, a week of protests in the CBD of Melbourne, Australia. In line with the overall philosophy of XR, this involved a series of actions using non-violent civil disobedience as a way of disrupting ‘business as usual’ and calling attention to the need to act on the climate and ecological emergency (see Extinction Rebellion 2019a or the Australian Extinction Rebellion website at ausrebellion.earth for further information on the goals and tactics of XR). Although the numbers of participants in XR Victoria were not high enough to stage the same type of intensive actions that XR UK undertook in London earlier that year, which saw the city centre almost brought to a stand-still as

bridges were occupied for days on end (Booth 2019), a series of marches, road blockades, and swarms caused considerable disruption and led to over one hundred arrests. There was also extensive media coverage of the events, which served to raise the profile of XR in Australia and draw attention to government inaction on the climate emergency.

On the Wednesday and Friday of that week, an action was held that stood somewhat apart from the other events. The ‘Disco Disruption’, or ‘Civil Discobedience’, involved rebels (including myself) learning choreography to the Bee Gees’ song ‘Stayin’ Alive’ in Carlton Gardens, where the base camp for the Spring Rebellion was located, before moving through the city and progressively occupying key intersections to perform the dance. Participants came dressed in what could broadly be described as party fancy dress, sometimes with an obvious disco theme, but otherwise involving sparkles, wigs, and clothes that had an overall ‘retro’ feel. Adding to the colourful effect of these outfits were the XR flags, banners and signs, as well as a ‘disco bike’ with its own mirror ball that transported the solar-powered sound system that played ‘Stayin’ Alive’ for the staged dances, and a variety of disco hits that activists danced freestyle to as they travelled from one intersection to the next. A short video overview of the first

of the two events can be found on YouTube (Extinction Rebellion 2019b) and I strongly encourage readers to view this before proceeding with this paper.¹ Unlike some of the other events of the Spring Rebellion, this was promoted as a family-friendly, low risk event, and a police escort ensured intersections were secured as the dancers moved into them.

The format used for the Discobedience quickly captured the imagination of XR groups elsewhere. A tweet containing a short video of the dancing posted by Extinction Rebellion Australia (2019) quickly reached one million views, and on December 6 and 7 a 'Global Discobedience' was held to align with the 25th Conference of the Parties climate conference in Madrid (Extinction Rebellion Vic 2019). The format is now regularly being used by a variety of XR groups around the world, including isolation versions during COVID lockdowns that involved doing the dance over Zoom, or video montages of rebels doing the dance on their own (see Extinction Rebellion Italia 2020 for an example of this).

In this paper, I would like to do an exploratory examination of why the Discobedience has struck such a chord and become so popular within the movement. I don't wish to present this as a definitive analysis of what the event did, or what an event like this could do. I take note of the point that 'an ongoing challenge within the literature on music and activism ... is to connect formal, sonic, affective and subjective aspects of musical experience to observable political processes' (Green and Street 2018: 172). I would, however, like to use the protest as a lens through which to explore the possibilities offered by the mode of protesting it represents. The success of the event in terms of effect or community building within XR was immediately apparent, and there is a very obvious analysis that could be made in terms of the role an event like this plays in connecting people with one another and enhancing a sense of community among those already engaged in activism through the shared experience of 'musicking' (Small 1998). Similarly, the Discobedience could be analysed in terms of how it connects to the culture or 'movement music scene' (Futrell et al. 2006) of Extinction Rebellion, or in relation to the concept of the 'flash mob' and how it used urban space (Molnár 2013). However, I would like to try to run a different argument for this event as 'bad environmentalism' that offers a potential destabilisation and queering of *time* that makes thinking differently about the future possible in new ways. I will argue that the musical choice of 'Stayin' Alive', and the cultural memories it evokes, are central to this possibility.

Bad Environmentalism

I would like to begin by interrogating this event using the concept of 'bad environmentalism', as developed by

Nicole Seymour (2018). Seymour notes that one of the main problems that environmental activists encounter is that the accepted modes of communication about issues like the climate crisis, and the effects produced by these issues, can actively discourage closer engagement with the cause. In cataloguing the 'affects and sensibilities typically associated with environmentalism', Seymour (2018: 4-5) notes that:

In addition to gloom and doom, these include guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness, sanctimony, self-righteousness, and wonder – as well as the heteronormativity and whiteness of the movement.

Not only are these sensibilities off-putting, but they leave little room to effectively deal with the ironies and contradictions of the situation whether it be the role of science as both villain and potential saviour, the twists in discourse that have seen key tactics of the left such as scepticism deployed in service of climate change denial narratives, the failure of anthropogenic climate change narratives to fit with Indigenous realities in a whole variety of ways, or the fact that the only tools to fight for the planet that are available to us are themselves profoundly rooted in the cause of the problem (as is often triumphantly pointed out by critics of activists). As an alternative to this, Seymour (2018: 8) suggests a turn to:

'bad environmentalism': environmental thought that employs dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse.

As such, 'bad environmentalism' often involves "'low environmental culture": art and discourse that is accessible, non-hierarchical, and lowbrow' (114). This opens up ways to destabilise the meanings that underpin many of the accepted ways of talking about environmental issues, particularly in terms of the binary logics and hierarchies inherited from mainstream scientific discourses. Ecofeminist approaches suggest that 'climate change and first world overconsumption are produced by masculinist ideology, and will not be solved by masculinist techno-science approaches', suggesting that 'climate justice perspectives at the local, national, and global levels are needed to intervene and transform both our analyses and our solutions to climate change' (Gaard 2015: 20-21). In addition to offering ways of doing this, 'bad environmentalism' questions the necessity of utility in environmental cultural, whereby only activities or cultural items that are demonstrably effective in achieving a worthy environmental end – or that at least have a clear idea of what such an end might be – are seen as worthwhile.

Seymour's approach to understanding bad environmentalism incorporates queer theory – using queerness 'as a stance rather than an identity' (24) – as one of its major theoretical viewpoints, because of the overlaps between the key qualities of bad environmentalism and the concerns of queer theorists. These include 'irony, irreverence, perversity, and playfulness but also absurdity, camp, frivolity, indecorum, ambivalence, and glee' (Seymour 2018: 23). This lens leads her to her key question, which I am also using to guide this interrogation of the Discobedience:

How might reclaiming gaiety and other contrarian modes enable us to create new modes of resistance, new forms of community, and new opportunities for inquiry into environmental crisis? (Seymour 2018: 24).

Using the responses to the tweet put out by XR Vic on the Civil Discobedience event mentioned above, we can easily conclude that this event is exactly the sort of 'bad environmentalism' that Seymour is discussing. The replies to the tweet fall broadly into three categories (in addition to the predictable 'why don't they get a job' or 'hey how did they get to the protest was it by car omg what hypocrites' comments that inevitably accompany any social media post or news story about climate activism). The first is supportive, offering praise for the event, generally along the lines of how much fun it looks, and how creative and colourful it is. The second is related, in that it uses the same elements of the protest – the frivolity and fun – as a means to attack the event, with suggestions that it is not taking its aims or subject matter seriously, or clearly moving towards a stated goal. The third theme is of embarrassment on behalf of the participants, with suggestions the event is 'cringeworthy'. The event lacks gravitas; the message, such as it is, is not clearly conveyed through the event itself but can only be accessed through engaging with Extinction Rebellion more broadly. Many of the people watching – at least during the Melbourne events – may not have even picked up on the climate messaging. The event also undeniably exhibited 'gaiety'. Did, then, this event offer space for the development of 'new modes of resistance' or 'opportunities for inquiry', and if so, what role might this particular song have played in this?

Music and Environmental Activism

Music, of course, has often been central to activism and activist repertoires, including in the environmental movement. At a basic level, music can be used as a way of directly communicating about issues through lyrics (Denisoff 1972). However, the importance of music to processes of social change is generally seen as being more related to its affective dimensions, than its use as an educational tool. Kaltmeier and Raussert (2019: 6) argue that:

Music frequently takes on a seismographic function and narrates to a larger public the presence of social crisis through the act of performance. Since music appeals to all human senses, it carries the potential to push affective politics and sensitize its audience to social conflict, crisis, and injustice. It is the mix of affective, cognitive, and kinesthetic response to music that makes the latter a powerful medium to express, narrate, and reflect the social.

Nevertheless, despite a recent flurry of mainstream artists incorporating themes of climate crisis into their music, 'unlike peace, civil rights, and labor anthems, few environmentalist tunes have worked their way as deeply into activist practice or the popular imagination' (Pedelty 2016: 2; see also Rickwood 2017). A number of reasons have been suggested for this. As a starting point, Pedelty (2016) notes that the environmental movement is simply not as old as these other traditions. There may not yet have been time yet for environmental music to become part of what Eyerman and Jamison have termed the 'mobilization of tradition', where 'after the movements fade away as political forces, the music remains as a memory and as a potential way to inspire new waves of mobilisation' (Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 2).

For other writers, though, musical form and genre may be key to understanding the lack of iconic environmentalist songs. Similar to Seymour's points about the over-seriousness of environmental activists being a potential liability in their quest to convert others to their cause, Publicover (quoted in Rickwood 2017: 124) has noted that 'environmental topics are not well-served by music that is preachy, propagandizing, or simply utilitarian'. Pedelty goes further than this in suggesting it is not just that the right song hasn't been written, but that there is a fundamental mis-match between forms of music that are likely to have widespread appeal (particularly those broadly categorised as 'popular music') and an environmental message. Pointing to one of the key categories by which popular music's worthiness has often been judged, authenticity, he notes that:

the truth of art has always been partly contingent on its wider social resonance. How we make music in relation to context – environment – has always influenced interpretation. Music is sometimes perceived as less artful when message and means contradict each other ... Therefore, when art evokes a sustainable aesthetic, visual and material contradictions are inevitably brought into the listeners' interpretive assessments (Pedelty 2016: 18).

In other words, the fundamentally unsustainable, if not downright hedonistic, nature of the mass mediated music

industries (Devine 2019) may render them unsuitable for conveying messages about the type of change that is currently needed in a meaningful way. Popular music, Pedelty argues, is essentially the theme music of consumer capitalism, designed to be disposable and unsustainable (in a number of ways).

It is exactly this appeal to authenticity and sincerity that using a song like 'Stayin' Alive' sidesteps. In order to understand this, we need to consider some of the associations of the song and the genre it belongs to, and how these contribute to the potential of this action. 'Staying Alive,' by Australian vocal trio The Bee Gees, is one of the most recognisable disco songs, but its place within that genre is contradictory in a number of ways. Disco emerged from dance clubs that were run by and catered for gay, black and Latinx patrons in 1970s New York. Key dance music scholar Tim Lawrence (2006: 150) notes that in addition to providing space for gay men and Persons of Colour (POC) to participate, women were also foregrounded in disco culture, particularly as vocal 'divas'. However, although emerging from these underground subcultures, by the mid-1970s the commercial potential of disco had been recognised, with corporate record labels' interest in the genre culminating in the release of the movie *Saturday Night Fever* in 1978. The movie and its soundtrack, which featured 'Stayin' Alive', were huge hits. For Lawrence (2006: 101), the depiction of disco culture in the movie was a sanitised version that omitted key aspects of gender and sexual identity that were core to the genre:

Saturday Night Fever reflected and reinforced the reappropriation of the dance floor by patriarchal heterosexuality, whereby dancers ... could only take the floor as part of a straight couple in which the man led the woman ... disco was suburbanized according to this regressive template.

For other scholars, however, the story is slightly more complicated, with the Bee Gees and Travolta as 'white men occupying vocal registers and striking choreographic poses that usurp the disco diva and the gay man while at the same time infringing upon, even denaturing, the very white masculinity that such a colonizing move is supposed to secure' (Nyong'o 2008: 165). That *Saturday Night Fever* and its soundtrack failed to completely recuperate disco from its outsider image can be seen in the notorious 'disco demolition' event that took place a year after their release. In July 1979, a disc jockey in Chicago called for baseball fans to bring disco albums to a game, where they were dramatically exploded in an event generally discussed as reflecting the racism and homophobia directed towards disco artists and audiences (Frank 2007). The DJ in question, however, has argued that it was the commercial

and frivolous nature of disco (that he contrasted to rock) that he objected to, thereby aligning his critique in some ways with the objections of the subcultural participants in early disco to *Saturday Night Fever* and associated culture as co-opted and inauthentic.

'Stayin' Alive' is, then, a somewhat messy cultural object that, while undoubtedly judged as lowbrow, fails to fit neatly into binary categories such as gay/straight, masculine/feminine, or commercial/organic, leaving it open to a variety of interpretations and affordances. This is furthered by the way the song has ultimately embedded itself in cultural memory in ways that make it particularly available to be used in an action like the Discobedience. Cultural memory involves 'the processes of the constitution and representation of the past in the present through the use of cultural items' (Strong 2015: 423). These items become imbued with symbolic meanings that are shared between people in a way that gives the items significance in the present. These meanings can vary between groups and can change over time, becoming multi-layered, but for the most well-known cultural items there will be certain ways in which they are understood that are fixed, or change only very slowly. As such an item, the use of 'Stayin' Alive' will always involve the invoking of shared conceptions of the past. Not only representative of disco, it can also be used as a shorthand call-out to the idea of the decade of 'the 70s', or even more broadly that which is 'retro', meaning the jumble of costumes at the Discobedience that shared nothing more than a sense of 'pop culture pastness' still made sense. More specifically, beyond music, it evokes a specific set of images – John Travolta's iconic dancefloor moves from the movie (despite the fact that the most recognisable sequence was set to a different song) as well as his rhythmic strut to 'Stayin' Alive' at the beginning of the movie. In this way we introduce yet another element of problematic or lowbrow culture, which is to do with dance. The mind/body divide in Western culture and the way rationality has been valued above emotionality and embodied responses has meant that musical forms strongly associated with dancing have long been regarded with suspicion in this worldview (Gunn 2016). Moral panics about various types of music, from jazz to rock 'n' roll to rave, have included elements of the perceived dangers of music that invites bodily responses, and this was part of the backlash against disco (Frank 2007). In the case of the Discobedience, however, being able to draw on this cultural memory of dance meant there were movements the organisers could incorporate into their choreography that already 'made sense' with the music. The evocation of the past via this 'accessible, non-hierarchical, and lowbrow' cultural object thereby facilitated engagement with the protest, making it easier to break social norms; not just protesting and taking up urban space normally reserved for cars, but singing and dancing with abandon in public.

Discobedience in Queer Time

At the risk, then, of committing an academic sin in introducing a (perhaps overambitious) new set of ideas at the end of a paper, I would argue that this opens up the potential for the queering of time. This takes as a starting point Halberstam's (2005: 13) argument that queerness itself has 'the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space'. This is connected then to the notion of 'queer time,' which is a different relationship with time that emerged in gay communities 'whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic' (2005: 2). Within these communities:

The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and ... squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand (Halberstam 2005: 13).

So while emerging from a fundamentally different crisis, those engaging with the climate emergency are also experiencing the sense of the 'compression and annihilation' of an expected future that could be mapped out in terms of 'those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death' (Halberstam 2005: 14), conducted within the inescapable confines of a capitalist system. This destabilising of what has been imagined for us, in terms of a future, enables – even necessitates – the imagining of new ways of living, whether in a world that has found a way out of endless-growth capitalism and its inevitable emissions, or its dark twin where the dire predictions of the climate scientists come to pass. Utilising this different way of thinking about time may prove to be a fundamentally important aspect of this, in that time – the clock, the calendar, the notion of efficiency – has been instrumentalised in the service of capitalism and profit-making (Lilja et al. 2015; Harvey 1989). Leahy et al. (2010) have argued that it is the inability of even those people who believe in anthropogenic climate change to incorporate its effects into their own imagined futures, which still focus on those same paradigmatic markers mentioned earlier and on finding paths to success as defined within consumer capitalism, that leads to an inability to take meaningful action on the issue.

This focus on the future is why I am suggesting that the Discobedience may allow a *queering* of time, rather than existing in 'queer time'. The ideas of inheritance and reproduction are important here, and at first it may seem that the stance of environmentalists is fundamentally different to what a queer approach may require.

Halberstam includes reproduction and inheritance as markers of life experience that queer time does not work to, and Edelman (2004) goes further in suggesting that the queer rejection of reproduction as a fundamental good leads to a rejection of the future and of hope. The environmental movement, on the other hand, often uses the figure of the child and evokes the 'next generation' as a motivating factor. Extinction Rebellion is no different in this, with stories of 'fear for my children or grandchildren' being commonly deployed as motivating factors for involvement with the group and ways to recruit new members. So rather than a crisis that leads to a greater engagement with the here-and-now, and the pleasures of the moment, as Halberstam suggested happened during the AIDS epidemic, the future is central to environmental activism. However, the type of inheritance suggested by XR might be called a radical notion of inheritance, which in its pessimistic form reduces 'inheritance' to the idea that future generations could even be alive at all or through 'climate justice' expands the idea to ensuring an inheritance *for all* (even beyond the human), as opposed to the heteronormative concept of passing down one's personal wealth to the offspring of one's body. Moreover, while the focus might still be on the future, this is not necessarily done in combination with hope; the notion of 'fighting without hope' is prevalent in XR discourse. In the XR handbook, Bendell states:

Putting all our hopes in a better future allows us to make compromises in the present, while letting go of a better future can allow us to drop false hopes and live in the present with more integrity. It might even make our activism more effective (Bendell 2019: 76).

The future that is being focused on is fundamentally uncertain, with even a best-case scenario requiring a complete change in what we have thought about as a 'good life'.

So while there is always the potential for a queering of time in a movement like XR, this may come to the fore when we are given opportunities to put the past, present and future in dialogue with one another in a way that disrupts the dominance of linear time. Use of the past allows this alternative temporality to come into being. Lilja et al. (2015: 420) suggest that:

Cross-temporal relationships imply how the present is non-contemporaneous with itself. Such asynchronous relationships between living and non-living dissolve the boundaries between presence and absence, fiction and reality, idealism and materiality, present and past, as well as subject and object.

They argue that this enables the development of empathy with those in other times and through this new script for social life and civic engagement. In the Discobedience, the destabilising combination of queer-coded 'lowbrow' popular culture from the past with gaiety in the present, in the context of a despair-laden future-focus, may offer space for this to occur. This may be enhanced further when done in combination with an action that is in some ways explicitly about time and how the experience of time occurs differently when you are using this song to disrupt the time of others, and the efficiency and clockwork-like nature of the CBD during a business day.

So 'Stayin' Alive', then, delivers a set of tools in terms of its recognisability and pre-existing associations with sexuality, fun and dance, as well as an easily reconfigured set of lyrics about 'life going nowhere' and of course 'staying alive' that allude to the climate crisis but are nonetheless delivered with irreverence and gaiety. The work that this particular song does in terms of tapping into collective and cultural memory in order to queer and destabilise time is at the core of its appropriateness for this event. The use of the music of a moment of hedonism, of celebration of identity and on one level the triumph of consumer capitalism (even in its exclusions) to draw attention to the potential destruction of all of these things and their role in their own destruction, while drawing on the energy and joy inherent in that moment acts as a way to invite reimaginations of the future that are not tied to the patterns that currently structure our lives, and may not even be grounded in hope: the future imagined may be one that does not exist. The Civil Discobedience has this potential because of the combination of gaiety and a common understanding of 'Stayin' Alive' rooted in its place in our collective memory. As I noted at the beginning, this can only be spoken about as potential; perhaps, at the end of the day, people just loved to dance on the street, and perhaps this reading of the possibilities of the action is pure speculation. However, given the urgency of this moment it seemed worth taking up Seymour's challenge to find new modes of environmental action and consider what new things they may offer in relation to this event that could, perhaps, make a difference.

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Author

Catherine Strong is a Senior Lecturer in the RMIT BA (Music Industry) program. Her work focuses on forms on inequality in music, particularly gender, and popular music as a form of collective memory and heritage. Recent publications include the edited collection *Towards Gender Equality in the Music Industry* (with Sarah Raine) and articles in *Gender, Work and Organisations*, *Cultural Sociology*, and *Continuum*, along with an industry report on the effects of COVID-19 on Victorian music workers. She is co-editor of the journal *Popular Music History*. Catherine is an active participant and organiser in Extinction Rebellion in Australia.

End Note

1. The action also included a 'die-in', where participants lie on the ground in silence for a period of time to signify the deaths that climate change will bring about, which can be seen in this video. Analysing this part of the action goes beyond the scope of this article.

invisible hostile employee

instance as explanation
 against glib transcription
 sufficient, valveless, no need to
vibe the room

I begin by describing myself describing
 a dream of tripping down a staircase
 the fall plays on a loop
 cool institutional light
 leads to a cut-away
 of multiple rooms
 each signalling
 different moments of my life

when I speak my voice
 disperses
 touches a baby blue-tongue
 bothers the outsourced convenience class

we'll discover mist as sculpture
 then mist to show we're time-travelling
 mist cut by the high beam

burn-off amplifies
 the immensity
 of the folly

ELLA O'KEEFE

Schoolgirl

The long banks of windows disclose nothing
 of what goes on inside—and Chloe Saulnier
 does not actually formulate the question. Television

would inform her imagining—if the building were not clearly
 much older than any series she might have watched. Must
 it be more sombre, more severe than she can picture?

Chloe cannot tell—but sees a glass of water,
 tall; filled; standing somewhere near a window sill
 and a window, partially open, disclosing nothing of the view.

Grey walls. There is no soundtrack to this image—
 only a sense of quietness, of nothing changing, of time moving
 slowly by. This is 'recovery', a long waiting for health—

as experienced by an old person—a woman probably—
 though Chloe does not picture her, just her patience.
 Then she sees herself, viewed from above and distant,
 in her school uniform,

as from these windows.

Peter Bakowski & Ken Bolton

Ian Curtis tours America

I remember we smoked on the concourse
 behind the Pittsburgh bus station
 and didn't speak of class.
 We tied our wrists together and watched
 the ashes fall. You said, in the perverse
 fashion of the young, 'Age is no excuse
 in matters of dying'. But I was thinking of Vegas
 carparks, and the cool cables of the Golden Gate bridge.
 Though it was a ragged opportunity, a half chance at best,
 you clung to England like a machine for better living,
 though your moment lay before you
 like an uneaten rose.
 Now, all I have is that tar black taste in my mouth,
 and a tongue that tells me
 the big skies are falling in
 to disrepair.

Shane Strange