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IN REVIEW: Richard Dyer in the House of Cinema

edited by LISA HENDERSON and VICTOR FAN
with LOUISA STEIN

Introduction: There Is Something about Richard Dyer

by LISA HENDERSON

To Cinema Studies Friends and Comrades:

I write to introduce you to a collection of epistolary essays on the work of Richard Dyer, prepared on the occasion of his retirement from King's College London.

Few scholars have considered as many topics in cinema and media studies as Dyer, or with as much depth and love—love for film and its history, for audiences of all stripes, for the endeavor of cinema scholarship, and for colleagues and their work. Dyer's published scholarship has ranged from light entertainment and the history of stardom to film song, serial killers and seriality, and especially pathbreaking and sustained work as a founding author (in English) of gay film studies. Throughout, he reveals the rich mix of affect, form, and world, whether in the slippery and overwhelming power of whiteness, the delicacy of male genitalia in porn (a genre typically condemned as indelicate), the expressive complexity of pastiche, or the vaporous whimsy of an eye line. His oeuvre and presence have enriched our field for forty years.

This collection of letters, some of them addressed to Dyer, all of them about him, his presence in the field, and his work, emerges from a 2016 Queer Caucus panel at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Atlanta. That occasion was not the first time SCMS had recognized Dyer; he received the Distinguished Career Achievement Award in 2007. But the retirement of a broadly read and beloved colleague brings with it new forms of recognition, new feelings and reflections, and renewed solidarities. Our Atlanta panel sought to crystallize that evolution since 2007, and this collection—epistolary,

classic, fanciful, personal, and lived—is our archive. We thank the Queer Caucus and our Atlanta cosponsors.¹

Victor Fan and I asked contributors to condense their comments in the form of a letter, to preserve the embodied feeling of the occasion and speak to how Dyer has touched our own scholarship, training, and teaching, sometimes up close, other times from a distance. Some of us, like B. Ruby Rich and Thomas Waugh, fought and taught with Dyer in the trenches of early gay and lesbian film studies, gripping their copies of *Gays and Film* or Dyer's *Jump Cut* essay "Homosexuality and Film Noir" as queer talismans that might help "connect our life and work," to quote Rich (in this collection).² Even at a distance, across generations, nationalities, genders, and race, reading Dyer felt close, as Miriam Petty writes of her encounter with Dyer's work on black stardom and whiteness as a graduate student in Atlanta in the early 2000s. Petty's recent monograph *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* is exemplary evidence of that solidarity and inspiration.³ In her letter, Petty notes Dyer's attunement to representations of race in films in which race was not the dominant theme. In his reply, Dyer uses everyone's letters to think about how queerness enters his work whether or not he's writing about queerness. Intersectional attunement surfaces in Petty's contribution, Dyer's reply, and the collection overall.

Louis D. Bayman and Ryan Powell share the honor of having formally been Dyer's advisees as doctoral students at King's in the 2000s. Both write now as appreciative peers. Dyer hears (and credits) insight wherever it comes from, on campus or off, and counts on his students-turned-colleagues to keep him current on the expanding range of directions in which they, or we, take his work. It is a sustained circuit of expertise and regard in the commons of cinema scholarship. For Bayman, a recent graduate assistant for Dyer's course on serial-killer films, that commons turns out to be a bloody basement, expertly appreciated! For Powell, it is a contemporary expansion of Dyer's classic analysis of the image of the homosexual as a sad young man.

As readers of this collection will notice, there is a premium on affection in that commons, one that most authors here attribute at least partly to the felt character of Dyer's work, his mode of address, and his sensitivity to our feelings and intimacies as members of cinema's audience. Feminist film scholar Anu Koivunen takes that observation further, tracing Dyer's insights into the affect of genre and style from his first book *Light Entertainment* and inviting Dyer—against the grain of his long-standing, if informal, refusal—to describe himself as a theorist of film affect (Dyer responds in his reply).⁴ Jackie Stacey, feminist, queer film and cultural studies scholar, and coteacher with

1 In addition to SCMS, the Queer Caucus, and the Black Caucus, cosponsors included *Film Quarterly*, King's College London, Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan / BFI Publishing, *Screen*, and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Thanks also to Leslie LeMond at SCMS, Neepta Majumdar on the SCMS 2016 Program Committee, and Andres Spillari at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, for assistance with images.

2 See Richard Dyer, *Gays and Film* (London: BFI, 1977); see also Dyer, "Homosexuality and Film Noir," *Jump Cut*, no. 16 (1977): 18–21.

3 Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

4 Richard Dyer, *Light Entertainment* (London: BFI, 1973).

Dyer in the early days at the University of Birmingham describes Dyer's approach as "textual intimacy." Patricia White (who was unable to attend Atlanta but was invited to contribute here) recalls her sense of recognition in reading Dyer as a student of feminist and queer cinema scholarship and later watching his ease and affection with women colleagues, herself included, at film conferences and symposia.

In the spring of 2015, I joined a plenary with Dyer and filmmaker John Greyson at the Sexuality Summer School convened by Jackie Stacey at the University of Manchester. The theme was queer arts activism. Bearing in mind the central place of Greyson's AIDS activist filmmaking, rich with original opera and show tunes, we titled our plenary "Why Sing?" In a world of economic, political, and interpersonal brutality, what place might singing have in queer activist art? There is the history of protest song, of "the political force of musical beauty" and of social and cultural formation through music—something Dyer reminds us of in his beloved essay "In Defense of Disco."⁵ But the question "why sing?" was also a provocation.

In assembling readings by Sexuality Summer School faculty, Dyer proposed for his selection the introduction to his book *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film*.⁶ Early in that book, Dyer writes that "singing about singing declares that there is something about singing."⁷ I chose this sentence as one of the handful of quotes we'd incorporate into our megaphone choir in Manchester because it was a fetching response to the question "why sing?" Many film songs are about singing, and singing does something for us that is hard to speak or write about, something that cannot be communicated with recitations of lyrics, no matter how metered or poetic. The literature on musical feeling comes into play, along with work on performance, queerness, gender, race, and nation (what's a nation without a song?), and some of the weightiest and politically minded observations must be braided with qualities heard and felt, but not seen, in singing and listening to song. Getting at that *something* about singing is a signature gesture, arguably a queer one, always on the lookout for something implicit. It is a gesture that illustrates Dyer's trust in popular articulation, both a song itself and the warmly put idea of there being "*something* about it." There's a grace and openness in this critical approach and an attention to form no matter a film's place inside or outside anyone's canon, as Amy Villarejo writes (to Batman and Superman) in this collection. Dyer's openness, grace, and sometimes daunting honesty are well matched to his capacity for scholarly labor, for conversation, for film going, watching, hearing, teaching, and especially writing. Amid health crises and international demand, he is one of the hardest-working people in cinema studies.

Finally, as Victor Fan writes, Dyer's hard work includes assistance by example and the gentler offers of friendship to new colleagues. After Fan joined the King's faculty, Dyer moved and surprised him with recognition and unforced hospitality that were as personally sustaining as they were illuminating about how to see film and how film sees.

5 Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Richard Dyer, "In Defence of Disco," *Gay Left*, no. 8 (1979): 20–23.

6 Richard Dyer, introduction to *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1–56.

7 *Ibid.*, 2.

In his reply to our letters, Dyer returns to some of the themes he improvised on from the Atlanta stage—the care we take in joining the personal and political as cinema and media scholars, the place of theorizing (or not) in one’s writing, and where queerness might enter his work—and anyone’s—when it is not expressly the topic, as is sometimes the case in this collection. Dyer’s reply is pointed, appreciative, and original.

As Victor Fan and I read contributions, I was struck (and just a little put out) by how many of us have stories of walking with Richard—B. Ruby Rich and Patricia White on the same occasion in Glasgow, Anu Koivunen in Stockholm, me in London. “Put out” because there is something in Richard’s attention that makes us think it’s because of *us* that the special combination of walking and talking produces insight and excitement, seemingly without effort. For my part, some twenty years into our friendship, I remember riding the bus through London’s West End, slightly irritated by Richard’s preference for buses over the tube. But as the bus passed every theater featuring a musical on the marquee, with fine intonation and a performer’s gusto Richard sang a phrase from the show’s signature song. The occasion unearthed from me a musical archive I didn’t know I had and welcomed a curious, delighted sing-along on the upper deck. Travels with you, Richard, are like that—fruitful, fun, intimate, encouraging, and of the world. In truth, we like them best knowing that there are so many of us who watch, read, write, and sing with you.

With love and gratitude,
Lisa

To Dye[r] For

by THOMAS WAUGH

Dear Richard,

You have just sent me one of your legendary postcards, men in kilts at the urinal this time, prodding me unwittingly to finish converting my SCMS tribute (roast?) from last March, ineptly titled “To Dye[r] for: From Gay to Queer?,” into a sober epistolary contribution to *Cinema Journal*.

There were eleven of us, and we each had to stake out our small parcel of territory. I had no trouble choosing *Gays and Film*, since your pioneering seventy-three-page first book from 1977 (you call it a “pamphlet,” but I call it the Bible) had such a paradigm-shifting effect on both the discipline and my career.¹ That lavender volume, whose

1 Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1977; 3rd rev. ed., New York: New York Zoetrope, 1984).