The track “I Feel Love” by Donna Summer still seems to come out of another world. Even though the song was produced three decades ago, it still sounds alien and futurist. And the world, out of which “I Feel Love” came, has been built out of loops, nothing but loops. The song rattles on and on like a machine gun. The loops appear deceptively simple at first. “I Feel Love” is based on the electronic throb of a pattern out of a few synthesizer notes the sequencer repeats over and over and occasionally transposes. But in the framework of these minimalist preconditions the track develops a field of rhythmic differences, deviations, and shifts. The blunt, mechanical thumping of a machine turns into complex polyrhythms, strict rule turns into confusing diversity, and eventually becomes an organism out of repetitions. Even Donna Summer herself eventually got lost in the confusing labyrinth of rhythms in “I Feel Love.”

In this essay I want to show how producer Giorgio Moroder succeeded in transforming the clatter of the synthesizer loops of “I Feel Love” into an organic pulse with the help of a relatively simple production trick. Then, I want to discuss how “I Feel Love” systematically dissolves and collapses antithetical oppositions. This production trick not only lends an organic quality to the mechanical loops, but, in the process, amalgamates nature and technology on a musical level. At the same time, the oppositions between discipline and liberty, obligation and self-determination, repetition and difference, and Eros and Thanatos are suspended in “I Feel Love.”

The Munich Machine

“I Feel Love”—lyrics and vocals by Donna Summer, composition and production by Giorgio Moroder—is generally considered to be the first disco track, which was
produced—with the exception of the singing—completely electronically. That makes the track the “Urpflanze” of techno, house, and other forms of electronic dance music. “I Feel Love” was a number-one hit around the globe, and has not lost its appeal today. With its meandering loops, it still does not fail to make people dance at birthday and wedding parties as well as at techno raves.

Singer Donna Summer was an African-American woman who had come to Munich from the United States in 1968 to play a bit part in the German version of the hippie musical Hair. Giorgio Moroder is an Italian musician and composer, who had risen in Munich at the end of the 1960s as a producer of successful pop songs. In 1974 the singer-producer duo had its first international hit with “Love To Love You Baby.” “Love To Love You Baby” was recorded with predominantly traditional instruments, but its musical structure, which combines a few musical patterns over and over in different permutations, already anticipated “I Feel Love” through its relentless loops.

“Love To Love You Baby” is a disco version of the notorious 1969 hit “Je t’aime . . . moi non plus” by Jane Birkin and Serge Gainsbourg, a quite straightforward—and very successful—musical simulation of coitus. Just like “Je t’aime . . . moi non plus,” “Love To Love You Baby” was banned by many radio stations when it came out in 1974 because of its lascivious moaning. Despite this (or maybe because of this), the piece made it into the top ten song lists in several European countries and in the US. The original version of the song was only three minutes. Producer Moroder sent the record to Neil Bogart, the boss of the disco specialist US-American record label Casablanca. Bogart supposedly played the song at a party and was so impressed by the sensuous effect of the song that he acquired the rights for the US-American market and asked for an extended mix.

In this period, rock music turned its back on the 3-minute pop song that fit on a single and started to fill whole LPs. A similar trend emerged in “black pop” music, where songs were extended; in order to play such long songs in the discotheques, the Maxi single was subsequently developed. Songs not long enough were extended, often by using tape loops. Therefore, it was in line with an emerging new trend in pop music when Moroder created the 17-minute version of “Love To Love You Baby.” The song took up the entire A-side of the album of the same name; when Casablanca released the album in the US, it became Donna Summer’s first worldwide hit—a considerable success for a European producer who was poaching in the predominately Afro-American genre of disco.

“Love To Love You Baby” is a disco piece in the style of its time: sumptuous string arrangements, hissing hi-hats, elegant little dashes of piano, and a wah wah guitar. The song’s elements are reminiscent of Van McCoy’s “The Hustle” (1975), Barry White’s “Love’s Theme” (1974), and other disco operas of that period. At the same time, “Love To Love You Baby” is also a piece of pure minimalism. The US-American musicologist Robert Finch compares the structure of the piece with Steve Reich’s