

Harry Styles – Aesthetic Queering

Marie-Anne Simmet – masi0001@students.uni-saarland.de



Empowerment through disruption

- Appropriation of (virtual) spaces for self-expression and – affirmation; fans “mobilize [Styles’] image for their own political purpose” (Gross), turn concerts into a political space for affirmation and recognition
- Ability to (re-)design dominant narratives (Black 398) of heteronormativity, whiteness, gendered clothing etc. by subverting them
- (Re-)claiming cultural practices such as fashion; Styles “plays” with clothing and encourages experimentation
- Choosing self-representation and –identification; choice to identify with a group, a set of values that the celebrity represents: “be kind” as Styles’ motto
- Pop culture is open to “queer readings“ (Jamieson 247) and can be appropriated
- Space for imagination (Black 399), creativity, and cultural production such as writing, arts: non-professional, non-official, “just for fun” without pressure

Literature Cited

Primary Sources:

Mitchell, Tyler. *Pretty, Much?* Vogue, Dec. 2020. Accessed 13 June 2021.
 “Watermelon Sugar.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Harry Styles, 18 May 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=E07s5ZYyMg. Accessed 3 June 2021.

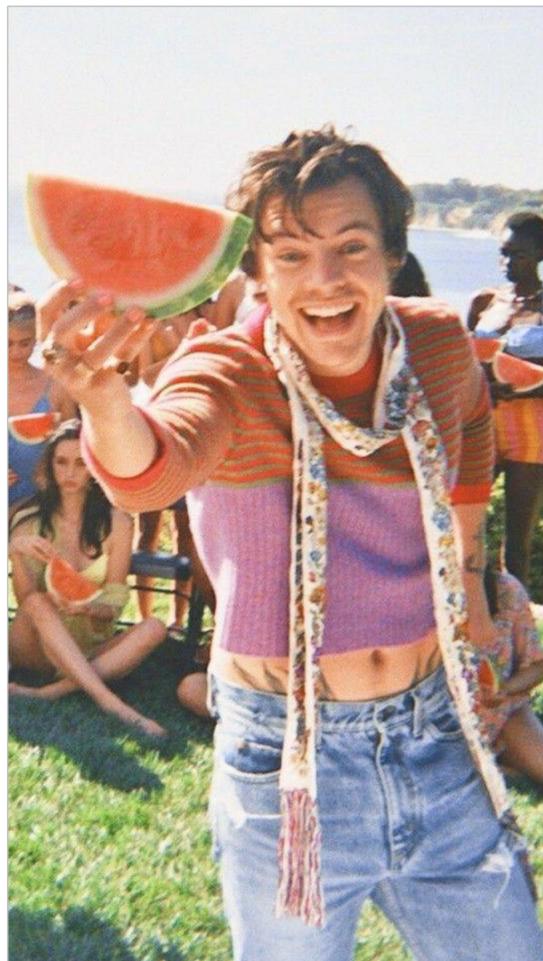
Secondary Sources:

Black, Rebecca W. “Online Fan Fiction, Global Identities, and Imagination.” *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2009, pp. 397–425. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27784341. Accessed 5 May 2021.
 Bowles, Hamish. “Playtime with Harry Styles.” *VOGUE*, 13 Nov. 2020. www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020. Accessed 2 June 2021.
 Gross, Allyson. “To Wave a Flag: Identification, #BlackLivesMatter, and Populism in Harry Styles Fandom.” *Fandom and Politics*, edited by Ashley Hinck and Amber Davison, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 32, 2020. doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1765. Accessed May 8, 2021.
 Hawkins, Stan. *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*. Routledge, 2016.
 Jamieson, Daryl. “Marketing Androgyny: The Evolution of the Backstreet Boys.” *Popular Music*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 245–258. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4500316. Accessed 4 May 2021.
 Jung, Susanne. “Queering Popular Culture: Female Spectators and the Appeal of Writing Slash Fan Fiction.” *Gender Forum*, vol. 2 2002, pp. 30–50. genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/0408_GenderQueeries.pdf#page=33. PDF. Accessed 2 June 2021.
 Lehnert, Gertrud. *Mode: Theorie, Geschichte und Ästhetik einer kulturellen Praxis*. Transcript Verlag, 2013.
 ---. “Queere Mode/Körper.” *Ist Mode Queer? Neue Perspektiven der Modeforschung*, edited by Gertrude Lehnert and Maria Weiland, Transcript Verlag, 2016, pp. 17–36.
 “Reacting to Harry Styles’ Fashion (he’s not original but thank god for his gucci campaign).” *YouTube*, uploaded by HauteLeMode, 5 Oct. 2018, youtu.be/uraqDyqHHN8. Accessed 2 June 2021.
 “Why is Harry Styles In A Dress?” *YouTube*, uploaded by HauteLeMode, 18 Dec. 2021, youtu.be/rfQaiSI--14. Accessed 2 June 2021.

“Why is Harry Styles in a dress?”

Harry Styles’ recent appearances in traditionally feminine clothing have sparked attention from conservative voices as to the danger of blurring the lines between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’ The fashion practices used in his representation construct him as an ambivalent figure and subvert expectations of traditional masculinity. This process of “queering” the celebrity is an advantageous marketing strategy on the one hand, but on the other it offers greater opportunity for identification among Styles’ fans. Fashion and aesthetics create ambivalence to the point of the celebrity being a symbol devoid of meaning onto which fans may project desires and identities. I argue that by constructing Styles’ queerness through aesthetic representation, a space of safety and empowerment is created for his fans.

My interest for this topic arises from the oppositional powers of fashion to convey meaning while simultaneously taking it away. Aesthetic representation is a means of expression for many people who feel as if it contributes to identity-construction – however, fashion and its meanings are so open that any conclusive interpretation is impossible.



Aesthetic elements in Styles’ representation

- “feminine”: dresses, crop tops, pink, thin scarves, colorful sunglasses, lace, tulle, sensuality (food), surrounded by women in a sensual but not explicitly sexual way
 → materials, cuts, colors
- “masculine”: suits, black, trousers, boots, tattoos, “womanizer” (orgy-esque)
 → ambivalence, mixed signals: never in “full feminine” dress but a combination that sends “mixed messages” (Jamieson 248)

Fashion as a cultural practice

- Fashion is a dynamic which works through artifacts and human actions (Lehnert 15): it is not only clothes, but the performances, interpretations of and meanings behind what we wear
- Fashion is always read and interpreted by the onlooker (Lehnert 17); even ‘mindless’ dressing sends messages
- A fluid, inconclusive social sign system, a discourse that rapidly evolves due to the speed of the industry: fashion and its attributions are ephemeral and vague (Lehnert 16)

Queering in pop culture

- The process of creating ambivalent identities that are difficult to clearly place on the gender spectrum
- Evolution of the male beauty ideal from hyper-masculinity to androgyny (Jamieson 246)
- Construction of “harmless” male celebrities that do not exhibit stereotypically male (sexually) aggressive behavior (Jamieson 245)
- Opening opportunities for identification, self-affirmation and representation
- Constructing ambivalence to the point of “emptiness” (Gross) so that the public may fill meaning into the celebrity

Fashion and Queerness

- Fashion is a practice with queer potential:
 - Both fashion and the (queer) body are gendered and never meaningless
 - They offer potential for identity construction and expression, identification with a social group; Fashion allows for self-differentiation (Lehnert 29): demarcation from other groups, individualization inside a group
 - Fashion creates ambivalence

[T]he stereotypical gay male body ... has become a new standard for masculine beauty in both gay and straight culture. This ... type of sex symbol is sensitive ... soft-skinned ... thin ... youthful ... fashionable ... he is, in a word, androgynous, embodying in roughly equal proportions traits which are traditionally perceived as masculine and feminine. (Jamieson 245)

Queerness as “safe space”

- Constructing an ambivalent male celebrity is “safe” (Jamieson 245): queer (subversive) enough to spark interest while devoid of aggressive masculinity; attractive for young fans as target group while reassuring to parents (Jamieson 248–49)
 → safe space for women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+
- Virtual safe spaces: (online) community, fan pages/blogs, fan fiction
 → fan interactions as collective enterprises that bring together (i.e fan fiction writing (Black 399))
- Local safe spaces: concerts, meet and greets
 → having “a place to go” where no judgement awaits, where community is actively in process
- Belonging instead of ‘otherness’
- Ambivalence in representation opens the opportunity for projection: fans are able to see themselves in the celebrity, to feel addressed and included, to project own desires