

Queer Aesthetics

I would like to start with a simple question: **what does a punk look like?**

Stop for a moment, get a clear image in your head.

Focus in on what it is that makes them look like a punk.

What **must** a punk have?

What would tarnish their punkiness?

Remember this image, we will come back to it.

Some time around and through 1991, Punk broke out of subculture and found itself in the mainstream, somewhere it did not intend to be¹. Punk is a gritty movement, through and through. Features like torn clothes, dyed hair and safety pins came from its lower-class, anti-authoritarian roots, and helped to form its aesthetic as something provocative and exclusive. In the 1970s looking like a 'punk' was risky, and would show the world your political alignment in a way that left no room for doubt (or blending in once the cops showed up)². In other words, it was something you had to choose to represent, and in doing so you became a part of the subculture of resistance. If you looked like a punk, you were a punk.

By design, Punk was fundamentally indigestible by the 1970s society that made it, but by 1991, Hot Topic was in business and haute couture began to chew. Punk – or rather a distilled, diluted form of it – was packaged and sold³. Pre-torn clothes made by sweatshop workers began to appear on the racks next to Che Guevara t-shirts. Cargo pants and tartan prints – traditionally signs of the lower class and rebellion⁴ – were shunted to the catwalk and the cover of magazines. In something of a bad joke, a clean, singular, conformative image of Punk Aesthetic was fed into the very same system that its founders had railed against. Anti-authoritarianism became grumpy faces, gritty DIY attire became upmarketed fashion statements, and punk's **deeply queer roots**⁵ were replaced with the straight, white, Everyman. And so, Punk was reduced, consumed and dissolved... right?

"I started dressing Punk because it helped me embody that bit of 'fuck you' I was feeling towards people around me at the time. I didn't fit in anyway, so I wanted to stand out and rub it in their faces. But I started to realize how little that

1 Sklar, Monica. *Punk Style*. 1-2

2 Ibid. 75, 146

3 Ibid. 116, 125

4 Ibid. 30

5 Curran, Nault, ed. *Queercore*, 47-48

worked? I dyed my hair, cut it into wild styles, tore up my jeans, whatever, but there were all these people in magazines and TV shows that had this crystal-clear punk look and I ended up just comparing myself to them. It wasn't freeing, it was just another way to feel self-conscious. Sure, I earned these torn up jeans, I liked all the right bands, but here was someone doing none of that who was more like a punk than me. Where were my studs, huh? Where were my chokers or arm bands? Not a single safety pin? Not a punk."

Here is where I remove the wool that I have so rudely placed over your eyes.

Punks are not unique in the way that they have been treated by the fashion industry and stylistic trends. Indeed, if we view punks as another in a line of **queer** counter-cultural movements, they are an entirely typical example of the failures of counter fashion to instigate progress, and of the conformative engine of aesthetics.

All too often have queer radical movements been reduced to aesthetics.

In gaining more acceptance through the progress of a political movement, queer identities invariably push into the mainstream. This is the goal of the queer rights movement after all; mainstream acceptance. With every mote of progress, though, there is always the risk of backlash⁶. Aesthetics are incredibly effective tools of influence, especially potent when they are made fresh and authentic⁷, but this influence is simply more readily available to those who already have it. This makes counter fashion, and the power it brings⁸, a tempting political tool with a tendency to backfire. When punks became politically powerful figures, their aesthetic became powerful in turn. In a cruel irony, it was their own aesthetic which was used to take their political power.

Like many other queer subcultures, punks relied on signalling to tell friend from foe⁹. When those signals became mainstream trends, they lost their highly specific cultural and political meanings, and in turn, their power. If you looked like a punk, you were a punk, and so if everyone looked something like a punk, what does it mean to be a punk anymore? This is especially convenient to those at the very heights of the fashion industry, who depended on the continued exploitation of the lower class that Punk came from¹⁰. Suddenly, the movement's founders and champions were the extreme fringes of a mainstream trend, and not to be taken seriously. Their political power was taken with the devil-may-care aesthetic it was built upon.

6 Thorn, Abigail. "Steve Bannon" 31:01

7 Wynn, Natalie. "The Aesthetics | Contrapoints"; Jenß, Heike, and Viola Hofmann, eds. *Fashion and Materiality: Cultural Practices in Global Contexts*. 1

8 Blanco F., José, and Andrew Reilly, eds. *Fashion, Dress and Post-Postmodernism*. 193; Richards, Harriette. "Practices of Cultural Collectivity" 136

9 Missionmag. "How the LGBTQIA+ Community Use Style to Signal Identity."

10 Sklar, Monica. *Punk Style*. 134; Bruggemans, Daniëlle et. al. *Dissolving the Ego of Fashion*.

A similar effect happened when Ellen came out in the 1990s; her clean, marketable brand of lesbianism was polished to talk-show standards and mostly accepted (or at least tolerated), but the more ‘obscene’ lesbians with **plaid shirts** and hairy legs at the picket lines were chewed up and spat out¹¹. Consider also the ‘Gay Best Friend’¹², a stock character who is infamous for being a non-threatening caricature of a gay man, as opposed to someone who expresses any kind of agency or desire of their own. Politics are replaced with aesthetics, and then those reduced aesthetics are used to undermine the politics. This is a pervasive issue facing queer acceptance, where looking and talking along the lines of acceptance is used to counter genuine change¹³.

*“My friend was talking to me about earrings, how they always wore a big, dangly earring in one ear to show that they were gay. **But now it’s a trend**, all over TikTok, and straight people are wearing them as fashion statements so that they can look cool and alternative. They’re not risking anything. They’re not respecting where it came from. Now it’s just a piece of jewellery, it doesn’t say anything, and so my friend **can’t use it** to safely communicate with their community anymore. It’s not like gay people own earrings, but it’s only cool because we wore them, but we weren’t even wearing them to be cool!”*

I’d like to get a little spicier with my next questions: **what does a drag queen look like?**

This is easy, right?

There is a good chance you are thinking of Ru Paul right now.

Makeup. Titties. Wigs. Eyes.

Slay.

Well... **what does a trans woman look like?**

Does the juxtaposition of those two questions hurt a little?

What does that question even mean?

Despite our shared history in the ballroom¹⁴, drag queens and trans women have been politically at odds. Drag is something of an aesthetic movement. It plays with the norms of gender, but only in the context of performance. Since *Drag Race*, it has paraded front and centre into the mainstream, with a playful aesthetic that thrives on camp drama¹⁵. It’s basically really fucking marketable. Come the 2010s and the rise of trans awareness.

11 Dow, Bonnie. “Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility.” 123.

12 TV Tropes. “Gay Best Friend.”

13 Von Busch, Otto, and Ylva Bjereld. “A Typology of Fashion Violence.” 92-95

14 Feldman, Zeena, and Jamie Hakim. “From Paris Is Burning to #dragrace” 390

15 Ibid. 387

In contrast to the camp, bubbly, light-hearted drag scene, trans politics was (and still is in many ways) a simply grim affair. At best, it's a difficult discussion about people's expectations and gender norms, and at worst it's a conversation about the Hays Code and murder and oppression¹⁶. Simply put, the aesthetics are rough, and with drag so fresh in the cultural sphere, the two are inevitably at odds. Trans people are forced to justify why they can't just be fun and camp like the queens, and why this gender thing means so much to them anyway¹⁷. Drag queens in particular are pushed to disavow their trans cousins for being too sensitive, or too serious. With the backdrop of centuries of hateful stereotyping, trans people have little to argue with, and were left being stuck with a choice between doing something for trans acceptance and their own personal safety.

*"I go to work, and I'll see my co-worker wearing a skirt, and it's like, 'go him, slay'. But I can't have that? I need to fight to be accepted as a trans man, so if I wore a skirt, it would be more like 'oh, are you actually trans?'. And this is something that straight guys are starting to wear too, and like, **I'm excluded somehow?** It's like I can only express my identity in a traditionally masculine way, because I'm still fighting to be seen as a man in the first place. It's better for me to fudge my expression and at least get seen as a man than truly express myself and get denied my personhood constantly."*

When I asked what a trans woman looks like, the answer that comes easiest is probably "just like any other woman", but this only reveals the flaw with the question, and every other question I've asked. **What if we don't?** Does that make us less valid as women? If a punk looks like a prep, are they less anti-authoritarian? All of this, the lines between queer identities, the lines between man and woman, and even the lines between the presumed normal and the inflammatory queers are **aesthetic barriers**. Beyond the aesthetics, drag queens and trans women are merely different facets of the same discontent. They both speak to a desire to be seen, to experience the self in a free and undefined sense, wherein others see us for who we truly are beyond the flesh, body and dress before them¹⁸. It is only in aesthetics that they are different. It is only when they are **reduced** to aesthetics that they are opposed.

"I feel like I'm stuck between fitting in and standing out. Where is the place where I can just be me? The queer community is based around this idea of self expression, but I find that on one side I have straight society telling me to blend in and basically sell out anyone that can't, and then queer society telling me to crush the system and revolution and fuck the consequences, all the while splintering into more and more pieces. Nowhere in that is actual self expression, or community, or

16 Feder, Sam. *Disclosure*

17 Me, literally a conversation I've had with my mum.

18 Greenlee, Douglas. "Peirce's Hypostatic and Factorial Categories."; Thorn, Abigail. "Men. Abuse. Trauma."

*understanding. There's total blinders to what we're standing for in the first place. All I want is the right for people to be who they are; I just want to **be**."*

I remind you of the punk that you imagined at the start of this piece, and I'll answer my final question for myself:

Why does it matter if they are a punk or not?

Because the aesthetic of a punk, and of queerness in general, is changeable, and in many ways it's meaningless. Anyone can tear a shirt, or buy one pre-torn, or dye their hair, or buy an earring. Aesthetics are powerful, yes, and in many ways they are an immutable fact of life. But they are ultimately only capable of constructing an **us**, and leading to the inevitable **them**. This is not the power to grow, not in the long term. Aesthetics have only the power to splinter. In her piece about the flaws with the term 'dysphoria', Abigail Thorn prompts us to seek frameworks that "[centre] our agency as human beings", and to stop drawing lines between dysphoria and self consciousness¹⁹. As opposed to clinical diagnoses and strict categories, she invites us to seek companionship with each-other, outside of aesthetic binaries like cis and trans.

Rather than trying to define how we are different, we should seek the ways that let us see how similar we really are. Self expression is something far deeper than a specific manifestation of aesthetics, it's being seen for who you are, beyond queerness, beyond your clothes, beyond your very flesh. Self expression is to simply be.

*"In the body mod community, we don't really have the same problem with aesthetics. Everyone is just themselves, and themselves is so intensely wild and out there that there's no comparing or contrasting or pinning down one look, let alone having it go mainstream. It's probably because of that that everyone's so chill. If you **identify** with the body mod community then you're a part of the body mod community. There's no aesthetic threshold or band you need to love. It's about connecting to what it's all about for you. If that means looking like a fucking dragon, then all power to you. If that means piercing your ears, then you're just as seen."*

19 Thorn, Abigail. "Have We Got It Wrong on Dysphoria?"



Works Cited

- Blanco F., José, and Andrew Reilly, eds. *Fashion, Dress and Post-Postmodernism*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021.
- Bruggemans, Daniëlle, Pascale Gatzen, Judith Ter Haar, Hanka van der Voet, and Hanka van der Voet. *Dissolving the Ego of Fashion: Engaging with Human Matters*. Amsterdam: ArtEZ Press, 2018.
- Curran, Nault, ed. *Queercore*, Routledge, 2018.
- Dow, Bonnie. "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18, no. 2 (June 2001): 123–40.
- Feder, Sam. *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*. Netflix, 2020.
- Feldman, Zeena, and Jamie Hakim. "From *Paris Is Burning* to #dragrace: Social Media and the Celebrification of Drag Culture." *Celebrity Studies* 11, no. 4
- Greenlee, Douglas. "Peirce's Hypostatic and Factorial Categories." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 4 (1): 49. 1968.
- Jenß, Heike, and Viola Hofmann, eds. *Fashion and Materiality: Cultural Practices in Global Contexts*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020.
- Missionmag. "How the LGBTQIA+ Community Use Style to Signal Identity." *Mission Magazine* (blog), June 8, 2020. <https://missionmag.org/style-to-signal/>.
- Richards, Harriette. "Practices of Cultural Collectivity: Style Activism, Miromoda and Māori Fashion in Aotearoa New Zealand." *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty* 12, no. 1 (June 1, 2021): 131–49.
- Rowe, Kaz. "Why Do We Idolize LGBTQ Historical Figures?" *YouTube*. 11 May 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kihyl7UmiUw>.

Sklar, Monica. *Punk Style*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018.

Thorn, Abigail. “Have We Got It Wrong on Dysphoria?” *TransWrites*. 15 June 2022.

<https://transwrites.world/have-we-got-it-wrong-on-dysphoria-abigail-thorn-discusses-trans-healthcare/>.

Thorn, Abigail. “Men. Abuse. Trauma.” *YouTube*. 27 July 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeGEv0YVltw)

[watch?v=AeGEv0YVltw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeGEv0YVltw).

Thorn, Abigail. “Steve Bannon” *YouTube*. 5 February 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO6uD3c2qMo)

[v=wO6uD3c2qMo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO6uD3c2qMo).

TV Tropes. “Gay Best Friend.” *Tv Tropes*. 7 August 2022. [https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/](https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GayBestFriend)

[pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GayBestFriend](https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GayBestFriend).

Von Busch, Otto, and Ylva Bjereld. “A Typology of Fashion Violence.” *Critical Studies in Fashion*

& Beauty 7, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 89–107.

Wynn, Natalie. “The Aesthetics | Contrapoints” *YouTube*. 20 September 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1afqR5QkDM>.

Discussions

I have quoted some discussions that I with my friends throughout the piece. **These are large blocks of text in italics.** They are crucial to understanding the problems of aesthetics, so take them as thematic and cultural cues. I did not record these discussions, and they are only meant to be indicative of what we discussed. I have also not included their names for privacy reasons.