



VIDEO TRANSCRIPTION

A Queer History of Fashion

From the Closet to the Catwalk

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Video length: 4:11 | This video is online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kkmpo9B2dZ0

I think it's been too little noted how remarkable a move it was to create queer T-shirts and other forms of activist regalia. After all, this is a community that was defined by the inability, socially and culturally, to speak its name. And it went from that kind of performative silence to the literal wearing of that name across one's chest.

The history of that development is one of the most telling signs of the modern queer movement. And what's most remarkable about it is how recent it is. We are so used to seeing t-shirts with slogans that now we think they've always been that way, but in my research I've been hard pressed to find one that antedates the early 1980s. There is a t-shirt that was made by the artist Joey Terrill in Los Angeles reading 'Mariposa' and that was in 1977 but that was hand-painted, and there were a lot of hand-painted t-shirts—people individually expressing themselves. But to have actually a t-shirt that was produced as a commercial enterprise available to people really was attended only upon the birth of the national marches on Washington and the initial protests around the Bowers v. Hardwick decision of the Supreme Court. That's when we start to see the advent of queer activist fashion as a viable commercial enterprise.

Of course I'm in some sense instantiating something of a false distinction when I talk about queer activist fashion in the first place because all fashion is intended to communicate an identity—to perform a self that seems real to the bearer. And so for example with the 1970s you have the clone look, which was tight t-shirts, very, very trim, tight 501 jeans, often sanded, so that aspects of one's secondary sexual characteristics came to the fore. Or similarly in the 1970s you had lesbian feminists wearing flannel t-shirts intended to communicate they were not interested in performing a sort of traditional female role. So in that sense, queer activist fashion has always been there, it's just that what I'm talking about is that new form, in which a word actually claims to represent an identity.

One of the most striking aspects of the queer t-shirts is how sensitive an index it is of minute changes in LGBTQ self-identification, because of course, to use a word means that that word has to correlate in a profound way with one's identity, and we can trace a remarkable series of words over only the last 25 years that have been used on t-shirts, over chests, from lesbian and gay, and trans and bi, to queer and then of course now with new forms of self-identification. And what's striking about these changes is that unlike a t-shirt that simply has an image on it, a word has to have some sort of claim to representing accurately a community. And so there's a lot of pressure on that word to bespeak exactly what one understands oneself to be. With the advent of queer t-shirts, we've seen those words get ever more self-selecting, ever more specific. ▼