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Harry Styles as a Cecaelia: Sexuality, Representation and Media-lore in “Music for a Sushi Restaurant”

ABSTRACT

The music video for Harry Styles’s 2022 track “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” (directed by Aube Perrie) provides a surprising representation of the pop star (arguably at the peak of his career) appearing as a cecaelia (a monstrous figure with a human head, arms and torso giving way to tentacles around its midriff). The video is notable in two distinct contexts. First, in terms of Styles’s trajectory as a popular music performer who has received intense media attention because of his fan base, artistic persona and ambiguous sexual identity; and second, in terms of the articulation of a relatively minor media-loric (i.e. modern folkloric) entity in a high profile popular cultural context. The article discusses these aspects before moving to an analysis of the music video showing how Styles’s role as a cecaelia serves as a representation of his career position, public profile and desire to assert his creative-industrial agency in the early 2020s. The music video thereby illustrates the potential of media-loric figures to represent complex themes in contemporary cultural discourse.

Keywords: Harry Styles, performer identity, sexuality, cecaelia, mermaids, media-lore.

INTRODUCTION: STYLES’S MUSICAL CAREER AND STAR PERSONA

Harry Styles has been the subject of intense media scrutiny since he first appeared as a teenager on the British version of television talent quest *The X Factor*. From there he shot to international popular music stardom as part of boy band One Direction (1D), which released five studio albums in 2010–16 and was deemed so significant that it featured in the London 2012 Olympics’ Closing Ceremony alongside George Michael, The Spice Girls and Queen. As part of 1D, Styles won American Music Awards, MTV Awards and Brit Awards. As a solo artist, he has won multiple international awards including both the Grammy and BRIT for Album of the Year for *Harry’s House*. Despite these industry accolades, he has been consistently stereotyped as a superficial cultural “lightweight” in a manner that has led him to respond in both public relations discourse and—as this article will go on to elaborate—in the music video for his 2022 song “Music for a Sushi Restaurant.”

Fans of Styles have featured in contemporary considerations of female fandom such as Ewens (147–72) and Tiffany (261–70). In Australia, Styles was also the inspiration for the male lead (called Harry) in Yve Blake’s musical *Fangirls*.¹ Styles’s music has been accepted by what might be called the traditional “white male mainstream,” but this has still been through the lens of his boy band/female fan legacy. For example, his second album *Fine Line* was listed as #491 in *Rolling Stone* magazine’s “500 Greatest Albums of All Time,” yet is still discussed in terms of female fandom rather than as a recognition of Styles and his own artistry. The opening sentence introducing *Fine Line* to the Greatest Albums list refers to it as a “divisive entry,” and describes Styles as “One Direction’s Harry Styles” rather than simply on his own terms (Schewitz). Schewitz continued: “I’m not a fan of One Direction’s music at all, but then I’m not their target demographic” (ibid.), a strange comment given that *Fine Line* is the second *solo* release for Styles rather than a 1D product. The rest of Schewitz’s profile focused on Styles’s live performances—“I didn’t hear him because his fans screamed through every song.” Such a comment is curious given the task at hand to review the Styles *recording*. Rather than writing about the album itself and its music, Schewitz spent column space on Styles as spectacle, rather than Styles as a musician. Sadly, this is not an unusual treatment for pop artists in the music press.

¹ Blake has discussed the genesis of this work and its relationship to Harry Styles and fandom in depth in the 2019 TED talk “Why Are Fangirls Scary?”

Styles is well aware that many of his fans are women and girls. When prompted to dismiss them as somehow unimportant, he replied: “How can you say young girls don’t get it? . . . They’re our future. Our future doctors, lawyers, mothers, presidents, they kind of keep the world going” (Crowe). The solidarity with women in the music industry has continued with his musical choices as well, with his touring band featuring prominent female players such as band-leader and drummer Sarah Jones, and his tours have featured female driven support acts such as Wet Leg, Mitski, Wolf Alice and Arlo Parks. Styles has also made prominent appearances onstage with Lizzo and Shania Twain (both guests at his headline show at Coachella 2022) and Stevie Nicks, notably as he inducted her into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2019.² These choices should not be remarkable for a solo male artist in the mainstream pop community, but unfortunately, this show of solidarity is still unusual. It offers leadership towards gender equality and diversity in the music industry that is still rare, and its consequence has positioned Styles as a relative outsider, albeit in the best way.

In addition to media portrayals of Styles as a stereotypical romantic target for young heterosexual cis girls and women, he also has a strong queer and gender diverse following. This includes fans who speculate that he and 1D band member Louis Tomlinson are actually in a romantic relationship. These fans, called “Larries” (a portmanteau of “Louis” and “Harry”), assert their position beyond traditional media expectations of binary heterosexual identity and attraction in pop music.³ The interest of LGBTIQ+ communities has also been apparent with, for example, the Drag King 1D tribute group Every Direction.⁴ Styles has openly welcomed LGBTIQ+ members of his audience, regularly appearing with pride flags onstage. During his “Love On Tour” concerts in 2022–23 he also conducted impromptu “outing” ceremonies for fans in the crowd who asked him to help them. *Variety* reported one of these interactions at a Styles concert at Wembley in June 2022, detailing how, at the fan’s request, Styles asked the crowd to chant the young man’s name, then with a rainbow flag declared him as “a free man” (Garcia).⁵

These shows of inclusion onstage and in fan communities have sparked speculation about Styles’s own sexuality. Partly driving this are Styles’s fashion choices on and off stage, which have become more extravagant

² For more on this see Giuffre.

³ For a good overview see McCann and Southerton.

⁴ See the in-depth exploration of this group and their fan relationships in the study by Pruett.

⁵ There have been several similar events reported in the press and on social media during 2022; however, this one is the most detailed and is on one of the biggest media outlets.

as his career has progressed. Notably, he appeared on the cover of *Vogue* in an Alexander McQueen gown in 2020, and in 2022 released a fashion collection in partnership with Gucci. Styles’s stage costumes, which include glittered jumpsuits, dresses and colourful suits which he wears bare chested, are also very different to the relatively low-key, tight black jeans and shirts he wore as part of 1D. As a solo artist exploring fashion and identity, suggestions that his flamboyance or experimentation should align with a particular sexuality position is certainly not aligned with much of the history of popular music where many male, female and gender fluid artists have regularly explored their creativity through fashion. Indeed *NPR* writer Ann Powers said that Styles’s wardrobe was drawn from “the finery of rock’s legacies,” noting not just straight male influences, but including pop referents such as the Spice Girls.

Styles has aligned himself with creativity (rather than scandal) as often as possible, carefully navigating the media’s interest in his sexuality. However, the interest has persisted, and began, shamefully for the press, while he was still underage.⁶ Styles has dealt with this in different ways, often reminding interviewers: “I have a private life. You just don’t know about it” (Lamont). Despite this, attention has remained on his sexuality and relationship status, brought to the fore again in 2022 as he promoted two films that he plays lead in, *Don’t Worry Darling* (Olivia Wilde, 2022) and *My Policeman* (Michael Grandage, 2022). The first, directed by Olivia Wilde, has been overshadowed by the off-screen drama around Wilde and Styles’s rumoured romantic involvement with her. In the second film, Styles was cast as a closeted man in a homosexual relationship with another man while being married to a woman, and again media interest was drawn by the possible correlations between Styles’s on-screen and off-screen experiences. In response to these questions, Styles has repeatedly challenged the media to reconsider its own practice rather than answering the question with a confirmation or denial, calling such questions “outdated” (Stoppard). Similarly, in a global cover story for *Rolling Stone* magazine, he stated: “I think everyone, including myself, has your own journey with figuring out sexuality and getting more comfortable with it,” adding when asked about his relationship with Wilde: “Sometimes people say, ‘You’ve only publicly been with women,’ and I don’t think I’ve publicly been with anyone. If someone takes a picture of you with someone, it doesn’t mean you’re choosing to have a public relationship or something” (Spanos).

⁶ As Banks noted, journalists asked Styles questions about intimate relationships even while he was underage as a member of 1D. After quoting an exchange in *GQ* magazine, where the journalist repeatedly asked Styles how many people he had slept with, the author declared: “This is inappropriate journalism practice, especially considering that Styles was still a teenager, which makes this interrogation even more violating” (Banks 14).

Despite this statement, the journalist continued to speculate. Clearly, the press is persisting with stories of Styles's romantic life whether he agrees or not. Following this interview, the press continued to pursue Styles's potential relationship with Wilde, particularly when Styles and Wilde appeared at the Venice Film Festival premiere of *Don't Worry Darling*. The director and actor did not directly stand next to each other on the red carpet or during photo shoots, leaving the media without a story. In place of a "couple shot," the media focused on a piece of footage which appeared to show Styles spitting on co-star Chris Pine in an apparent retaliation for on-set tension. As the footage circulated around the world, Wilde and Pine dismissed the story and Styles joked onstage when he returned to his music tour shortly after, telling a sold out Maddison Square Garden audience, "I just popped very quickly to Venice to spit on Chris Pine" (Walsh). Again, Styles and his fans are aligned, and even "in on the joke," of the absurdity of media attention.

Music videos have been important for Styles during his career, and, indeed, continue to be important for the music industry more generally. Following the relative boom of the industry in the 1980s, a relative decline in revenue followed in the 1990s and 2000s, and while some were concerned that music videos as a format would cease to be made, music videos have returned to prominence online, with streams via YouTube, in particular, being a vital way for artists and audiences to connect (Gigmit). Over Styles's career so far there has been a thematic continuity in the music videos, first as part of 1D and then as a solo artist. Most often Styles is presented "as himself," and as a relatively active person apparently with his own agency. Several of these have been critically and popularly acclaimed. The video for 1D's "What Makes You Beautiful" (directed by John Urbano) won an MTV Award and, despite the lack of similar recognition at the time of its release, 1D's 2015 clip "Drag Me Down" (directed by Ben and Gabe Turner) has passed 1 billion views on YouTube. In each of these clips Styles and the band are shown miming to the camera while intercut with a basic narrative; in the first a beach holiday romance, and the second at a NASA base where the band are moonlighting as astronauts. Each video is quite unremarkable stylistically, but clearly successful as examples of the mainstream pop genre with a broad audience appeal audience.

Styles's videos for his solo work have shown him as triumphant on his own. The video for his solo single "Sign of the Times" (directed by Yoann Lemoine), which won the 2018 Brit Award for British Video of the Year, shows him walking alone on an island, apparently singing into the wind until he is whisked up and taken away by it. He is positioned as a solo adventurer and long shots of him in the sky are intercut with medium-close ups of his face singing to camera, drawing the gaze of the viewer.

Although he is still “a pretty face,” this is no longer the only way Styles is portrayed. The song’s sound and the clip’s imagery signal music and artistry on a grander scale than what Styles had attempted before. Film clips for his singles “Adore You” (directed by Dave Meyers) and “Watermelon Sugar” (directed by Bradley & Pablo) each featured at the 2021 Grammys. The first was nominated for Best Music Video, and the second for Best Pop Performance (which Styles won). In each of these clips Styles is again courting his audience in different ways to depictions of him in the music press. “Adore You,” the video for a basic love song that could easily have been styled like an early 1D “beach holiday” video, sees Styles instead placed in the fictional world of Eroda (“Adore” spelt in reverse), where he is shown serenading a rapidly growing sea creature. The scenario is deliberately ridiculous and Styles’s appeal is played with as he approaches various townsfolk in the clip with a toothy grin that literally sparkles. He is shown as beautiful, kind, and pure—another departure from the press’s obsession with his real life relationships. The other extreme is shown in “Watermelon Sugar,” which is sonically bright and upbeat. The lyrics are playful but clearly euphemistic—an element that Styles brings to life in the clip as he is seen eating watermelon slices while being caressed by bikini-clad women and, significantly, men, on the beach. With a prelude written in yellow text over a black background saying, “This Video is Dedicated to Touching, May 18 2020,” innocent glances and stolen looks give way to him alone at a table, and later as part of a large group on a rug, suggestively eating fruit. The theme of watermelon sugar—a euphemism for oral sex (Parsons)—is played on further as Styles is part of the group but often lost in the mass, no longer the focus of sexual attention but just part of the larger celebration. Within the context of COVID lockdowns (the video appearing in May 2020), the clip is Styles inviting his audience to be together again, in whatever configuration(s) they want.

“Music for a Sushi Restaurant,” the third single from his third album *Harry’s House*, draws the history sketched above but gives it a new inflection. After another year when Styles’s (and by extension, his fans’) sexuality was scrutinized at the expense of discussions of his music, the music video can be read as a deliberate attempt to challenge how he has been portrayed in the press. Instead of being a celebration of the superstar Harry Styles, the clip represents him as a “star in the making” in a fantasy world. This process of discovery and development also shows his gruesome ultimate demise. The video’s theme is dark but it is also one of the few places where Styles has been shown as relatively unattractive and sonically flawed. The video is also the only clip from the album where he is shown on stage performing (albeit in role as a cecaelia—a squid-human hybrid), with other *Harry’s House* tracks’ videos showing him in the abstract, in

a hyperreal world, spinning around into the air in “As It Was” (directed by Tanu Muino) or as part of a lavish multidimensional slumber party in “Late Night Talking” (directed by Bradley and Pablo). “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” also shows him to be ultimately unwanted—in a stark contrast to previous depictions in his own media and by the music industry generally. As we will show, this departure is a significant creative statement for/about him, as well as a commentary on the media as a type of business that can shift its product support swiftly, and brutally, if it feels it has exhausted one commodity or found another. The use of the cecaelia, and media-lore more generally, is striking because of its visual distinctiveness but also for its play on the song’s theme of “music for a sushi restaurant.” Without this clip, the music suggests itself as a soundtrack to someone eating a meal, but in the context of the video Styles provides both the soundtrack and the main course.

CECAELIAS AND MEDIA-LORE

The notion of media-lore was first proposed by the Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics in 2014⁷ to refer to distinct modes of development of folklore within modern forms of screen-based media (cinema, TV, the Internet, etc.). Harry Styles’s appearance as a cecaelia merits discussion both in its own right and as the latest manifestation of a media-loric creature with comparatively recent origins. Unlike many of the fantastic creatures that appear in film productions such as the *Harry Potter* series or in various online media contexts—which are modernized versions of traditional entities (such as dragons, unicorns, ogres, mermaids, etc.)—the cecaelia is distinct by being a product of popular culture that has tenuous links to prior mythological creatures. Indeed Hayward (*Making* 37) identifies the creature as first appearing (in female form) in Cuti and Mas’s 1972 graphic story “Cilia,” where the eponymous female protagonist is described as a “cilophyte” (an invented term that did not subsequently gain traction). While the graphic story remains obscure, a version of her name (which was initially spelled as *cecælia* before being modified to *cecaelia*) came to refer to a tentacled human, with the bodily divide occurring at a similar area of the midriff to the mermaid’s human/fish point of transition. Allison has provided valuable research on the development of the term *cecælia* that shows it first being promulgated via a dedicated Wikipedia page in 2007 (which is now offline) before being

⁷ In the Laboratory’s summary statement for their 2014 conference “Mechanisms of Cultural Memory: From Folk-lore to Media-lore.”

deployed to refer to tentacled humans more generally in online graphic art and in computer games. The increasing currency of the name was reflected by Disney’s retrospective use of it to refer to Ursula, the sea-witch from their animated film *The Little Mermaid* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1989). While there is no evidence that anyone involved with the design and production of Disney’s film was familiar with Cuti and Mas’s story, there is a significant resemblance between the two figures in that both have six octopus-like tentacles (two fewer than actual octopuses, complicating any description of them as octo-human [or suchlike]). The main contrast is in their upper human form, Cilia having the long hair, facial beauty and slim form typical of representations of mermaids in contemporary popular culture, while Ursula is intentionally represented as older and non-stereotypically attractive (with her face and torso modelled on the well-known, grotesque drag performer known professionally as Divine⁸). Both figures are portrayed with muscular tentacles but whereas Cilia’s primarily represent her alterity, Ursula’s embody her threatening power. Ursula’s role and narrative fate within *The Little Mermaid* film (where she is eventually killed) was subsequently revisited and modified in the music video for T. S. Madison’s “Feeling My Fish” (2014), which substantially modifies Ariel’s signature song “Part of Your World” from the Disney film. Appearing in a black dress with six tentacle-like fabric tails, T. S. Madison ends up in a position of power, instructing the mermaids to bow down before her.

While there do not appear to have been subsequent manifestations of female cecaelia in mainstream media, male versions have appeared in two high-profile audiovisual productions: Stephen Chow’s Chinese comedy feature film *The Mermaid* (2016) and the music video for Ricky Martin’s single “She Bangs” (2000, directed by Wayne Isham).⁹ These representations are similar—and markedly different from Styles’s video—in that their tentacled, semi-humans are represented as powerful male figures. In “She Bangs,” two cecaelias guard the entrance to the underwater nightclub where Martin performs his song. Their muscular arms are crossed and their solid torsos remain immobile while their powerful elongated tentacles range around them.¹⁰ The (single) cecaelia that appears in Chow’s film is given a personality and appears in various key scenes. Significantly for this

⁸ As discussed in the 2003 “making of” video *Broadway Comes to Burbank*, produced for the 2006 DVD release of *The Little Mermaid*.

⁹ While a tentacled-faced, monstrous incarnation of the mythic figure Davy Jones appears in two of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series of films—*Dead Man’s Chest* (2006) and *At World’s End* (2007)—this is not a cecaelia as his lower body and torso are human in form.

¹⁰ Although it is difficult to precisely identify in the scene, they appear to have six tentacles each.

article, the actor playing the role is former Taiwanese boy band member and subsequent solo pop singer Show Lo. Lo plays a character named Uncle Octopus who associates with a pod of (mixed gender) merfolk whose environment is threatened by an industrial development. Lo's cecaelia is handsome, with blonde, cornrow hair, and is shown with eight muscular tentacles. He is represented as a confident, assertive anti-human/anti-industrial activist who conspires to kill Liu Xuan, the industrialist whose planned development will pollute the merfolk's home. In a comic scene that anticipates elements of Styles's video, Uncle Octopus encounters a group of thugs in a field. While tall grass conceals his lower torso, his tentacles protrude and he has to explain them away as those of an octopus he has just caught and also has to dissuade the thugs from variously biting on, slicing off and applying a blow-torch to them in order to snack on them.

In common with mermaids and mermen, the substitution of the lower portion of the human torso and legs with piscine elements both compromises the overall humanity of the creatures and removes their human genitalia, raising issues about their ability to procreate and the presence, nature and/or position of the physical organs required. The substitution of human lower halves with piscine or cephalopodic ones thereby problematizes anatomical definitions of gender. In the case of mermaids and female cecaelias, their representation with human breasts and (usually) long hair marks them as female whereas facial hair and/or upper body muscularity are the prime markers of older mermen's masculinity (and with the absence of these leading to a more androgynous aspect). In the terms of Freudian discourse, such substitutions can be seen to bestow a degree of neo-phallic power/agency to the mermaid (Zimmerman qtd. in Hayward, "Rhapsodies" 17), whereas the absence of male genitalia on the merman's tale serves to undermine that aspect of masculinity (or, rather, of masculinity as defined by anatomy). Similarly, Silber's analysis of Mycenaean and Minoan octopus imagery is pertinent for interpretation of cecaelia in that he asserts the "polyphallic appearance" of the former creatures (162); a perspective that was echoed by Triton in his characterization of Ursula the sea-witch's tentacles as phalluses (150). The assertive masculinity of both the nightclub guards in Martin's video and Uncle Octopus in Chow's film support such a characterization. Differing from these precedents, one of the innovative aspects of Styles's video is that the lower half of his cecaelia is modelled on a squid's thin tentacles, rather than meatier octopus ones, with their appearance (out of water) being flaccid. The associations accruing to this aspect are discussed in the following section.

THE SONG AND VIDEO

Styles has stated that the song “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” was inspired by hearing a track from his previous album *Fine Line* (2019) in a sushi restaurant in Los Angeles and his thinking that it was odd music for such an establishment (Pham). The song’s lyrics are simple and contain jazz-style scat singing along with skeletal lyrics about green tea and Japanese food and a lyrical reiteration of the song’s title (with nothing suggesting fantastic marine hybrids). Styles’s vocal line is high-set and clear-toned, and its extensive use of vocables suggests crooned jazz styles, such as those deployed by Jacob Collier on tracks such as his version of Stevie Wonder’s “Don’t You Worry ‘Bout a Thing” (2015). Musically, the track has a pronounced retro, jazz-funk feel, set to a solid electric bass riff, pulsing kick drum and light electric and acoustic percussion rhythms, with Styles’s vocals floating above them in pitch. The chorus features a heavier descending synth bass line, distorted electric guitar lines and a busy syncopated horn part reminiscent of 1970s’ soul/disco acts such as Earth, Wind & Fire or Stevie Wonder, also with a clear influence from Quincy Jones (Jones is also credited as a songwriter on a song later on the album, “Daydreaming,” which samples “Ain’t We Funkin’ Now” by The Brothers Johnson).

Music videos have varying relations to the genre of music represented, the specific track, its lyric and/or the established persona(e) of the musical performer(s) (Railton and Watson). In some cases, the video appears illustrative of some or all of these aspects and, in others, appears to operate largely autonomously. Lip-synching of vocals and instrumental miming offer some of the most obvious points of correspondence but may also occur in contexts that modify or inflect the associations cued by lyrics or music tracks. The lyrics for “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” offer a cue for the culinary theme and restaurant setting of the video but their easy going references to food, love and “staying cool” do not suggest the plight that Styles—or, rather, Styles-as-a-cecaelia—finds him(it)self in. The video’s scenario is relatively straightforward. It opens, to a soft musical introduction featuring vocables, showing a man finding an unconscious, bearded cecaelia on the beach and phoning the manager of a fish restaurant who comes and collects him in a van. In synch with the introduction of the song’s rhythm part, the screen shows a montage of images of the cecaelia in the kitchen, including one of the manager and three staff members holding him horizontally, emphasizing his long, limp (prosthetic) tentacles. Now awake, the cecaelia sees crabs and fish being cracked, chopped and cooked and intuits that the same fate awaits him. At this point he begins singing (or, rather, lip-synching to a vocal sequence that has already commenced).

This changes the momentum of the narrative as the manager appreciates his catch's singing abilities and recognizes the potential of exploiting these. After being fed with fresh fish, having his tail scrubbed, having a shave and being dressed in a necklace and sprinkled with glitter, the singing cecaelia is presented as the restaurant's key attraction. This is revealed in a brief shot of a new sign going up outside the restaurant. Identified as "Gill's Lounge" (punning on cephalopodic gills) and as hosting a "live show," the sign's central image is of a cecaelia represented in a very mermaid-like manner, with a long, fish-like tail that only breaks into tentacles at its end. Following the introduction of this sign, the video shows the singing cecaelia becoming increasingly diva-like, requiring manicures, massages and facials. These sequences are followed by scenes of the restaurant packed with customers, with the cecaelia singing on a rock on stage accompanied by a live band. As the number peaks, the cecaelia's voice breaks and falters. The video immediately returns to images of seafood being prepared and then alternates these with sequences of the cecaelia's resumed singing before ending with further images of food preparation. The restaurant sign then reappears in a significantly modified form. Instead of "Gill's Lounge," it is re-presented as "Gill's Sushi" and the (still mermaid-like) image of the cecaelia is presented in sliced-up, sushi-like form.

Despite these dark themes there is a persistent humour in this clip, drawn from a knowingness about the context of performance and objectification in music performance (like the one Styles expressed with the Chris Pine incident in Venice). Styles, and his fans, are aware of the intense media scrutiny he receives, and are able to use tools like sarcasm and parody to deal with this attention. Once Styles's cecaelia is shaved and cleaned up, he goes from being a scared singer to a stereotypical diva, wearing lavish jewels and demanding green tea (synched to the song's lyric). As the restaurant owners tend to his needs and massage his tentacles, he is seen arguing with, and later dismissing them, all the while wearing extravagant, seashell-themed sunglasses in the underground backstage dressing room. Onstage, Styles is backed by a band of prawn-headed musicians—thereby substantially upping the surrealist quotient of the video, in line with much of director Perrie's previous work.¹¹ At one stage his performance is momentarily interrupted as the music stops and a male audience member approaches him to ask "Can I touch your tail?" The silence is broken with the sound of one of his tentacles slapping the

¹¹ As Demetrius Romeo identified for us, the Styles's band's appearance resembles three of the four members of The Residents who are depicted with prawn heads on the front cover of the 1977 re-release of their 1974 album *Meet the Residents*—see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meet_the_Residents#/media/File:MeetTheResidents2.jpg

man across the face, before the song continues. Styles the stage singer is feminized, or othered, at this moment as he is objectified by the dominant male perspective of the punter wanting to grope him. These exchanges are so exaggerated through the setting and the film clip’s diegesis that they are comic but their dark comedy does also allude to his being an outsider. As a highly successful musician, but also one that champions women in the industry, welcomes LGBTQIA+ audiences and refuses to be part of media speculation about sexuality, Styles is an outsider in terms of the mainstream music industry.

The video offers a significant departure from the imagery featured in Styles’s previous videos and, indeed, more clearly conforms to the oeuvre of its director, Aube Perrie. After directing music videos for Francophone artists such as Angèle and Petit Biscuit in the late 2010s, Perrie attracted attention for his inventive videos for Marc Kinchen’s “Chemical” and Megan Thee Stallion’s “Thot Shit” (both 2021). The latter two were notable for incorporating surrealist elements. Unlike the style known as MTV Surrealism in the 1980s, which made extensive use of chroma-key effects¹² or the contemporaneous music video style often characterized as surrealist animation,¹³ Perrie’s surrealism derives from inserting bizarre elements into otherwise realist scenarios, such as featuring a dog-headed human in the “Chemical” video or transforming a misogynist senator’s mouth into a vulva at the end of “Thot Shit.” These elements work as motifs in differing ways. The realist, mechatronic-prosthetic, dog-headed human in “Chemical” is the chief protagonist in the pathos-laden scenario about desire set to an up-tempo house rhythm, with the canine element reinforcing the song lyrical themes. By contrast, the vulva image in “Thot Shit” occurs at the end of a video in which assertive women dance and flaunt their self-assurance over an up-tempo, bass accentuated groove and Megan Thee Stallion’s rap-singing in the face of a sexist and hypocritical senator (representing males more generally); the force of their female energy eventually transforming his mouth into iconic female anatomy.

Styles appearance in “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” is significant for multiple reasons. One is his prior association with mermaid culture. This aspect is already well established, with him having revealed a mermaid tattoo on his lower arm in 2014, which has since been clearly displayed as he performs. This image has a notably unconventional aspect. Instead of the

¹² Typified by David Mallet’s video for David Bowie’s “Ashes to Ashes” (1980) and Charlie Levi and Jeff Stein’s video for the Cars’ “You Might Think” (1984)—see Lynch for discussion.

¹³ Typified by Jim Blashfield’s video for the Talking Heads’ “There She Was” (1985) and Stephen Johnson and Nick Park’s video for Peter Gabriel’s “Sledgehammer” (1986)—see Richardson for discussion.

mermaid's transition to fishtail commencing around her midriff, Styles's tattoo shows a mermaid with a human pubis (and implied vulva) above her tail, which commences below the swell of her hips.¹⁴ She thereby "has her cake and eats it" in terms of physical options. Styles was also in contention for the role of Prince Eric, the human lead in Disney's live action remake of its animated 1989 *Little Mermaid* film, before withdrawing from the project (Taylor). This association also extended to Styles appearing in cosplay as Ariel from Disney's *Little Mermaid* for a photo shoot for the US TV show *Saturday Night Live* in 2019 that surfaced in 2021. Although he has never publicly commented on his interest in mermaids, Benozillo reported that when Styles was asked to explain his tattoo he answered ("with a cheeky smile"), "I am a mermaid." The association with fantasy culture and gender fluidity is important. The emphasis on *mermaid* rather than *merman* aligns with Styles's existing media persona—a willingness to move beyond traditional gendered expectations in terms of dress and presentation. Styles's readiness to accept female gendered roles also aligns with his musical performances as well, often keeping the original pronouns for songs even if he has changed the gender as the lead; for example, singing "come get your man" while covering Lizzo's "Juice" and singing "Man! I Feel Like a Woman!" with Shania Twain.

It is important to acknowledge that the music video of Styles singing "Music for a Sushi Restaurant" was not the first audiovisual presentation of the track, with it having been used in an advertising campaign for Apple AirPods with Spatial Audio in June 2022. As described in *Billboard*, "the playful spot . . . is a bit of a throwback to some of the classic 2003 Apple 'Silhouettes' ads of yore, featuring pink, red and blue dancers grooving to the bass-slapping tune along with Styles scatting along as his color-blocked body cycles" (Kaufman). By recontextualizing the song with its unusual music video, Styles could be understood to be reclaiming it from the music industry and its expectations—removing the emphasis of the ad and Apple on him as a type of "silhouette," and replacing this with the complex figure of an objectified singing cecaelia. The relationship between the song and the artist can be compared in two ways. In the first version, Styles's singing and dancing is used to attract revenue as part of an established music industry pattern (via Apple as playback, as well as Apple as media distributor); the second—the Perrie music video—cuts ties to this established expectation by his initial appearance as dirty and unkempt, then revealing him to be a cecaelia, notably without human genitals but eventually with a voice, before the latter and, indeed, his general viability, decline.

¹⁴ See the tattoo as reproduced in Minton.

The complexity of the cecaelia as a creature, and the scenario in which he/it finds itself, leaves it open to multiple interpretations. One concerns the manner in which we can perceive Styles-as-cecaelia as “bait” (squid being a frequent form of bait for offshore fisherman). He is initially seen as an oddity as he is retrieved from the sea, dirty and with a full beard, apparently just as something to amuse the staff at Gill’s as they prepare their normal haul of fish and crabs for customers. Once he shows he can sing, Styles becomes a different type of attraction—a novelty that is cleaned and dressed up to attract customers as a sea-themed cabaret performer as they eat. When his voice fails he becomes less of a novelty and instead just fodder for the venue to either dispose of or capitalize on. They choose the later, and Gill’s becomes a sushi restaurant (as indicated in the song’s title) as Styles’s cecaelia tail is cut up and served. Could this be a metaphor for the music industry too? One, that has so far cleaned him up and presented him as a prize, but that might eat him should he fail to perform, as they want him to. But, like anything in popular culture—let alone anything so polyvalent as a human-squid figure—the video persona of Styles-as-cecaelia is open to diverse interpretation and engagement by fans. It has been actively embraced by some on Twitter (see Veitch) —albeit with comments such as “easily the most insane character arc I have ever witnessed” (mattxiv)—and some dedicated fans have even softened the radical alterity of the media-logic monstrosity by producing inventive fabric renditions of the figure that Styles has physically embraced on-stage (picshrry).

The position of Styles as bait can also be read on a visual play on a label that had been circulated in some media relating to Styles. Specifically, Styles has been accused of “queerbaiting,” a term used to suggest teasing or appropriating queer identities and audiences without coming out as queer himself.¹⁵ A few days after the release of the “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” clip, for instance, Patrick Lenton argued that the label “queerbaiting” had come to be used as “a kind of weapon to use against celebrities,” saying:

[B]y policing whether or not Harry Styles is “allowed” to wear a green feather boa on stage, or Billie Eilish can include sapphic themes in her music videos, or Kit Connor can play a bi teenager without explicitly confirming that he himself is a bi teenager, we create a hierarchy of queerness—a right or a wrong way to actually be queer.

This process of inclusion and exclusion—implying that only under certain conditions can expressions of love and identity be expressed—has significant consequences for individual artists and fans. Further to

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of this in relation to Styles see McCann and Southerton (151–52).

this, Lenton adds that demands for celebrities to disclose their own sexual identities, as this relates to possible claims of queerbaiting, is not progressive, but the opposite: “Being out and proud is a choice that many people make, but shouldn’t be seen as being more valid or worthwhile than anyone who doesn’t choose that path.” Although beyond the scope of our article here, this issue and its consequences for artists and fans have also been explored by Roach, and McCann and Southerton, with the latter suggesting discussions of industry discourse offer a “specific challenge . . . [to be] rethinking expectations around desire and sexuality, and indeed how we might imagine collective queer activism in a digital age through the practices of this fandom” (152).¹⁶ In the case of this video, the challenge is one to the viewer and the industry. Why should Styles, and by extension his fans, be placed under such intense scrutiny for their identity? Especially when this scrutiny happens as a distraction from the music itself—or as in the clip—a literal disruption, as the track stops and starts.

CONCLUSION

Styles and Perrie’s music video for “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” offers a challenge to existing media representations of Harry Styles—in particular to the industry’s preoccupation with his sexual orientation and love life. While focusing on these aspects of Styles, the press in particular is distracted away from his actual art—and are also often making value judgements about its worth and the worthiness of the types of fans who are attracted to it. Styles’s willingness to role-play media-loric figures such as a Disney mermaid and a cecaelia in high-profile public contexts, and the appreciation of fans, commentators and critics of these, illustrates that such figures continue to have considerable potential as motifs for the exploration of personal identity and broader socio-cultural issues. In Styles’s case, the latter involve aspects of star performance, interpretation and typecasting in popular music culture and of the potential for artistic agency within a carefully managed cultural industry. There is an inventive reworking of a key motif of Andersen’s story and Disney’s adaptation in the video apposite for a pop star in that Styles-as-cecaelia finds his voice once on-land, rather than having to relinquish it in order to exit the ocean (as Ariel has to) and rather than having to steal it from the little mermaid, as Ursula gleefully does. Styles-as-cecaelia both finds his voice and loses it shortly after in what seems a clear representation of the fleeting nature of fame and adulation. But there is a substantial degree

¹⁶ See also Factora, who explores queerbaiting and its changing application and consequences from a nuanced non-gendered perspective.

of theatricality to this in that Styles (the performer) is very much alive and thriving as a popular music performer and his representation of himself as the limp tentacled squid-cecaelia is as much “ironic parody” (Bényei) as it is biting satire. And all in 3 minutes 29 seconds, re-emphasizing the enduring potential of music video as a form.

Thanks to Olle Jilkén, Elizabeth Humphrys and the anonymous *Text Matters* reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript, and to Matt Hill for his discussion of musical matters.

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