

Winning failure. Queer nationality at the Eurovision Song Contest

Peter Rehberg

Once upon a time there used to be a specific queer appeal to the event of Eurovision, an event that the German journalist Elmar Kraushaar has named “Gay Christmas” (quoted in Wolther 2006, 139). The Eurovision Song Contest, according to him, is a “national holiday for queers” almost as important as Gay Pride, a well deserved alternative to Christian holidays with their celebration of family values and heteronormativity.¹ Similarly, Irving Wolther (2006, 17ff) in his dissertation “Kampf der Kulturen” describes the attachment to the ESC itself in terms of a coming-out: “For many years I lived with the conviction that I would be the only man on Earth interested in this kind of music. My enthusiasm provoked not understanding but pity in my friends. Only when I got in touch with the international fan club, OGAE, would I be freed from my isolation.”² Described in terms of coming out and a support group, Eurovision fandom has in itself been read as a metonymical secret code for being gay, much like one’s excitement for opera or Hollywood melodrama in pre-Stonewall times. One’s attachment to cultural products like the ESC, the recognition of their campy appeal, can be a survival strategy in times when no “authentic”—that is, politically self-affirmative—songs, books, or movies are available for sexual minorities.

1 For a discussion of the ways in which Christmas in particular reinforces heteronormativity, see Krass 2003, 12ff.

2 Translation from the German P.R.

However, set up as a competition between nations, the structure of the Eurovision Song Contest simultaneously problematises the argument according to which the ESC functions as a site for a celebration of international queerness. No doubt, the Eurovision Song Contest does have a transnational queer appeal: its utopian value of an imagined queer community manifests itself in fan clubs, websites, and conferences, with their celebration of everything kitsch and diva-esque. Nonetheless, such readings easily become blind to the fact that, with Eurovision, “nationality” does not simply dissolve into the celebration of “the queer nation”, that is, of a queerness that would transcend traditional national distinctions. With Eurovision, we do not transcend nationality; rather, Eurovision provides a rare occasion for simultaneously celebrating *both* queerness *and* national identity.

This troubled link between queerness and nationality was highlighted by Lordi’s victory for Finland in 2005. For fags outside Finland, the recognition of Lordi’s queerness wasn’t immediately available. For example, the gay German audiences experienced the surprising victory as an aggressive invasion, a colonization of sorts: the camp glamour that German gays had associated with the event was taken over by a carnivalesque but still very macho performance in a typically straight-male genre, hard rock.³ Finnish queers, however, had

3 See Rehberg 2006, 46.

no problems whatsoever in joining in the celebration of their first-ever Eurovision victory as they danced drunk all night on the streets of Helsinki.

How might one read these two distinct reactions to Lordi's victory? Did the Finnish homos just not care about the queer specificity of the ESC? Did national success prove so seductive that they sacrificed queerness for national glory? Was the overcoming of what Mari Pajala (2007) calls the history of Finland's "national shame" in the ESC more important than defending the integrity of the queer nation?

I would argue that, with Lordi, queerness, the core value of Eurovision, was not simply sacrificed for the comfort of national belonging. While Lordi's victory can be seen as a straight appropriation, indeed colonization, of Eurovision as a queer event, this was achieved by camping up "straight masculinity", by presenting it as monstrous and artificial. Manliness became a spectacle; to paraphrase Joan Rivière, it was given in the form of a masquerade.

To think of queerness and nationality as mutually exclusive, then, would be to miss the point. Perhaps not just in the case of Lordi, but also in the more traditionally queer performances like Dana International, celebration of queerness and of national identity can join forces. Is the Eurovision Song Contest, then, a rare occasion where queer people have access to a sense of nationality? If that is the case, how do the camp appeal of Eurovision and the celebration of nationality come together?



Lordi

Unqueer nationality

The assumption that Eurovision provides a *rare* access to national feeling for queers presupposes that heterosexuality is inscribed in the category of nationality in the first place. To an extent, this is incontestably true. Obviously, the state is metaphorically imagined in the language of the heterosexual couple and family. In German, the expression “Vater Staat” (“Father State”) is used in discussions of the welfare or public educational systems; “Mutter der Nation” (“Mother of the Nation”) is a pet-name for popular actresses and female politicians. Furthermore, the assumed heterosexuality of citizenship becomes clear from gay people’s lack of civil rights, whether in Europe or in the United States. In Europe, most countries’ constitutions, for instance, still privilege marriage, which—with the exception of Spain—is exclusively understood as heterosexual. The German “civil union” for gays and lesbians is legally still a second-class partnership when it comes to issues of adoption, heritage, and taxation. (The South African constitution, the first one explicitly granting equal rights to sexual minorities, suggests that this may be gradually changing.) Similarly, as Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman (1994, 201) argue, “healthy heterosexual identity (the straight and un-diseased body) is a prerequisite to citizenship of the United States”. This is clearly reflected by the fact that non-U.S. citizens with HIV are not permitted to enter the country.⁴ In this scenario, homosexual foreigners with HIV are figured as a threat to a healthy

4 While the questionnaire by the Immigration and Naturalization Service that every tourist has to fill out before entering the United States does not specifically address HIV, it does request information concerning “transmittable diseases” in general. That this obviously includes HIV was brought to a broader public attention during the Gay Games 2006 in Chicago when the federal government decided to waive the ban for HIV-positive people for the duration of the event.

national identity—as a particular uncontrollable form of warfare, so to speak. The heterosexist structure of national identity doesn’t allow for any positive recognition of queer people. Queers are politically suspicious: because they threaten the heterosexist order, their second-class membership demonstrates that their citizenship is always already precarious.

Given such systems of exclusion, the Eurovision Song Contest becomes an exceptional site in offering a sense of national belonging for queers. But what is the political valence of the song contest? Does the Eurovision in any way promote gay civil rights or help in their achievement? Is Eurovision a form of nostalgic yearning which eventually turns into a conservative gesture—that is, does one become a part of an imagined collective called “the nation” that forces one to subscribe to the mechanisms of claiming “proper identities” by excluding multitudes? Or can one plausibly suggest that queer fandom of Eurovision in fact alters the very idea of nationhood? Is camp, in other words, a fundamentally apolitical phenomenon, as Susan Sontag (1964, 277) argued early on, or can camp destabilise ideological structures and values?

Camp, high and low

The production of nationality depends on performative rites in the public sphere. Since in Western societies the classical rites of the nation state—military parades, for instance—are in decline, pop cultural events have more or less taken over the task of producing national identities. As one of such events, Eurovision, with its more than seven million spectators, is the largest reoccurring pop show on earth.⁵ Each individual act (comprising, according to the rules, 5 “Live Aid” in 1985 gathered 1,5 billion people in front of the TV.

no more than six performers) represents a country. By a collective identification with the performer, national identity is being produced, whether in victory or shame.

This production of nationality takes place not only on the stage, but on the results board, where by the end of the show the votes are gathered. Charts structure the relationships between performers and listeners. The voting procedure tells us exactly who liked what and how much. Every vote works as a double message: it addresses both the popularity of the music and of (the idea of) the specific nation. Referring to the contestants only as nations, not as individual performers, the scoreboard highlights the importance of the concept of nationality for the competition. The live TV-voting allows countries to declare their sympathy with, disinterest in, or disapproval of each other. This competition can be understood as a playful version of war; it presents us with a scene where national identity is questioned, defended, and contested. It is through such competition that ESC produces, or fails to produce, the sense of national identity.

In Eurovision, nationality is produced in an unconventional way by being camped up. It is the role of camp that delineates the position of gays and queers in this drama. Camp is a specific mode of changing meanings by reading mass-cultural products from gay men's perspective. The exaggerated staging of femininity in 1930s to 1960s Hollywood drama, for example, allowed for cross-gender identification with sentimental femininity, as in the work of Douglas Sirk and, later on, Rainer W. Fassbinder. Central for the enjoyment of camp is the category of gender. Camp, one might say, is comprised of forms of representation that mock the possibility of true desire, true gender, and true subjectivity. At its best, camp functions as a form of queer deconstruction, undercutting the power of heterosexuality

to naturalise itself. Because camp constitutes a more or less hidden dialogue between production and spectatorship, the question in camp criticism is always the following: how much does the "sensibility" lie only in the eye of the beholder and how much of it is already (consciously or not) prefigured in the performance itself.

Often the enjoyment of movies, songs or art as camp is synonymous with embracing cultural leftovers. "Trash", as Andy Warhol and other pop artists knew, is the archive for forms of desire and subjectivity without cultural intelligibility. Its status as an archive of historically unactualised forms of living—as Walter Benjamin put it—explains the avant-garde's interest in trash. Assuming conventional cultural hierarchies, camp sympathises with cheesy pop products, thus reversing the cultural values of high and low.

However, it is not the aesthetic and social values of abjected possibilities alone that attract camp readings of cultural products. Camp cuts across distinctions in both ways: "One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious." (Sontag 1964, 288.) High culture can also produce incommensurable, odd forms that turn into camp. Opera, for example, has a wide campy appeal. Whether concentrating on high or low culture, a formal criterion for camp would thus become a discrepancy between form and content or intention and result. Excessiveness of both the means and intentions can be camp—that is, cultural products that stress the artificiality of their project. I suggest that, in the Eurovision arena, nationality itself is one such form of high culture, whose mannerisms and earnestness are queerly camped up.

The German example

German entries provide particularly interesting examples of the campy politics of nationality at the Eurovision Song Contest. Over the years, Germany has sent to ESC a sixteen-year-old girl (Nicole), a blind lady who looks like a transsexual singing a disco-tune (Corinna May), a Turkish casting band from Munich (Sürpriz), and a group of singers and dancers called Dschinghis Khan. As Schweiger and Brasius note, “[e]specially a country with a difficult past like Germany had an interest to present itself as song-loving, peaceful, and friendly” (quoted in Wolther 2006, 48).

Germany, in other words, is a special case when it comes to national self-expression. Even though a number of representations are prohibited (for example, the first two verses of the national anthem), the allowed symbols—like the national flag which is differentiated from the flag of Nazi Germany in its use of colors—are still rather close to a notion of nation that turned out to be disastrous for all of Europe. The knowledge and carefulness necessary when one deals with national symbols in the German context make such symbols potentially suspicious. I want to suggest that, because the idea of nationality in the German context cannot but be precarious, it is even more open to the possibility of camp.

German entries have become all the more campy because Eurovision has become the impossible site for reconciliation with the German past. The first entry to openly embrace this, to produce what from a present perspective seems like intentional camp, was Dschinghis Khan. While displacing German aggression to Mongolia, the group sang about “bringing fear and despair to every land” (“Sie brachten Angst und Schrecken in jedes Land”) to the tune of a campy dance

floor stomper. A number of German critics were shocked that this group of five would represent Germany—and in Israel of all places. Yet, the performance proved successful not just for the national audience, who elected the song, but the international one as well, whose enjoyment of such theatrical, carnivalesque restaging of the German threat was suggested by the group’s finishing on the fourth place in the contest.

However, to eventually win the contest, the playful parody of conquering Europe wasn’t enough. The only time Germany has won the contest was with a sixteen-year-old girl singing a peace song. Although she already had hit puberty, Nicole was marketed as a child rather than a young woman. (Asked whether she was nervous before her performance she stated: “I played cards.”) The nonsexual image of a 1960s-born, innocent teenager (clearly a copy of the persona of Ireland’s Dana from 1970) holding a white guitar and singing a song of peace was the very condition for getting the highest score. While Dschinghis Khan boldly ignored the demand for a serious German song that would appropriately respond to the call of representing a peaceful post-fascist Germany, Nicole’s “Ein bisschen Frieden” naively insisted on fulfilling precisely this. Both performances can be understood as camp, though Sontag (1964, 282) writes: “One must distinguish between naive and deliberate camp. Pure camp is always naive. Camp which knows to be camp is usually less satisfying.” According to this distinction, then, Nicole was naïve camp while Dschinghis Khan, hopefully, was deliberate camp.

Yet, if the German example tells us anything, it is that, with Eurovision, nationality itself turns into camp, much like opera with the earnestness of its grand emotions. Allowing a brief enjoyment of togetherness, in a carnivalesque transgression it celebrates nationality

as a pop-cultural guilty pleasure. Nationality is treated like big emotions in pop culture: the pathos survives under the condition that it is temporally circumscribed. One believes in the truth (of uncomplicated affect, such as that of national belonging) for only three minutes. Like with football, nationality becomes an element of entertainment culture where its idea survives without being necessarily linked to a stable sense of nationality.

Ultimately, because of the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the semantic weight of the call to be a national representation and, on the other, the format of the pop song (with its extremely short shelf life and the fact that the Eurovision stage has produced almost no durable stars), the representation of nationality at the ESC cannot but fail. That is, if the intention is to have a properly gendered performance representing a country appropriately, this can never happen within the format of disposable pop. Yet, this very same discrepancy opens up the possibility of camp in the first place. The best performances are the ones that acknowledge the inevitable failure of this demand by translating it into campy entertainment; recent examples include Israel's Dana International, Finland's Lordi, and Ukraine's Verka Serdutchka. This, then, is true camp: to triumph by owning up to, or thematising, the inevitable failure of one's endeavor to represent nationality.

The possibility for camp to be inscribed in the representation of nationality presupposes, however, that this very nationality has historically lost its power to produce and dominate cultural meanings. This, in a sense, can be said about every European country. As a contrast, the Stars and Stripes and other forms of Americana do not signify as camp, because they still represent *the serious political intentions of a world power*. Eurovision, by contrast, is a celebration of Europe

only negatively, that is, to the extent that it brings out the failure of the very concept of modern European nationality to live up to the historical ideal of the nation as a seat of global power. Only by joyfully incorporating this knowledge can one win at the Eurovision Song Contest.

References

- Berlant**, Laurent & Freeman, Elizabeth 1994: Queer Nationality. In Michael Warner (ed.): *Fear of a Queer Planet. Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 193–229.
- Krass**, Andreas 2003: *Queer Denken. Gegen die Ordnung der Sexualität*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Pajala**, Mari 2007: *Finlande: zero points? Der Eurovision Song Contest in den finnischen Medien*. Trans. Delef Wilske. Köln: Saxa Verlag.
- Rehberg**, Peter 2006: Gods and Monsters. *Siegessäule* 6, 46.
- Sontag**, Susan 1964: Notes on Camp. In Susan Sontag: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador, 275–292.
- Wolther**, Irving 2006: *Kampf der Kulturen. Der Eurovision Song Contest als Mittel national-kultureller Repräsentation*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.