Performing the queer network. Fans and families at the Eurovision Song Contest[1]

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This essay explores the ways in which the Eurovision Song Contest has particular meanings for gay spectators; looks at the ways in which some spectators queer the contest via a camp reading strategy; and suggests that the very articulation of these meanings and these reading strategies participates in their exposure—and therefore in the erosion of their signifying power. Thus this essay itself, by analyzing Eurovision's queerness and campness, helps facilitate the exposure and therefore the breakdown of these previously suppressed, subliminal meanings.

If we have any excuse to offer for this transgression, it is that this exposure is already underway: the age of Eurovision as an underground, covertly camp spectacle is passing, and what may be emerging in its place is Eurovision as what Moe Meyer (1994, 5) calls "Pop camp, the camp trace, or residual camp, a strategy of un-queer appropriation of queer praxis whose purpose – – is the enfusement of the un-queer with the queer aura, acting to stabilize the ontological challenge of Camp through a dominant gesture of reincorporation".

Queering hegemony in ESC

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1994) understands camp cultural readings as gestures that surmise there are others out there who might share in the same discourse, an imagined community if you like, or an alternative family. For many gay men, of course, the coming out process is precisely an act of coming in, coming into the gay family through a shared discourse, and that discourse is precisely the reading strategy of queering culture as camp. That cultural entertainment may in fact be conceived by cultural producers as family entertainment, aimed at the suburban family glued in front of the television, for instance, sharing a spectatorial moment of togetherness. Such is the Eurovision Song Contest. It would be impossible to imagine viewing figures annually in excess of one hundred million if it were otherwise.[2] But that family entertainment also has an alterna-

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2 The annual viewing figures of the Eurovision Song Contest are a subject of some debate. The European Broadcasting Union, which produces the contest, confirms viewing figures at one hundred million. However, it is widely believed that the actual number of viewers is closer to two or three hundred million, particularly given Internet viewing.

tive family, a queer family whose reading strategy is the discourse of camp. That family's knowledge of the history and rules of engagement of the contest is extensive, and it perceives itself to have an ownership of the contest, as manifest in the largely gay membership of the official fan network, OGAE *(l'Organisation Generale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision)*. Thus the avowal of fan interest that brings people together to watch or attend the contest, or its affiliated national and peripheral events, is a form of coming in, of appropriating, and of strategically queering the ostensibly straight form of the event.

We understand queering to mean the disruption and, therefore, critique of the regimes of the "normal" or normative. Queering via the invocation or assertion of gay subcultural readings critiques the heteronormativity of the Eurovision Song Contest. In order for something to lend itself to being queered, it must be in some way hegemonic or dominant. An argument we will develop throughout this essay is that Eurovision's current "out-gayness" has created a cultural dominant that now itself may need to be queered; just how such queering can be accomplished remains one of the open questions of our research.

Methodology

Our thoughts about Eurovision as a queer spectacle and as a haven for gay fandom have been shaped by our participative observation of several Eurovision Contests and by our interactions with Irish Eurovision fans through interview-based fieldwork.[3] In order to establish the grounds for our argument, we will briefly introduce ourselves and our approach here. Brian Singleton is a native of Northern Ireland and a Eurovision fan since childhood. He follows the contest avidly and has an extensive knowledge of its history. He has attended three live Eurovision events: the 50th anniversary celebration in Copenhagen in October 2005, the 2006 contest in Athens and the 2007 contest in Helsinki. He joined OGAE Ireland in early 2006. Karen Fricker is a lecturer in drama and a professional journalist, who attended the 2005 contest in Kiev as well as the Copenhagen, Athens and Kiev events. She is American and does not have a history of Eurovision fandom or deep knowledge, having become aware of the contest in approximately 2003.

In our attendance at the contests and at the Copenhagen event, we could not but note the abundant presence of fans and their enthusiastic participation both as spectators and behind the scenes in the Eurovision press corps. Particularly given the relative unpopularity and unfashionability of Eurovision in Western Europe at the current moment, it was our perception that the fans have become a key force in keeping interest in the contest alive, and that their passionate affiliation with the contest appeared connected to numerous identity issues, including sexuality and nationality, in ways that were complex and not immediately apparent. Not wanting to theorise in the abstract, we decided to approach a study by meeting and interviewing fans, and

3 For a more in-depth account of our fieldwork and its findings, see Fricker, Moreo & Singleton 2007.

thus brought Elena Moreo on board to conduct interviews; she also attended the 2007 contest in Helsinki. Elena is a PhD candidate in Sociology; being Italian, she was very aware of Eurovision, but did not consider herself a fan.

For the interviews, we started with immediate contacts—friends and colleagues that we knew of as Euro-fans or whom we had met at Eurovision events. Indeed our first interviewee was Brian Singleton himself, who has participated in our study as an auto-ethnographer as well as theorist and critic. We used a "snowballing" technique, meaning that we relied on our interviewees to give us contacts towards further interview subjects. Obviously, restricting the sample—despite our attempts at diversifying the sources of subsequent snowballing—influenced the conclusions. Whenever possible we tried to recognise the constraints on interpretation which arose from our method of sampling. Our snowballing resulted in an interview set of 30 men and five women between the ages of 19 and approximately 65, with most in their 30s and 40s. By and large they all had comfortable middle-class lives: amongst them were architects, arts and broadcasting professionals, students, salespeople, teachers, university lecturers, IT specialists and health care professionals. Serious Eurovision fandom can involve significant expenditure, particularly for those who attend the contest, but few of our interviewees mentioned cost as a limitation in their engagement in fandom. While it is doubtless the case that there is a working-class base of Irish Eurovision fandom, we did not encounter it via our research.

In the interviews, we were curious to know about our respondents' first memories of watching the ESC, whether they had attended live events, what they liked most about the visual and musical spectacle, if they felt that their passion was linked somehow to a gay aesthetic or realm of taste, how they connected with other fans across Europe and whether they see themselves as fans or rather rejected this definition.[4]

ESC and Irish gay history

Many of our interviewees talked about their first experiences of the Eurovision Song Contest as a spectatorial practice of the family.

JOHN: It was always a very big event on television. I can remember being six or seven, and it being a big event in the house. We grew up with my grandparents so there were always several generations watching. We lived in the countryside, and I watched it every year until I was 15 or 16, until I started going out myself in the evenings.

Such discussions which site the contest within the nuclear family are manifestations of nostalgia for lost innocence and for a time before the fans came into their alternative queer family and came out to their straight one.

4 We quote from these interviews in the course of this essay. All names and some minor personal details have been changed to protect the interviewees' anonymity.

The interviewees talked of the thrill of being allowed once a year to stay up late, a transgressive act. Eurovision permitted them to be "other" on the level of daily behavior as children. Some also professed an awareness of their love of Eurovision as appearing at the moment of discovering what was outside the family:

*CHRIS: My uncle had this old-style, pre-television age way about him, and while we were watching Eurovision he would start telling stories, about when he was in London in the '60s—**shouting** these stories, and I would be trying to tape the contest, and I would be looking at him with hatred; he was messing up my recordings – – Eurovision was like my sacred shrine, and he was pissing all over it. I wanted the whole world to shut up so I could watch.*

Learning foreign languages for Irish children begins at the age of 12, and some fans make a direct link between this educational beginning and their discovery of embodied foreign languages set to music in the ESC. Loving Eurovision was also a means whereby many of our fans learned to differentiate themselves from the family because of their sexuality, as our interviewee Stephen explains:

STEPHEN: When I was growing up Eurovision was a gay thing; it was like your private property. Even though your mother watched it, your father watched it, your grandmother watched it, maybe there was like a secret code. Like when I was a child, I used to stand at the top of the stairs on Sunday morning after Eurovision and pretend I was the winner, the star – – .

Given the near-monolithic homogeneity of Ireland 20 years ago (white, Catholic and English/Irish speaking) reinforced by economic policies that kept the other countries of Europe as an unattainable and exotic mirage, the ESC provided a spectacle of otherness. Here, for example, our interviewee John, who is in his late 40s, talks about his memories of the 1971 contest in Dublin:

JOHN: When the contest was produced in Ireland for the first time, there was an element of national pride about that. It was very formative for people of my generation. – – Hosting Eurovision was a big event, in that it was something European which was glamorous in itself, that was happening in our capital city. The woman who presented it was a continuity announcer on television, who everyone was familiar with, and suddenly she was transformed in this evening dress, presenting this show to Europe, and speaking French. She had gone from our little television screen to this much bigger thing – – .

When we say that Eurovision presented a spectacle of otherness in Ireland, we mean "otherness" in relative terms, of course: before the late 1990s, Eurovision presented itself as hugely respectable, with its live orchestra and formal dress of its audience. The queer reading was a private affair, embedded in the subcultural systems of the consumption of television culture, namely in private homes of like-minded viewers. When most of our interviewees were growing up, male homosexuality was still illegal in Ireland, and this was repealed only as late as 1993. Thus, before the 1990s, coming into the gay family in Ireland was not a coming out

in terms of the law. Ireland's four wins at the contest in the 1990s coincided almost simultaneously with the struggle for and the repeal of the law criminalising homosexuality. The entry into the discourse of camp in terms of the Eurovision was concomitant with a very public coming out of gay subculture in terms of the law.[5]

Many Irish Eurovision fans still watch the contest in the setting of a private home, as do many fans around Europe and beyond. These group celebrations are often elaborate and performative, involving the preparation of special food; voting and betting games in which attendees represent different countries and win a pot of money if their entry triumphs; and highly participative audiencing practices, in which at-home viewers engage in their own contest to provide the wittiest, bitchiest and most knowledgeable commentary on the singers and their acts. Such banter often references past viewing experiences and shared knowledge of the contest, thus celebrating and affirming the queer family of Eurovision. Such performances of knowledge are also a means by which to queer Eurovision history before the point at which it was publicly outed. This "outing" was accomplished first by the creation of OGAE in 1984, and has continued in a series of events and performances: most notably the victory of the transgendered Dana International in 1998, by the then-first drag performance in 2002, by the Slovenian trio of "air hostesses", Sestre; and again by the Dutch TV presenter in 2006, who preceded his announcement of his country's votes with a declaration of sexual interest in the contest's male host, Sakis Rouvas.

The older gay fans we interviewed, who are in their 50s and 60s, spoke of the contest largely in terms of the closet, understanding their fandom as a shared, open secret with other gay spectators. One of our interviewees, Stephen, is in his early 50s and is a well-known member of Ireland's artistic community. While curious, he initially resisted participating in our research, and when finally interviewed, delivered a hilarious high-camp performance of his fandom all the while resisting our attempts to theorise or nail down his affiliation to the contest. "Eurovision to me so camp, you cannot define it" he told us, and went on to describe his past adventures in watching the contest, stressing particularly the long-held friendships and in-jokes that have been cultivated through his fandom, such as the words he and his friends use to describe various aspects of the contest:

"Eurotingle" – – the sensation you would get going up your back when it is gone past ***sept points*** *and Ireland has not been mentioned, and maybe we'd be given a ten or twelve – – .*

"Eurofacts", something a too-serious Eurovision fan will say, like "this is the third time Ireland has won while sitting on a stool"—boring facts, just so irrelevant and gaga – – .

"Euro-limbo" – – the place that Eurovision acts go when they win the contest and then don't get famous – – .

5 Homosexuality as defined legally in Ireland only encompasses male homosexuality. It was only sexual activity between men that was criminalised under the law until 1993. Lesbianism therefore remains legally invisible.

Such examples notwithstanding, we must underline and refine a key point at this stage: Eurovision is not necessarily inherently gay or queer. The mainstream of viewers, historically, has understood it as delivering exactly what it purports to deliver: a mainstream competitive performance of new popular music. Further, not all Eurovision enthusiasts are gay, though it is our observation that the majority of serious fans are gay and do read the contest through a queer reading strategy. The ESC is particularly receptive to such a strategy because of several of its qualities: its spectacular nature, its performativity, and its liveness. The fact that the contest is both competitive and recurrent also helps invite intense fan engagement. We will briefly expand on these qualities here.

ESC and intensive viewership

Like opera and musical theatre, which also have a notable subcultural queer spectatorship, the lyric and spectacular qualities of Eurovision invite a particular intensity of viewership. The live performance of song makes a strong connection with audiences' emotions, and the focus on "entertainment and sheer dazzlement", as John M. Clum (1999, 6) puts it, offers "an escape from the masculine rites that disinterest and threaten" gay men. As many of our interviewees commented, Eurovision is "over the top", in that the pop song format, in which participants have only three minutes to win over the viewing public, tends towards broadly accessible, attention- and emotion-grabbing songs and performances. In the age of the closet, gay male lives were built on performance, on pretending to be and passing as straight; thus any live performance that foregrounds its performative nature tends to appeal to a queer gaze. The queer spectator recognises and relates to such performativity as a signal that covert meanings are there to be read and interpreted, and as a welcome reminder that all roles, including gender roles, are themselves performances and can be deconstructed and read in alternative ways. The sheer excess of the competition in recent years—with a record 42 songs in the 2007 competition—its sense of being overstuffed and overlong, also adds to its over-the-top quality.

Gay spectators tend to narrativise the Eurovision event, to turn it into an evening of stories bursting with potential success and imminent failure. Only one act can win Eurovision but several dozen try each year, and historically, the winners have been unknowns. The underdog story—the person who battles against obscurity or oppression to triumph against the odds—is a classic gay narrative, through which spectators can read their own stories of fighting through bias and prejudice towards fully realised, proud gay identities. Eurovision is a treasure trove of underdog stories to be sought out and identified with or queered if necessary, year after year.

The fact that it is a competition adds to the intensity with which fans engage with the contest. If it were merely a showcase of songs, this would not be nearly as compelling as the drama that unfolds each year as national entries battle for the Eurovision Grand Prix. That it has been hap-

pening every year for over half a century also means that there is an enormous accumulation of history and facts to be mastered, analyzed, and argued over by enthusiasts. Eurovision, in its recurrence and competitive nature, resembles a sporting event; and the qualities of Eurovision fandom can be most closely paralleled with sports fandom (as opposed to fandom of cultural texts that are finite and complete, such as *Star Trek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Harry Potter*). Not for nothing is Eurovision known colloquially as the "gay World Cup".

International ESC

Also important to queer readings of the contest is its internationalism, which results in songs emanating from and reflecting many musical traditions and local tastes. Most spectators will therefore find some of the competing songs unusual and exotic, assuring that the contest will come across, as we discussed above, as a spectacle of otherness to viewers from many cultural backgrounds (who are at the same time united by their reading of Eurovision as queer). Another important factor is the contest's quasi-amateur nature, the fact that some of the songs and performances will probably not be particularly well-executed. The possibility therefore opens up for moments when Eurovision's pretence of glamour slips and observant audience members can, for a moment, see behind the curtain to the man pulling the levers. These little moments of failure and strangeness are reminders of the contest's performativity and artificiality, which invite queer spectators' empathy.

One such moment of slippage happened in 1990, when the soundtrack failed for the Spanish duo, Azucar Moreno, and they were forced to start their act again (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2SOPPubnBc). Azucar Moreno presented themselves as smouldering über-divas whose anger at the injustice of the world meted out to them was additionally fuelled by the failure of technology around their act. However, this failure worked to enhance their diva status as survivor-warriors in a hegemonically mainstream musical culture that attempts to normatise them as victims. This is, of course, a queer reading of what happened on that stage at the 1990 contest in Zagreb, one example of the way in which gay fans' analysis focuses on these moments of failure that instigate a queer reading of the contest. Many queer fans fear and decry the increasing professionalism and slickness of the contest because mishaps like that which befell Azucar Moreno are less and less likely to reveal themselves to audiences. The fear is that ESC's queerness will disappear into a corporate machine. The desire to see the moments of slippage is doubtless one of the factors that drives fans to actually attend the contest, in that attendance affords many opportunities to observe behind-the-scenes activity and moments of exposure and liveness that are never seen by televisual spectators.

All of these qualities leave the contest wide open for the ironic yet highly emotionally engaged spectatorial participation that characterises the queer gaze. Tony Kushner's (1996, vii; quoted in Clum 1999, 5) summing up of the qualities of stage musicals that so appeal to queer spectators equally applies to Eurovision: "Fabulousness, irony,

tragic history, defiance, gender-fuck, glitter drama… the raw materials are reworked into illusion."

Outing ESC

The Eurovision Song Contest provided up to approximately a decade ago a safe closet (provided one disavowed an interest in straight company). Then came the crucial moment at which Eurovision was first and most triumphantly exposed as queer—and which was also the moment when Eurovision's political power as a site for the performance of queer identities and engagement in queer solidarity may have started to evaporate.

That moment, as mentioned before, was the victory in 1998 in Birmingham, U.K. of Israel's Dana International, who had made it well known in her aggressive pre-contest PR campaign that she was transgendered. Dana International's victory was widely understood within the gay community as accomplished via a lobbying campaign amongst gay- and gay-sympathetic voters to exploit the newly-introduced possibilities of televoting.

A subcultural reading strategy was endorsed by a political voting strategy. It was in that year as well that fans first made their physical presence known in the televised contest itself, in that the director of the broadcast in Birmingham invited fans into the auditorium and placed them in the front section of the audience, which in subsequent years has become standard practice. This crowd of ecstatic, screaming fans—nearly all men, most of them gay—helped transform what had previously been a staid event attended by VIPs in formal dress into a wild, participatory spectacle, in which fans performed their fandom for cameras projecting the spectacle worldwide.

Dana International's performance pointed out, to the point of excess, the constructedness of gender. And from that point on, the secret was out: Eurovision had been queered. Now that Eurovision has outed itself, the political power of its covert queerness is being slowly transformed into part of its commodity value, in a process familiar from all aspects of contemporary Western culture. Now, a song or act being perceived as "gay" in the context of Eurovision is seen as adding to its value and possible success. Our interviewee Susan talks about the changes she saw happening to the contest in the early years of this century:

SUSAN: It seemed like from the year that Latvia won onwards [2002], every guy in the contest was really going for the gay vote. It just seemed really camp that year. Eurovision has always been such a sort of a closeted thing, but that year they weren't even being closeted. They were just – – outright.

This commodification of the gayness of Eurovision was evident in the 2007 contest, which featured no less than two drag queens and several other songs with an overtly gay aesthetic, including, for example, the self-consciously campy choreography by the UK entry, Scooch. The presence of a gay club scene alongside official contest activities and of many gay fans in the press room, contributing coverage

to gay publications, websites, and their own Euro-themed publications, is now an accepted part of the life of the contest, acknowledged by the performers, the European Broadcasting Union, and participating national broadcasters. The staging and production values of the contest in recent years has become increasingly self-conscious in their flamboyance and campiness, at no point more so than the 2006 contest in Athens, with its semi-final opening number of scantily clad, dancing Greek gods; and, in the final, the presenters being flown in from above the stage like in a Vegas floorshow.

All this being said, however, we would caution against taking an argument about the ubiquitous gay aesthetic of Eurovision too far; we would argue, rather, that the politics of Eurovision's queerness are shifting. Eurovision remains designed as a family entertainment, with the heterosexual male/female pairing of presenters providing a straight and normative frame for reading. Knowing viewers can read the spectacle of fans—in their prime position in the arena, screaming and waving flags just in front of the stage—as a queer expression, but many viewers will still not know to read it as such.

Further, just because Eurovision has been outed in many circles does not necessarily take away the power and appeal it holds over gay spectators. Understanding and expressing a love of Eurovision, and finding solidarity in the Eurovision community, can be and still are powerful parts of a coming-out process for gay Euro-fans. Eurovision fandom still functions as a gay family for many enthusiasts. But now that the gay aesthetic is arguably one of Eurovision's cultural dominants, there is the possibility that its potential to be queered is slipping away. As a result, some gay fans are adopting strategies to resist or put the brakes on the increasing visibility of Eurovision as gay and to maintain the possibility of a queer gaze upon it. Eurovision fans thus find themselves in a similar situation to opera fans in the post-gay liberation era, who have been forced to reconsider their relationship to their favored art form, as Wayne Koestenbaum (1994, 31) argues:

We consider the opera queen to be a pre-Stonewall throwback because we homophobically devalue opera love as addictive behaviour and as displaced eroticism. But this logic would also have us renounce our fetishes, would deny us lace or leather, and would deny a taste's inevitability – – I used to be afraid that if I analysed my love for opera too closely, I would be forced to abandon it. But the drag queen does not give up his drag just because he has cracked his code.

One of the strategies for retaining queer meanings of Eurovision which is specific to Ireland, relates to viewers' choice of broadcast network on which they watch the contest, and therefore the particular commentator who will mediate the experience for them. The commentator for the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ, Marty Whelan, is a straight, middle-aged male who makes no reference to sexuality or camp, aiming his commentary at the suburban family. Many Irish viewers, therefore, opt to watch the

BBC instead, for Terry Wogan's notorious commentary. Wogan's bitchy comments on taste and fashion and his overall dismissal of the contest (despite providing commentary for well over 30 years!) fit in neatly with many queer readings that rely on dismissal in order to protect Eurovision as a closet. Preferring Wogan is a means for some fans to protect and maintain the viewing conditions that pertained in the past; by doing so, they arguably participate in nostalgia for the days of the closet, but are also employing a resistant strategy in order to keep some of Eurovision's meanings secret and shared.

Such complex agendas are also at play in fans' reactions to songs which play too heavily on either side of the gender and sexuality divide. The 2006 Icelandic entrant, Silvia Night, for example, was booed by fans because her offstage antics and self-consciously campy stage performance too deliberately exposed themselves as constructions and as attempts to exploit the fashionability of a gay aesthetic in a Eurovision context (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LEos9VLtgFU). On the other hand, many fans abhorred the 2006 Lithuanian entry, "We are the Winners (of Eurovision)" because of its macho sloganising by straight men in suits; the very name of the group, LT United, evoked the hyper-masculine world of professional football (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9qrO92xDpA). The appearance and demeanor of the straight line of six performers adhered to normative discourses of male sexuality, and it ran against Eurovision traditions in its lack of spectacularity and emotionality (save aggression). By proclaiming themselves the winners before the contest had even taken place, LT United mocked the competitive element of the spectacle and, crucially, erased the audience from their imaginative frame. It was impossible to fit the attitude of the song into the tradition of Eurovision acts and thus impossible to queer the song. Many fans therefore read LT United's presence in the contest as a homophobic expression of backlash against Eurovision's current gay identity.

Rethinking ESC's viewership

With the advent of text voting from approximately 2001 onwards, the voting populace became much broader and presumably younger, and we can see the results of this both in the kinds of performances that have started to score well and in the increasing efforts of national broadcasters to make their acts appeal across a number of demographics. In Athens 2006, the acts which proved most successful were those which were simultaneously open to a variety of readings, both normative and queer. For example, Russia's act, which placed second in Athens, featured a handsome young man, Dima Bilan, performing an upbeat pop song, a mainstream spectacle sure to appeal to young female viewers. Onto the end of the performance, however, was appended a high-camp flourish which clearly seemed aimed at the queer gaze of gay spectators (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbyv_FpeMk8).

It is in the context of the need of contemporary acts to appeal to numerous demographics that the 2006 winners, the Finnish group Lordi, are highly significant. Lordi's

monster personae and allegedly hard rock sound made them appealing to the youth vote and to heavy metal fans, even though their song, "Hard Rock Hallelujah", is probably better described as pop music in heavy metal drag. With their fabulous costumes, highly theatricalised stage show, and cascade of pyrotechnics, they also seemed to participate in the Eurovision tradition of camp. Most important was their complete refusal to step out of character, thus maintaining a firm grip on their performativity and not exposing it as false. While heavy metal music is associated with heteronormativity, the very act of entering the pop contest that is Eurovision can be read as Lordi's act of queering the self. (See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6VzdtmrP6Y.)

Interestingly, however, for some gay spectators it was Lordi's apparent heteronormativity that could be read as a queering of current Eurovision norms. One of our interviewees, Raymond, said he liked Lordi because they subverted the current trendiness of gayness in Eurovision: "Everyone aims for the gay aesthetics in Eurovision now, so that songs that are not regarded as gay things (in inverted commas) would do badly." For Raymond, this led to the perhaps unlikely scenario of him rooting for Lordi, because they seemed to deviate so far from the now-sanctioned commodified gay aesthetic.

Current gay spectatorship of Eurovision is, then, as we are describing, an extremely complex phenomenon. Generationality plays a crucial role in the fans' understanding of the contest, as we discovered in our research with Irish fans. Older fans tended to talk about the contest in nostalgic terms, conjuring up past memories of viewing experiences and community-building, and expressing concern about Eurovision's shared meanings slipping away:

STEPHEN: Things have changed between nobody saying they were gay to everyone saying they were gay within my lifetime – – . I am perhaps less excited now about the contest because over the years, it seems to have become everybody's, in the sense that it has become younger and more rock.

One of our interviewees, in his mid-30s, revealed himself on a generational cusp as regards his Eurovision spectatorship: he was initially resistant to our research as something that might expose the closet, and then went on to reveal something resembling self-loathing because of his love of the contest:

SEAMUS: In many other aspects of my life, I have very good taste, and I would like to think that people consider me as somebody who has good taste, but I am excused in the case of Eurovision because I am gay.

For this fan, Eurovision is an exercise in tastelessness and therefore something to be enjoyed privately, at home with like-minded friends. His attitude has doubtless been shaped by Eurovision having been "outed" in his viewing lifetime and becoming an element of gay fashionability. Its

elite status has therefore eroded, and in the eyes of this fan it has become common, for the masses.

We also observed, in our interview set, a number of young gay fans, in their early 20s, who engaged in Eurovision fandom and even attend the contest out of an evident belief that it was a cool gay thing to do. These young men came out into an Ireland in which homosexuality was decriminalised and increasingly socially acceptable, even trendy; and now quite flamboyantly participate in Eurovision-oriented activities as celebrations and gay rituals, without expressing much awareness of the origins of these rituals in shared, private discourse of the closet era.

Conclusion

Whatever their various motivations and histories, however, gay fans who continue to participate in Eurovision activities—gathering at home and in clubs, attending the contest and its attendant party scene, fan club activities in the "off-season"—are helping keep the ESC queer by continuing to perform it as queer. By making a strong gay presence felt at the contest, by camping it up in costume at parties and waving their flags in the front rows of the arena, by booing those acts that are too straight or dismissing those too evidently constructed as gay, today's fans assert their continuing ownership of the contest even as its popularity appears to be returning in some Western European countries, but in the frame of kitsch and irony. These fans know that allowing Eurovision to become wholly an ironic phenomenon will erode its signifying power and turn it into both a commodity and a simulacrum of itself.

In our view, the best strategy by which to queer Eurovision today is to resist its commodification as both a gay and a straight phenomenon. What our interviewee Raymond so pointedly named as the current "gay hegemony" at Eurovision must be challenged if Eurovision can still retain the potential to be queered in the post-closet era.

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