

# Closeting Eurovision. Heteronormativity in the Finnish national television

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Queer culture has become more and more visible in the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) during the past decade.<sup>1</sup> Openly gay and transgendered performers, self-consciously camp entries and the contest's large gay male fan audience have all contributed to the development. This has also raised questions about the contest's significance for sexual politics in Europe. Robert Deam Tobin has discussed the ESC as an arena where European cultural citizenship and belonging can be claimed. As Tobin points out, the chance to manifest European belonging through the ESC has been most valuable for marginalised groups: countries at the margins of Europe as well as sexual and ethnic minorities. He suggests that in its present form the contest "offers a model of European citizenship that is particularly amenable to needs that are present in queer populations and communities" (Tobin 2007, 25).

Europeanness may be particularly attractive to queer people because political institutions such as the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights have promoted the rights of sexual minorities, often challenging discriminating legislation in member states. Indeed, supporting the rights of sexual minorities is to an extent

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term queer mainly as an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bi and transgender.

*One way of maintaining a coherent heteronormative image of the national television audience is to picture the gay fandom as a separate group, a nation of its own.*

seen as a part of a European identity. (Ibid., 31–33.) Moreover, Tobin argues that the ESC deconstructs essentialist identity claims and challenges conventional standards of cultural belonging through its reliance on camp aesthetics. The ambiguity of camp "allows performers and fans alike simultaneously to claim and disavow regional, national, and continental identities", making it possible "to maintain a sense of cultural identity while critiquing essentialism" (ibid., 34). Thus the ESC can help "queer the nation" and make room to citizenship that is not based on traditional ideals of nationality (ibid., 26, 33–35).

While the ESC can offer a sense of queer European belonging, on a national level it has not always been easy to combine visible gay elements to an international song

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contest. The ESC's position in gay culture has in some countries been an acknowledged part of the program's image for quite some time. In Sweden, for example, there is a clear queer presence in the national Eurovision qualifier, *Melodifestivalen*. In 2002 the presenters, opening the show with a song celebrating the joys of schlager music, described the evening by exclaiming, "We shall all become queens for one evening!" ("Vi alla blir fjollor för en kväll!"). Apart from having a visible position in the production of the show, gay men are also an acknowledged part of the audience: an out gay man himself, Christer Björkman, who is responsible for choosing the performers for the show, has said that there has to be at least one song aimed at "disco queens" (*diskofjollorna*) each year (QX 12/2006). This would be unthinkable in Finland where the public service broadcaster YLE (Yleisradio, Finnish Broadcasting Company) has been much more cautious in acknowledging Eurovision's gay appeal. The ESC is a traditional television spectacle which explicitly addresses a national audience. Accordingly, there is tension between the conventional heteronormativity of national television and Eurovision's gay and queer aspects.

In this article, I ask how Finnish television and other mainstream media have addressed (or declined to address) the question of the ESC's gay appeal to find out how understandings of nationality, sexuality and television are figured in changing ways in relation to the ESC. First, I take a look at those characteristics of the ESC as a television program that have enabled Eurovision's gay fandom to remain relatively invisible in Finland for a

long time. I am particularly interested here in the role of national television as an institution that reproduces and sustains heteronormative notions of belonging and nationality. Second, I look at how Eurovision has been brought out of the closet. How has it become possible to combine homosexuality with the national discourses prevalent in the ESC? Several interview-based studies on Eurovision's gay male fandom have analyzed the program's appeal to and relevance for its gay audience in different national contexts (Lemish 2004; Moser 1999, 90–108; Singleton, Fricker & Moreo 2007). The present article contributes to the discussion concerning the sexual politics of the ESC by focusing not on the experiences of its gay fans but on the ESC broadcasts and their framings in mainstream media. A few Eurovision entrants such as Dana International, Sestre and t.A.T.u are frequently cited in both popular media and scholarly discussion as illustrations of the contest's increasingly open queerness (e.g. *HS Nytt* 18/2007a; Tobin 2007, 25–26). Conventional images of gender and sexuality, however, are still rather more common in the ESC as a whole. I do not wish to downplay the contest's queer potential—I agree with Tobin that it has become a useful arena where marginalised groups can assert themselves—but I do want to draw attention to the normative elements of the program that frame the queer performances.

Dana International's victory in the 1998 ESC was groundbreaking in highlighting Eurovision's connections to gay culture for a wider audience (see Lemish 2004, 56–59). Accordingly, I take the 1998 contest as a starting point and look at how the ways of discussing homosexuality in

relation to Eurovision have developed in the Finnish media since then. The material consists of Finnish ESC broadcasts and their coverage in a selection of major Finnish newspapers and magazines.<sup>2</sup> Dana International's appearance on the Eurovision stage didn't bring about a sudden visibility of Eurovision's gay fandom but rather began a slow process that arguably culminated when Finland hosted the ESC for the first time in 2007.

### **(Re)producing the national audience**

John Ellis has divided the history of the European broadcast television into three periods: the era of scarcity, the era of availability and the era of plenty. The era of scarcity is characterised by few television channels, which means that large parts of the population see the same programs. In the era of availability, on the other hand, there are more channels and programs to choose from. Television no longer addresses its viewers as a mass audience, but rather directs its programs to smaller, more distinct audiences. The era of plenty refers to a time when television programs can be received through many different technological apparatuses, "customers" can choose their preferred "contents" and television has become interactive. (Ellis 2000, 39.) In Finland, the era of scarcity lasted until

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<sup>2</sup> *Helsingin Sanomat (HS)*, the only daily national newspaper in Finland, *Turun Sanomat (TS)*, a regional newspaper based in Turku and *Ilta-Sanomat (IS)* and *Iltalehti (IL)*, the two national evening papers. Apart from these papers, I have included in the material articles on ESC fans from other Finnish magazines, as well as the ESC 2007 special issue of *Seura*, a traditional family magazine.

the 1980s when the two national television channels began to be gradually joined by new commercial channels as well as cable and satellite channels. According to Ellis, television during its era of scarcity produces a kind of "national private life" (ibid., 47), functioning as a powerful force of social cohesion and integration. During the era of availability, television addresses more diversified audiences and offers a place for the discussion of differences. (Ibid., 46–48, 69–72.) When Ellis outlined his historical schema in 2000, the era of plenty existed mainly in optimistic predictions of the television industry (ibid., 39). Seven years later this still remains largely the case.

The ESC is a typical television event from the era of scarcity. YLE first entered the contest in 1961, and for decades it was one of the biggest television events of the year in Finland, watched by large audiences and widely discussed in the press (see Pajala 2006). Since the early decades of Eurovision the television environment has changed and the contest no longer holds quite a similar position. That doesn't mean that the ways of understanding the ESC characteristic of the era of scarcity have disappeared either from the program or the way it is discussed in the press. In both instances, the audience is still largely addressed as a national mass audience. For example, in the Finnish media, the ESC has traditionally been represented as a particular favorite of "the people" (*kansa*). Through numerous strategies of representation, this Finnish *Volk* is constituted as a heterosexual audience. As V. Spike Peterson (2000, 59) suggests, "heterosexism is key to nationalism." The centrality of reproduction in nationalist ideologies and the idea that

reproduction should be tied to normative heterosexuality have contributed to this.

As a television “genre”, the big entertainment gala or spectacle such as the ESC is typically tied to hegemonic values. The shows are expensive and aimed at a large audience. Often they are staged to celebrate specific values—in the case of the ESC, the idea of a common Europe, and at the same time, of nationalism. Thus it is not surprising that heteronormative assumptions about the audience have usually dominated such entertainment spectacles.

The concept heteronormativity describes a system where heterosexuality has a naturalised position as the “proper” sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner emphasise that, as a general organizing principle of society, heteronormativity informs even practices that are not directly related to sexuality. Berlant and Warner define heteronormativity as “a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy” (Berlant & Warner 2000, 318) that privileges heterosexuality as a form of sociability. Heteronormativity is constructed in practically all the spheres of the society: in legislation, economy, medicine and education. It guides understandings of what constitutes a “normal” course of life and romantic relationships. (Ibid., 318–321.) Nationality plays an important part in heteronormativity: “National heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space

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3 For the history of the concept of heteronormativity, as well as discussion of its usefulness and problems see e.g. Jackson 2006; Rossi 2006.

of pure citizenship. A familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities.” (Ibid., 313.)

The relatively late appearance of queer viewpoints to Eurovision in the Finnish media is to a large extent the result of the centrality of a national framing in Finnish accounts of the contest. In the Finnish media, the discussion of Eurovision has centered very much on questions of national representation and the search for success. Paradoxically, one of the reasons for the continuing cultural visibility of the ESC in Finland has been the Finnish entries’ lack of success. This has enabled the contest to become material for a national narrative in which Finland tries to succeed in Western Europe and keeps melodramatically failing. This failure had been attributed to various forms of national difference: the Finnish language, the geopolitical position of the country and the Finnish taste in music, believed to differ markedly from Western European tastes (see Pajala 2006, 83–104; 328–347; Pajala 2007). The dominance of this national narrative of failure in the Finnish media in part explains why the ESC’s gay audiences have remained largely unacknowledged: its centrality has left relatively little room for other viewpoints, such as camp and queer approaches to Eurovision.

Television as a cultural form has helped construct and maintain national heterosexuality. National broadcast television is linked to “heterosexual culture” (Berlant & Warner 2000, 316) because it has addressed a national audience that is assumed to be heterosexual. Television has traditionally been understood as a domestic medium

and television schedules have been planned to fit the daily rhythms of family life.<sup>4</sup> As Lynn Spigel argues, television's position in the home has meant that it has become a site for negotiating and defining the relationship between the public sphere and the private sphere. Television has been seen as a medium that brings the public sphere into the private sphere of the home. This has inspired both hopes for democratization and anxieties about undesirable influences that could contaminate the domestic space through television. (Spigel 2001, 31–59.) Because television functions as a bridge between public and private space, the representation of sexuality on television has been carefully regulated. As Jane Arthurs points out, the “family address” of traditional European public service broadcasting has particularly limited the representation of homosexuality. (Arthurs 2004, 21–29.) This is apparent not only in the until-recently small number of homosexual characters on television but also in the ways the audience is addressed.

The commentators have an important function in the ESC: they “domesticate” the broadcast for a particular national audience. Because of the commentary, the tone of the ESC varies from broadcaster to broadcaster; most famously, BBC's Terry Wogan has established an ironic approach to Eurovision on British television. The Finnish commentators of the ESC have typically addressed the audience as a heterosexual family audience. This has only been em-

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4 For television's relationship to ideals of domesticity, see Spigel 1992; for information on the planning of television schedules when television first came to Finland, see Salokangas 1996, 116, 121.

phasised since the early 1990s as the tone of the broadcast has become less formal and the commentators have started to pay more attention to the performers' looks. They are careful to anchor their remarks in a heterosexual frame of reference. Typically, a male commentator will make comments on the attractiveness of the female singers. If a male commentator admires a male singer, he is sure to add that the performance will certainly appeal to many women watching at home. For example, in 2001 the male commentator said of the Spanish singer David Civera: “I think Spain's David looked quite a few ladies celebrating mothers' day tomorrow or girls on their couches at home straight into the eyes.”<sup>5</sup> Women are brought forward as the bearers of the admiring gaze. Because the broadcast is aimed at the Finnish public as a whole, only heterosexual viewers are explicitly addressed.

### Challenging heterosexual expectations

Dana International's performance in 1998 provided an unexpected challenge for this hegemonic frame. The Finnish television commentary for the Birmingham contest is striking in that it offers an example not only of this heteronormative address but also of its failure. The commentary for the Finnish broadcast was provided by a man and a woman, Sami Aaltonen and Maria Guzenina. The commentators created a distinction between the “general” national television audience and the fan audience. Fans

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5 “Siinä taisi Espanjan 'Daavid' katella sinne kotisohvalle aika montaa huomenna äitienpäivää viettävää rouvaa tai neitiä suoraan silmiin.”

were more visible—and their reactions to the performances more audible—in the 1998 ESC than they had been in previous competitions: for the first time, the tickets for the front rows had been distributed through Eurovision fan clubs (Feddersen 2007). For this reason fandom was also discussed by the Finnish commentators. The commentary was addressed to the “general” audience, who was informed about the special tastes of the Eurovision fans by the “expert” commentators. “Eurovision fans love these little tricks”<sup>6</sup> the commentators explained after the Croatian performance, during which the singer Danijela shed her dark gown to reveal a delicate white dress underneath. Dana International’s performance was introduced with the comment that Eurovision fans “are very much into this kind of kitsch and like this kind of a glamour artist.”<sup>7</sup> At the same time the commentators implied that they themselves, as well as the general audience, were not that keen on kitsch and glamour.

Dana International was represented as a fan favorite, but the commentators, especially Aaltonen, talked about her disparagingly. The commentators presented transsexuality as a gimmick to get media attention, which they presented in a negative light (while simultaneously applauding the Finnish contestant’s public relations savvy). Aaltonen made jokes about Dana International’s transsexuality and musical abilities. Calling the contestant “a pretty human being” he said: “It doesn’t lack anything but the ability

6 “Euroviisufanit rakastavat tällaisia pikku tempauksia.”

7 “[E]uroviisufaneissa jotka ovat kovasti tämmösen kitschin perään ja tykkäävät tällaisesta glamour-artistista – – .”

to sing—or actually it does lack something else as well nowadays.”<sup>8</sup> Here the transgendered singer is represented as both ridiculous and problematic: according to Aaltonen, Dana International is not a woman but “a human being”, nor is she a man, because she “lacks” something. The joke was possible because the commentators addressed an audience that was not expected to identify with Dana International. Viewers who did not fit into the heteronormative gender system were not included in the community constructed in the commentary.

As the voting unfolded, the commentators disparaged Dana International’s success: her advance was described as “threatening” and she herself as a “freak”. When the Finnish song failed to score any points for a long time, the dialogue between the commentators got increasingly hysterical: they joked that Aaltonen had in his frustration ripped off his clothes and revealed a pink bra underneath. Aaltonen said, “I wore this bra just in honor of Dana as that seems to be the spirit of Eurovision this year.”<sup>9</sup> The hegemonic position of the heterosexist male persona was threatened by the conduct of the European televoters. The last strike came when the Finnish voters awarded Dana International their second highest points. Now the commentators remained silent: the audience they had

8 In vernacular Finnish, it is common to refer to people with the pronoun “it”. This is not considered insulting in itself, but Aaltonen’s language is rather informal for television.

9 “Laitoin nämä rintsikat ihan Danan kunniaksi että nyt kuitenkin kun tässä näköjään tämä on tämä Euroviisujen henki tänä vuonna niin.”

confidently addressed as likeminded and heterosexist had behaved against expectations.

### Heterosexualising the hosts

Apart from the commentators, the hosts have constructed heterosexuality as the normative frame through which to approach the ESC. In a program like the ESC, where the competing acts can be quite different from each other and address the audience in different ways, the hosts provide some unity to the show. In recent years, the contest has nearly every year been presented by a male/female couple in ways that conform to the ideals of normative heterosexuality (see Rossi 2003, 120–121): the woman is generally younger, shorter and more glamorous than the man.

Eurovision's normative representations have not been missed on by some commentators. The 2003 final of the Swedish *Melodifestivalen* parodied the heteronormative conventions of presenting television shows. In the beginning of the program, the host Mark Levengood staged a wedding scene with his male co-host and real-life registered partner, Jonas Gardell. The couple appeared on stage dressed up as bride and groom, Levengood in a baroque white dress. Gardell asked the audience: "Do you, the public, take Mark and Jonas as your lawful wedded hosts?" When the audience shouted yes, he asked, "Shall I kiss the bride?" but did not do it. The act played with the conventions of heterosexuality as public spectacle, linking the wedding ceremony—the ultimate symbol of heterosexual romance and privilege—to the standard television show

convention of a male/female host couple.

The tradition of having a man and a woman host Eurovision is in fact not very old—less than two decades.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, it has quickly become naturalised. After Lordi's victory in Athens, one of the most heated topics of speculation in Finnish newspapers and on Internet message boards was the choice of hosts for the final in Helsinki. In this discussion, it was nearly always taken for granted that there would be two presenters, of the opposite sex.<sup>11</sup> The choice of the presenters stirs such interest because the hosts are seen as national representatives: they are the face of Finland in the contest. The role of national representatives is most readily given to an image of a heterosexual couple.

In the end, television presenter Jaana Pelkonen and actor Mikko Leppilampi were chosen to host the ESC. "Chemistry" was one of the central criteria given for their selection.

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10 Until 1978 the ESC was always hosted by a single female presenter. In 1978 and 1979 the contest was hosted by a male/female couple, but in 1980 the organisers returned to female presenters. The 1988 contest marked the return of the male/female couple, a convention which has thereafter been used in all contest apart from 1993 and 1995 (a female presenter) and 1999 (a trio of presenters). For information on the hosts, see e.g. Thorsson 1999.

11 Many newspapers held polls to find out the readers' favourite hosts. In both *Ilta-Sanomat* (24.5.2006) and *Iltalehti* (24.5.2006), the readers voted for female and male hosts separately and the winners of these categories were then presented as the readers' favourite host couple. In *Helsingin Sanomat* (27.5.2006), the readers could vote for ten couples, nine of whom consisted of a man and a woman and one of two men, television presenter Marco Bjurström and Mark Levengood, who is of Finnish origin though he has lived for a long time in Sweden. Marco Bjurström and Maria Guzenina won the poll.

Ville Vilén, director of the YLE Vision subdivision that produces YLE's entertainment and popular music programs, explained that Pelkonen and Leppilampi were chosen because of their "television experience, language skills and chemistry" (*IL* 7.2.2007). "Chemistry" not only referred to how well the hosts worked together, but was clearly a sexualised metaphor. The columnist of the tabloid *Ilta-Sanommat* was charmed by Pelkonen and Leppilampi when the presenters were introduced to the media: "There is obvious chemistry between this couple! Jaana teased Mikko, and Leppilampi was not left speechless." (*IS* 7.2.2007a.) Pelkonen and Leppilampi said that they were going to prepare for the job by spending a lot of time together, and Leppilampi joked that this would require understanding from his wife (*IS* 7.2.2007b). The hosts' flirtation with the conventions of heterosexual coupledness was a source of charm and humour for the media. In particular, the metaphor of "chemistry" helps to naturalise heterosexuality, as it refers to processes of nature. It brings to mind a process where two elements are combined to produce something new, perhaps something spectacular—an explosion, for example. As a metaphor for sexual attraction, chemistry resembles the common convention of romance fiction of describing desire as a force of nature, such as a tempest or a flood. This convention helps to represent desire as natural, powerful and other-worldly. (Belsey 1994, 27–28.) Likewise here the metaphor of chemistry represents heterosexual attraction as a natural force.

By choosing Mikko Leppilampi, YLE caused some controversy, as Jaana Pelkonen had for some years worked on

Finnish Eurovision programs together with another male presenter, Heikki Paasonen. According to press reports, YLE filmed Leppilampi, Paasonen and another male candidate together with Jaana Pelkonen to see how well they worked together (*IS* 9.2.2007). There is no indication that YLE would have filmed any of the men together to see if there would have been "chemistry" between them.

Heteronormativity, in other words, has been maintained in the Finnish ESC broadcasts by addressing the audience as heterosexual and by privileging the male/female couple form. A young, conventionally attractive, heterosexual couple was deemed most appropriate to represent the nation at Finland's first time of hosting the ESC. The announcement of Pelkonen and Leppilampi as the hosts during a live television broadcast was accompanied by clichéd images of Finnishness: the sauna, snow and birch trees. The combination of these visual symbols of Finnishness with an image of heterosexuality in the form of the host couple created a traditional image of the nation.

### Outing Eurovision

The live broadcast where the hosts were announced offered very traditional images of gender and nationality. Yet, it also featured a drag performance caricaturing the previous year's competition between Lordi and Sweden's Carola. The joint appearance of representations of national heterosexuality and drag performances suggests that gay culture had been slowly making its way to the Finnish Eurovision culture for a while already.

Dana International's participation in the 1998 ESC was instrumental in bringing Eurovision's gay fandom to the attention of the Finnish mainstream media. After the contest, the Finnish contestant, Marika Krook, obviously appalled by the results, famously averred that Dana International's victory was the result of a "homosexual conspiracy". When, referring to this claim, an interviewer pointed out that Dana was in fact transsexual, Krook insisted:

*It was still a homosexual conspiracy! They all belong to the same group. The whole thing became a political statement which doesn't belong to Eurovision at all. Music is after all the only thing that is to be judged. I have nothing against homosexuals, they are lovely people and some of my friends are like that. But this whole public vote turned political. Neighboring countries voted for neighboring countries and homosexuals voted for Israel. (Hufvudstadsbladet 11.5.1998.)*

Here national and sexual loyalties are accused of ruining the supposed objectivity of the ESC. In their explicitness, Krook's comments were, however, quite unusual.

At the time of Dana International's Eurovision victory, it was more common for Eurovision's gay fandom to appear as *an open secret*. In interviews with fans, while the Finnish mainstream media declined mentioning Eurovision's position in gay culture, some *implicit* links were been made. For example, in the commentary of the 1998 contest, even though gayness was not explicitly mentioned, Eurovision fans were associated with homosexuality through references to camp and kitsch. The same year, the popular

talk show *Kaken pesula* ("Kake's laundrette", TV1 1998) dedicated an episode to discussing Finland's unlucky Eurovision history. The program featured an interview with a "Eurovision activist" who worked in Con Hombres, a Helsinki bar popular with Eurovision fans. The fact that Con Hombres is in reality a gay bar was not mentioned in the program; instead, it was identified as a "Eurovision bar" in the graphics and by the voice-over. The viewer could still recognise Con Hombres as a gay bar not only because of its name but also because of the way it was imaged: the dark interior dimly lit by a red light and a couple of lonely men without women provided a culturally recognizable image of a gay bar. The program created a silent connection between the ESC and homosexuality by replacing the words "gay bar" with the expression "Eurovision bar". Still, a talk show on national television avoided explicitly discussing gayness in relation to the ESC.

This representational strategy follows the logic of the "epistemology of the closet" as described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The closet is constructed by "the speech act of silence" (Sedgwick 1991, 3). The structures of secrecy and revelation associated with the closet are cultural ways of producing knowledge and ignorance. The closet typically constructs homosexuality as an open secret: something you may know but are not allowed to talk about. (Sedgwick 1991, 1–8, 22.)<sup>12</sup> This representational strategy sustains the idea that homosexuality is something private and poten-

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12 Lynne Joyrich (2001) has analysed the way the epistemology of the closet functions in the programmes on commercial network television in the USA.

tially hurtful that shouldn't be mentioned. An extreme instance of such silencing occurred on the message board of YLE's Eurovision web site. Popular among Finnish Eurovision fans, this site made the decision to censor the word "gay" (*homo*) as a swearword. This resulted in absurd situations when people tried to discuss topics such as homophobia but the relevant words were censored from the messages.<sup>13</sup>

The tradition of the open secret also made it possible for the media to offer *revelations* to its audiences. Such media texts construct an audience supposedly ignorant of the ESC's status in gay culture. For example, writing about Eurovision's gay fandom in the 2002 contest in Tallinn, the newspaper *Turun Sanomat* described the fans as "gate-crashers" who take over press conferences, hang at embassy parties and advertise the ESC as the camp event of the year through "journalists of similar sexual orientation" as far away as in America. This side of Eurovision is presented as a "revelation" to the readers: "Everybody knows but nobody tells. That is the week long gay festival that revolves around Eurovision. – Finland should win Eurovision once so that we could see the incredible theatre that doesn't make it to television screens." (*TS* 25.5.2002.)

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13 See for example the thread "Kymmenen uutisten kevennys!" on the forum "TV1:n keskustelu: Euroviisut" (<http://www.yle.fi/tv1/ubb/Forum28/HTML/000181.html> [19.9.2001]). Since then "Viisukuppila", a site operated by the fans themselves, has become the main forum for Finnish ESC fans. See <http://www.viisukuppila.fi/> [13.8.2007].

Two years later a columnist in Finland's largest newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published a similarly "educational", if less disparaging, piece. The writer starts by representing Eurovision's gay fandom as a little known open secret: "Knowledge of this [gay interest in Eurovision] reached my ears only after Eurovision in Tallinn through surprised and slightly amused eye witness accounts. An ordinary television viewer doesn't necessarily recognise the phenomenon, which apparently bursts into view only behind the scenes." (*HS* 21.4.2004.) The columnist goes on to present examples of Eurovision's nature as a "drag show", considers some reasons for the contest's gay appeal and guides the readers on how to seek out Eurovision's hidden meanings.

While different in tone, both articles assume a heterosexual readership that is to be informed about Eurovision's gay fandom. In the first example, the fans are positioned as a potential spectacle for "us", the supposedly heterosexual Finnish people. In the latter example, the writer, in the role of the expert-critic, presents the presumably heterosexual readership with a new viewpoint on a television program. While the column describes gay subcultural practices, the address of the text remains heteronormative. It assumes a readership consisting of "ordinary television viewers" for whom Eurovision's position in gay culture is as unknown as it was for the journalist. The gay event can thus be discussed in a "surprised and also slightly amused" way.

Furthermore, both articles position the ESC as a gay spectacle that takes place *abroad*, beyond the national borders. This fits in with the tradition of positing homosexuality

as a foreign influence, a historically common representational strategy in many countries, including Finland.<sup>14</sup> These kinds of revelations are based on the assumption that homosexuality is not normally visible in Finland but only becomes apparent at international events such as the ESC. By representing the Finnish audience as ignorant of Eurovision's gay fandom they help maintain the "pure" heterosexual space of the nation. Preserving an illusion of a coherent "national heterosexuality" (Berlant & Warner 2000, 313) was possible as long as the ESC remained an event that took place abroad.

### **Fandom and the appearance of the "Gay Nation"**

Since the late 1990s, explicit references to gay culture have become a standard feature of the ESC, most obviously in the form of drag performances. At the same time the ESC began to be discussed increasingly in terms of camp, a framing that had not been common in the Finnish media coverage of the contest until then (Pajala 2006, 74–82). This development coincides with a period of reforms in the history of the ESC. In the 1980s European television moved from the era of scarcity to the era of availability: there were more channels than before as the first commercial channels were established in many countries and, in addition to national

14 In Finland, the stereotypical image of Swedish men as gay has helped to situate homosexuality outside of Finland's borders. For the history of this stereotype, see Juvonen 2002, 103–104, 114, 141–143, 155–156. In the field of art history, Harri Kalha (2005, 267–288) has analysed the way Finnish art criticism has treated features associated with homosexuality—femininity, colour—as foreign influences that "contaminate" Finnish art.

broadcast networks, more and more people had access to local cable or international satellite channels, such as MTV. All this made it difficult for a traditional television event like the ESC to maintain its former position. As the ESC was seen as an old-fashioned program past its prime, the ratings declined (see Moser 1999, 7–8, 108–117; Pajala 2006, 58–59).

To counter this development, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) began to reform the contest in the late 1990s with the aim of making it more popular with and attractive to younger viewers (see e.g. Meier-Beer 2002). In the more and more competitive television environment, the ESC was potentially useful for the European public service broadcasters who organised it: the program did after all have an exceptionally long history and, in many countries, a traditionally high profile. Numerous changes were instituted: the juries were gradually replaced by televoting from 1997 onwards; in 1999, the contestants could sing in any language and the organizers were no longer required to provide a grand orchestra for the event. These changes affected the type of music performed at the contest. In the 1990s the juries favored traditional ballads and ethnic influences. By getting rid of the orchestra the organizers made the contest more open for mainstream pop music with the result that the variety of genres and performance styles represented at the contest has grown during the last decade. This includes performances that are indebted to gay culture.

As the amount of television channels grows, television increasingly addresses smaller audiences and niche groups.

Accordingly, there is also some room to address viewers in other than heteronormative ways. During the last decade, homosexuality has become more common and even trendy on popular television in general as evidenced by programs such as *Will and Grace*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and the *L Word* (see e.g. Straayer & Waugh 2005). At the same time, television audiences are increasingly addressed as fans. The Internet has facilitated the development of an intensive and active engagement with media products that is typical for fandom, which means that practices that used to be typical only for a small group of fans have become more common. Television companies actively encourage fandom for example by setting up Internet sites for their programs and producing DVDs and other products related to the program. (Nikunen 2005, 101–107.) This is apparent also in the development of the ESC: since 2000, when the first official compilation CD was released, the amount of official ESC merchandise available has grown enormously.<sup>15</sup>

In line with the general development of television culture, the ESC has in the recent years been represented not only as a traditional favourite of the Finnish people but increasingly as the favourite of a particular group of viewers, the Eurovision fans. There have been many press interviews and television documentaries focusing on the fans' experience of Eurovision in Finland.<sup>16</sup> In some of

15 See "Eurovision Shop", <http://www.eurovisionshop.tv/shop/default.asp?s=30CE667C01DC40FB8C545A8A2EAE3C19> [13.8.2007].

16 Television programmes featuring Eurovision fans include *Jaettu*

these interviews, gay Eurovision fandom is discussed in a way that concentrates on the experiences of the fans themselves, rather than that of the heterosexual outsiders (*Matkaan* 5/2004; *TS Treffi* 12.5.–18.5.2004).

Interestingly, national metaphors begin to appear when Eurovision's gay fandom is discussed openly. Phrases like the "gay nation" or the "rainbow nation" are used to refer to gay people as a group (*TS Treffi* 12.5.–18.5.2004; the television program *4-pop*, Nelonen 2003). As one newspaper article puts it, "the rainbow nation loves Eurovision" (*TS Treffi* 12.5.–18.5.2004). The national metaphor gives gay people some legitimacy as actors in the cultural field. It also represents them as a unified group, just as nations have been traditionally imagined as culturally homogenous. The claim that the "gay nation" loves Eurovision doesn't leave room for differences among gay people. In relation to Eurovision, the "gay nation" also consists either implicitly or explicitly of men. While it is true that the majority of Eurovision fans are male, there are certainly lesbians who like Eurovision type schlager music, but they are practically never seen in the Finnish mainstream media. Moreover, a lot of gay men are obviously not interested in the ESC at all.<sup>17</sup>

*viimeinen sija* ("Joint last place") TV1 2005 and *Viisuhörhö* ("Eurovision freak") TV1 2005.

17 In Sweden, Peter Tai Christensen (2000, 42–43; see also Christensen 2005) has discussed the differences within gay culture in relation to the ESC. He suggests that interest in the ESC is seen as typical for effeminate gay men whose position in gay culture is to an extent marginal because they are seen to uphold stereotypical images of homosexuality.

Inscribed in these terms, the newly found visibility of gay fandom continues to organise knowledge about sexuality in a clear cut heterosexuality/homosexuality binary (see Joyrich 2001). As a result, it propagates a homogenous image of gay culture. Moreover, the “rainbow nation” metaphor makes it possible to separate homosexuals from the rest of the nation. The growing visibility of Eurovision’s gay fandom could threaten the fantasy of the nation as a cohesive(ly) heterosexual space by exposing the fact that the traditional favorite of the Finnish audience is also a piece of camp gay entertainment. One way of maintaining a coherent heteronormative image of the national television audience is to picture the gay fandom as a separate group, a nation of its own.

### “Gay Helsinki”

With the 2007 contest, as the ESC entered the space of the Finnish nation, Eurovision’s gay fandom could no longer be closeted or posited outside the national borders. In the countdown to the ESC in Helsinki, a light, entertainment oriented approach to Eurovision was more prevalent than before in the Finnish media. Lordi’s victory has provided a happy ending to the national narrative of repeated failures, which made the contest a focus for positive feelings for a change. Because of this, there was more room for discussions of Eurovision in terms of fandom and pleasure than before, although obviously these perspectives were not completely missing from earlier media texts either. *Ilta-Sanomat* and the family magazine *Seura* both

published special Eurovision magazines, which featured interviews with current and former Eurovision performers, rated the 2007 entries and offered advice on how to make the most of the Eurovision night, giving information on the different Eurovision-related events in Helsinki and suggesting menus for a Eurovision party. Both magazines also acknowledged the contest’s links to gay culture by interviewing a drag artist and a gay fan about Eurovision’s appeal to gay people. (*Ilta-Sanomat Euroviisut* 27.4.2007; *Seura Euroviisut* 16b/2007.) The contest’s gay fandom was a regular part of the ESC coverage, no longer expected to come as a surprise to the readers.

In fact, Eurovision’s gay appeal seemed to become one of the central themes of the 2007 Eurovision press coverage. *Nyt*, the weekly supplement of *Helsingin Sanomat*, highlighted it on the cover of its Eurovision issue (*HS Nyt* 18/2007). The cover image featured the three blacksmiths of a famous statue in central Helsinki dressed up in Tom of Finland gear over the headline “Gay Helsinki” (“*Iloinen Helsinki*”).<sup>18</sup> The cover promised to offer three theories as to why “sexual minorities have such a passionate relationship with a song contest,” as well as a “Gay guide to Helsinki.” The paper interviewed amongst others the speakers of the *Queer Eurovision!* seminar (University of Helsinki 8.5.2007) about the ESC’s relevance for gay men (*HS Nyt*

18 While *iloinen* (happy, gay) does not denote homosexuality in Finnish, the use of the word root in such compounds as *ilotyttö*—a prostitute; literally, “a gay girl”—suggest the intimate connection of sexual nonconformity with the affect of *joy*, a linkage affirmed by the usage of the English “gay”.

18/2007b). The “Helsinki Gay and Eurovision Song Contest Guide” was published in English so as to cater to international ESC tourists (*HS Nytt* 18/2007c). It offered information on gay bars and other places of interest as well as a history of gay Helsinki. Because *Nytt* caters primarily for young adult readers, it evinced a more liberal attitude towards sexuality than *Helsingin Sanomat* in general.<sup>19</sup> Eurovision’s gay appeal was legitimised as a topic through its association with academic research as well as through tourism: the arrival of hundreds of Eurovision tourists to Helsinki meant that Eurovision’s gay fandom was also of commercial interest to local businesses.

While gay fandom was an interesting new viewpoint to the ESC for the Finnish press, what happened in the television event itself? In terms of the performances and the results, the 2007 ESC must be one of the queerest ever. It was won by Serbia’s Marija Šerifović, a tomboyish young woman rumored but not confirmed to be lesbian (e.g. *HS Nytt* 18/2007a), whose four female backing singers were styled to look like the cast of *L Word* with their curly hair and trouser suits. The emotionally charged performance featured the women longing for and supporting each other. The second place went to Ukraine and Verka Serducha, actor Andrei Danilko’s drag queen alter ego. Verka and her backing troupe looked like a glammed-up version of a Soviet-era army entertainment group, very different from the more conventional drag queen act by Denmark’s DQ, who was eliminated in the semi-final. In terms of represen-

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19 See Juvonen 2004 for an analysis of the way *Helsingin Sanomat* addressed homosexuality in 2002–2003.

tations of gender and sexuality, the framing of the performances, however, was more heteronormative than the entries themselves. As customary, the “postcard” films between songs aimed to showcase “Finland and Finnishness from many different points of view,” as the Finnish commentary of the broadcast put it. When it came to sexuality, however, the viewpoints were not very varied. The postcards told small stories, and in many of them the narrative was provided by heterosexual romance: a young Goth boy and a girl clad in a Finnish folk costume sit next to each other in a fairground ride and leave walking hand in hand; a postcard filmed at a metal music festival ends with images of a kissing heterosexual couple and their young baby; a young man proposes to his girlfriend by sending a photo of a ring to her mobile phone; even a little girl and a boy playing outdoors in the winter end up by falling in love, symbolised by a heart shape that forms in the snow around them. Finding signs of other than heterosexual interests in the postcards requires attentiveness, although a couple of the films feature same-sex couples that could be read (against the grain, perhaps) as romantic.<sup>20</sup> When the nation

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20 In a postcard set in the National Library of Finland, a young woman and a man study together, whispering and giggling flirtatiously. The narrative of the clip centres around a middle-aged woman spying on a man of her age. In the end we also see two young women sitting close to each other, laughing at the older woman. As the theme of romance has been established as central to the film by then, it would be possible to read the girls too as a couple. Another film shows two young girls washing rugs at the seaside. The girls exchange looks and start to undress. Clad in bikinis, the girls invite three boys to join them. The boys take over the washing while the girls settle to sunbathing. The girls use their sexual attractiveness to get the boys do their work for them, but do not seem to have any other interest in the

was represented for an international audience, images of conventional heterosexuality still dominated.<sup>21</sup>

Elsewhere on television, however, there was room for more diverse images. Just before the ESC, YLE launched a new digital channel, YLE Extra. During Eurovision week the channel aired a daily program *Euroviisujen takapuoli* (“The backside of Eurovision”). The producer of the show promised to bring camp back to Eurovision—“although it is of course difficult to make a camp program about something that is already completely camp”—and to feature topics that are not addressed by “the official YLE and EBU”, including the viewpoints of the people on the street and sexual minorities (*HS Nyt* 18/2007d). The program covered the events of the Eurovision week in a very tongue-in-cheek, informal manner. Among its regular features was a drag queen who was interviewed about her personal views on Eurovision. The proliferation of television channels enabled YLE to present varying viewpoints to the ESC—to offer both the “official YLE” view and its “backside”—and to address different audiences.

The 2007 ESC in Helsinki thus produced a variety of

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guys—perhaps they are more interested in each other. I thank Kaisa Ilmonen for this insight.

21 Similarly, while Eurovision fans were highlighted in the programme, this was done in such a way as to not draw attention to the prevalence of gay men among them. In the final the hosts emphasised that it’s the “devoted fans who make the Eurovision Song Contest such a special event.” In humorous interludes, the role of the devoted Eurovision fan is played by Kriise, a Finnish comedian famous for her role as a self-satisfied blonde and here dressed in a pink princess dress.

images of sexuality and ways of addressing the Finnish public. In the press, Eurovision’s gay fandom was no longer a secret or a revelation. With the arrival of the ESC in Helsinki it wouldn’t have been possible to be ignorant of the contest’s queer appeal. The increasing attention paid to the gay fandom was probably in part motivated by the need to find fresh approaches to the ESC, and in part by the need to present Helsinki as a welcoming city for Eurovision tourists. On television, YLE Extra made room for new approaches to the ESC, albeit in a channel only available to viewers with access to digital television. The results of the 2007 ESC could be taken as an indication that the large European televoting public was very receptive to queer images. Nevertheless, heteronormativity was maintained through the representation of Finland in the postcards and the choice of the hosts. Heterosexuality still dominated representations of the nation as a whole.

## Conclusion

The ESC’s queer elements have had an awkward relationship with the national discourses prevalent in the program. This has been especially true in Finland, where the question of nationality has dominated in the media coverage of the program. The centrality of nationality kept Eurovision’s gay fandom an open secret for a relatively long time. As a television program, the ESC has addressed a national audience, which made it difficult to include gay fans as an acknowledged part of the audience. The recent changes in television culture have, however, brought the ESC out of

the closet also in Finland. The ESC is framed more and more as an object of fandom, as well as an object of interest for the national audience. With the proliferation of television channels and programs, there is more room for different ways of addressing the audience. In the increasingly competitive television environment, even public service broadcasters need high viewing figures. Thus Eurovision fans have become more and more important for television producers. All this has helped make Eurovision's gay fandom more presentable in the Finnish media.

What do these developments mean for heteronormativity and television? Obviously, heterosexuality has lost some of its former sense of "naturalness" and entitlement. At the same time, heteronormativity has not completely lost its hegemonic position in television culture. Television scholars have pointed out that the recent increase of queer characters in television fiction isn't in itself enough to change the way television addresses sexuality, as long as other aspects—such as modes of producing knowledge and narrative structures typical for television—remain unchanged (Joyrich 2001; McCarthy 2001). This is also true in the case of the ESC: queer performances do not mean that the program is free of heteronormativity, if ways of addressing the audience or representing the nation keep privileging heterosexuality.

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