

TIINA ROSENBERG

Rising Like the Eurovision Song Contest

On Kitsch, Camp, and Queer Culture

ABSTRACT

The 2020 Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the ESC is still shining after more than half a century and even now seems relevant for its audiences. In the ESC, queer interaction and togetherness are based on a combination of kitsch and camp, an aesthetic style and sensibility that aficionados regard as appealing because of its ironic, over-the-top challenging of the norms of 'good behavior' and 'good taste.' Nonetheless, it may seem strange that the ESC, a post-war European peace utopia and mainstream music event, is identified to such a degree as queer today, and the question remains whether the ESC can be of interest to dykes and feminists. This essay, therefore, revisits the notions of kitsch and camp as queer communication strategies. It closes with a reflection on the contest's arbitrary notions of Europe, its troubled geopolitics, and its radically extroverted playing with taste taboos as pleasurable entertainment.

Keywords: camp, Eurovision Song Contest, kitsch, queer culture

You said, "I love you."

Why is that the most unoriginal
thing we can say to each other
and still the thing we long to hear?

Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (1994, 9)

THE EUROVISION SONG Contest (ESC), founded in 1955 as a utopian dream of bringing post-WWII and eventually post-Soviet Europe together around some light entertainment, has become Europe's most watched television program, with an audience of approximately 200 million viewers. The ESC was going to be held in Rotterdam, Netherlands, in May 2020, but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of the traditional ESC final, the television program "Eurovision: Shine a Light" was broadcasted across Europe to the sound of the Rotterdam Philharmonic playing Katrina and the Waves' "Love Shine a Light," the winning song 1997. The former ABBA member, Björn Ulvæus, appeared in the show saying,

The ESC is one hell of a launching pad. It still remains one of the most genuinely joyous events of the TV era and it is so disarmingly European. It allows you to escape and be happy [. . .] Very good title by the way—Shine a light. I'm glad they didn't choose Waterloo. Long live the Eurovision Song Contest! (<https://www.svtplay.se/video/26768585/eurovision-europe-shine-a-light>).

Thanks to its enormous fanbase, the ESC is still going strong after more than half a century and even now seems relevant for its queer audiences. Nevertheless, it may seem strange that the ESC, a post-war European peace utopia and mainstream music event, is identified to such a degree as queer today. As one sympathetic towards the annual music television extravaganza, I wonder how far the ESC can take its queer audiences in a post-closet world. In the ESC, queer interaction and togetherness are based on a combination of kitsch and camp – an aesthetic style and sensibility that aficionados find appealing because of its ironic, over-the-top challenging of the norms of 'good behavior' and 'good taste.'

Nonetheless, if the ESC is camp in a gay male tradition, the question remains whether it can be of interest to dykes and feminists? This essay, therefore, revisits the notions of kitsch and camp as queer communication strategies. It closes with a reflection on the contest's arbitrary notions of Europe, its troubled geopolitics, and its radically extroverted

playing with taste taboos as pleasurable entertainment. There is now an interest in new forms of camp by queer women, but I would also encourage queer scholars to take a closer look at camp produced by queers of color, trans people, and migrant LGBTQ+ communities, whose contributions have remained absent from scholarly work on kitsch, camp, and the ESC.

The ESC – Only entertainment?

Writing about entertainment, as film scholar Richard Dyer observes, is often done through a series of negations, since it is not considered art, not serious, not refined (2002a, 6). Moreover, entertainment does not simply give people what they want – it actually defines those wants. After all these years of cinema, cultural, media, performance, and television studies, entertainment has become a legitimate research object. This attitude towards entertainment has opened up for new approaches to the previously nationally and regionally oriented scholarship on the ESC, including feminist and queer methodologies.

One can begin to analyze the relation between the queer margins and the mainstream by delineating queer culture from the culture of queers. Dyer makes this distinction, writing that the notion of queer culture has become the updated and more accessible form of what was previously called gay (male) culture, while the culture of queers is the culture of those who remain marginalized (2002b, 8). The difference is crucial because the commercial and globalized culture that is today called queer does not necessarily include the culture of queers – those social outcasts originally covered by the word queer. Dyer also points out that the notion of queer(s) has tended to be associated with white, elite gay men. The traditions of working-class and non-white queer subcultures and lifestyles have been foundational for the development of queerness, yet they keep disappearing from view in dominant constructions of queerness (6).

Although Dyer emphasizes the centrality of culture (in the broadest sense) for the queer movement, culture itself cannot, as some may hope, change the world. It has, however, certain key functions to perform be-

cause the arts and popular culture express, define, and mold experiences and ideas, making them visible and available for wider audiences (2002a, 164). Dyer sees four dominant concepts of the politics of culture: identity, knowledge, propaganda, and pleasure. The politics of culture is a subtle part of that more conscious process of making sense of the world, that process being the group's production of knowledge about itself and its situation. Dyer cautions us that we must not flinch at the understanding of culture as propaganda because it is not exclusively simplistic. Rather, it means committed culture that recognizes its own committedness and enjoins audiences to share its commitment (2002a, 15–16).

The ESC can be viewed as committed culture that can be openly LGBTQ+, but does not have to be explicitly queer. While queer can be used as an umbrella term for LGBTQ+ culture, it also includes other non-straight and non-binary positions, pleasures, and readings that are not clearly marked as LGBTQ+. The point, as queer scholar Alexander Doty states, is that the most radical understanding of queer is queerness as something apart from established gender and sexuality categories (2000, 6–7). This is where the ESC finds such a broad base: because of its unique position in popular culture in general and queer culture in particular, the aesthetics of the ESC are a combination of kitsch and camp that appeals to a large audience, both queer and straight.

The ESC – Celebrating peace and unity in Europe

The start of the ESC was modest. It was based on the Italian San Remo Music Festival and was first held in Switzerland in 1956. As gender scholar Jessica Carniel observes, the prosaic reason it came into being can be found in the European Broadcasting Union's ambitions to promote the Eurovision distribution network (2015, 137). Cultural historian Dean Vuletic writes that Europe, as defined by the European Broadcasting Union, was originally not a political entity, but an area demarcated by "geographical and technical considerations, particularly the remit of broadcasting signals – rather than cultural or political ones" (2017, 22). Nevertheless, the ESC has gradually become culturally and politically charged in relation to Europe and its nation states.

The ESC takes place annually in May (with the exception of May 2020). This scheduling was not a random choice. The aim was for the contest to coincide with Europe Day, a celebration of European peace and unity on May 9, based in turn on the 1950 Schuman Declaration emphasizing European cooperation and solidarity. As cultural theorist Johan Fornäs points out, May is metaphorically associated with “awakening after a frozen winter symbolizing a political resurrection after years of divisive wars” (2017, 190). Similarly, Vuletic concludes, “Celebrating European values in May [. . .] has a long history and makes sense as a way of underlining a desire, after long periods of deep darkness, to inaugurate a new flourishing era of peace and prosperity” (2017, 18).

The course of Europe’s post-WWII history – The Cold War, the Balkan conflicts, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the refugee crisis, and the resurgence of increasing nationalism – has not been without its effect on the ESC (Baker 2015, Fornäs 2017, Vuletic 2017). Vuletic, who analyzes the ESC from a cultural and political perspective, argues that the contest has been shaped by such developments as the proliferation of national television services and their international collaborative frameworks. The ESC rules explicitly state that “No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC” (<https://eurovision.tv/about/rules/>). However, encoding political messages into songs is what the contest has always been about (Carniel 2015, 136). Therefore, the ESC has been politically charged since its inception. A mix of sexual politics, geopolitics, and ethno-religious sympathies, it provides literal and figurative access to an ideal of post-war, modern European society that is “democratic, capitalist, peace-loving, multicultural, sexually liberated, and technologically advanced” (Raykoff and Tobin 2007, xviii).

The growing scholarly interest in the ESC has mainly focused on the cultural and political implications of the contest, both nationally, and in a wider European context (Baker 2015, Fornäs 2017, Raykoff and Tobin 2007, Tragaki 2013, Vuletic 2017). Fornäs, who has studied 1,400 songs performed in the ESC finals and semi-finals between 1956 and 2015, observes that two main topics stood out in Western European ESC

songs before the turn of the millennium. The first is the touristic celebration of Europe's rich cultural heritage, especially its urban culture and the capitals of Western and Southern Europe. The second theme, prominent from 1990 onwards, is the validation of an intensified and expanding European integration (2017, 200).

I agree with Carniel who finds the ESC a useful prism through which to examine contemporary European debates about sexual politics, as well as the contest's role in defining the borders of modern Europe and its conditions of belonging (2015, 136). The symbolic coming out of the ESC took place with Dana International's winning performance, "Diva," in 1998. Prior to this, Eurovision's gay appeal, while present, was considered closeted (141). Other out-performances, such as those of Marija Šerifović ("Molitva," Serbia, 2007), Verka Serduchka ("Dancing Lasha Tumbai," Ukraine, 2007), and Conchita Wurst ("Rise Like a Phoenix," Austria, 2014), have been widely celebrated by media and audiences. As queer scholar Heiko Motschenbacher has stated, their presence at the ESC has led to greater queer visibility, in its turn facilitating a gradual integration of queers into the European mainstream (2016, 33; Ziv 2007).

The ESC: "Love, love, peace, peace"

In the ESC everything is possible – from spectacular performances by glittering divas, bearded drag queens, and Australian pop-opera singers, to vocal balancing acts in Montenegrin pop-folklore performances and lovesick Italo-pop songs from San Marino. The whole spectacle is a sublime, contradictory mix of musical entertainment and shameless kitsch. Austrian author Hermann Broch demonized kitsch in the 1950s as the 'incarnation of evil in the value system of the arts' (1955, 295–309). However, kitsch has survived, and 'high' culture has been at peace with it for a long time. Playful, ironic ways of dealing with kitsch have become commonplace, and cultural practices, such as camp, cute culture, and trash, have found new ways of challenging the boundaries placed between 'high' and 'low' art (Dettmar and Küpper 2007, 9–10, Holliday and Potts 2012, 1–44)

There are many definitions of kitsch, but no adequate translation of this German word into any other language. Odd Nerdrum, who calls himself a kitsch artist, explains the kitsch phenomenon as follows:

We all know the gypsy girl and the little boy with a tear, the grandmother with a child on her lap, and the fisherman with his pipe, the two silhouettes against the sunset, and not the least, the moose by the lake. All of this became a forbidden area for the tastes of the educated. The so-called 'simple' and 'blind' taste for this imagery stood in contrast to Marx, Freud, and the entire Modern elite who had been seeing through everything down to its smallest particle. But the Devil is not just stupid and Kitsch is not just low. There are also higher forms of Kitsch, or to use Broch's words again: There are geniuses within Kitsch like Wagner and Tchaikovsky. (Nerdrum 2011, 17)

With the expansion of (mainly) popular culture, the former hierarchization of low and high art has been replaced by aesthetic pluralism and a (mostly) peaceful coexistence among different aesthetic styles, with no single form having an exclusive and binding claim to hegemony or normative validity. There are now possibilities of combining and integrating aesthetic forms that were formerly separated into 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' styles. With artists such as Jeff Koons, kitsch has moved into the avant-garde and 'bad' taste turned into 'good' taste as kitsch and art have collapsed into post-postmodernity. Nevertheless, as so often in the art world, only those who know what the 'right' sort of kitsch is, can define its artistic qualities. The Madonna by Pierre et Gilles may be admired by anyone, but only the connoisseur knows when kitsch is an ironic, critical quote, and when it is 'just' plain kitsch (Liessmann 2007, 306).

The entr'acte performed by comedian Petra Mede and singer Måns Zelmerlöw, whose winning song at the 2015 contest in Vienna, "Heroes," took the 2016 ESC to Malmö, Sweden, is a playful example of how to use kitsch in order to create the perfect ESC presentation. Zelmerlöw co-hosted the 2016 show with Petra Mede and together they performed

“Love, love, peace, peace” – a humorous formula for a flawless ESC performance:

Step 1! Get everyone’s attention. A powerful, majestic start. Maybe a battle horn of some kind?

Step 2! Drums! There has to be drums! It doesn’t hurt if the drums are played by gorgeous topless men. It’s proven very efficient throughout the years. But, please feel free to try other alternatives. It’s proven very helpful to go the exact opposite way. Use a grandmother!

Step 3! Show the viewers your country’s ethnic background by using an old traditional folklore instrument that no-one’s heard of before

No, no - in this case, it’s proven much more efficient to not use a young model. Go with an old man instead. A beard helps!

This instrument is called a Swedish *kvinnaböske* - a small roundish piece from the horn family, inherited from the Vikings. Just make something up. No-one will know

Step 4! In Eurovision, nothing says winner like a violin. Trust us - bring a violin

Step 5! The violin, the drums and the *kvinnaböske* might make it all feel a little bit old fashioned, but this can easily be fixed by adding a DJ who pretends to scratch. In real life of course, this is thirty years old but in Eurovision, it will give your number a contemporary feel

Step 6 - Costumes! You need to look memorable, something that the viewers will notice.

Oh! Perfect!

Step 7! The song. Everything else might be important, but the song is essential. Let it be about something everyone can connect to. Love works. Peace is also a popular way to go

Yes, peace is good. ABBA actually won the competition with a song about war with Waterloo, but this is not something we recommend

Now when you have everything you need and the pieces are gathered - go for it and don't look back!

Let the song begin with passion
Let the wind begin to blow
You can break the rules of fashion
And your chance to win shall grow
Look into the TV camera
So the audience can see

That you're lovable - not desperate
Smile and they will vote for me
Fill the stage with light
As dancers will join us
The expectations grow
It's time for the chorus
Love love peace peace

Old women baking bread
Peace peace love love
And a man in a hamster wheel
Love peace peace love
Make it unforgettable
You will be the best
And win the Eurovision Song Contest
Now we'll go down a notch
Our hands will touch

Pretending we're in love
It's you and me and when we change the key
We'll give the world a show
It begins to snow

(accessible at <https://www.svtplay.se/genre/eurovision-song-contest>)

This is a perfect summary of an ESC performance and one, I think, that makes an argument here can be made *for* kitsch. The fans of the ESC love the event, while the more critical viewers might be stuck in a love-hate relationship to it. The ESC can be fun and joyful, but it can also be the opposite, and an audience can be simultaneously drawn to it and offended by it. The lust for the ESC kitsch challenges more ascetic forms of the performing arts; it is a way to enjoy what radical modernism and political enlightenment has denied its audiences (Liessmann 2007, 308). While many contemporary conceptual artists are introvertedly interested in themselves and hardly recognize their audiences, kitsch and the ESC are radically extroverted. Kitsch loves its audience and the audience seems to love kitsch – something that becomes very clear in the case of the ESC.

Camp politics of the ESC

Although kitsch is the aesthetic cornerstone of the ESC, it is only a part of camp aesthetics within the system of queer communication. Like kitsch, the term camp is also difficult to translate into another language, but the phenomenon itself exists globally. At the beginning of the twentieth century, camp gained currency in the slang of theatricals, high society, the fashion world, showbusiness, and urban subcultures, and in the 1920s it also emerged as a literary style reminiscent of Oscar Wilde, with its aura of “aestheticism, aristocratic detachment, irony, theatrical frivolity, parody, effeminacy, and sexual transgression – traced in the drag urban scene which is evoked in Isherwood’s *The World in the Evening* [1954], and finds its seminal study in Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp* (1972)” (Cleto 1999, 9). For Newton, camp was not so much the queerness of

perceiving audiences and performing subjects, but rather the cohesive effect of the theatrical self-representation of a stigmatized self (203).

Camp established itself as a theoretical notion with Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," where she summarized camp in 58 points. One critique of Sontag's essay has been that it downplayed the queer origins of camp, denying camp a political dimension, in contrast to those who claimed that it was by definition a political approach. Thus, Newton describes camp as a philosophy of transformations and incongruity (1972, 104; also, in Cleto 1999, 10). Cultural theorist David Bergman offers the following momenta as a preliminary definition of camp:

First, everyone agrees that camp is a style (whether of objects or of the way objects are perceived is debated) that favors 'exaggeration, 'artifice', and 'extremity.' Second, camp exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture. Third, the person who can recognize camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp is a person outside the cultural mainstream. Fourth, camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalization of desire. (1993, 4-5)

Although kitsch and camp today fit into various sub- and pop cultural contexts, a distinction can still be made between taking an ironic distance to it, and the embrace of the 'naïve' kitsch consumer (Broch's term) who whole-heartedly enjoys kitsch. It is a relevant question whether straight spectators are, in fact, always naïve kitsch consumers, while queer and camp-competent audiences see something else in the ESC. Drawing such generalizing conclusions is difficult in the absence of empirical evidence, but what can be said is that kitsch in the service of camp aesthetics requires queer cultural competence that can only be obtained from queer culture.

The great dyke rewrite of camp

The camp style of the ESC is generally characterized by white homo-normativity, thanks to camp's reliance on partially reactionary and

misogynistic images. This leads one to wonder whether out-LGBTQ+ identities can be analyzed together. As queer scholar Jack Halberstam observes, in terms of queer historiography and queer biography, it might be pointless to study lesbians and gay men as a group. Although there are similarities, their gendered histories differ in many relevant aspects. With regard to dykes and transgender people, similarities can be found in gender variation, although once again Halberstam claims that their respective histories are different (2005, 62–70).

Notwithstanding, as philosopher Judith Butler and theatre scholar Sue-Ellen Case have claimed, queerness is ultimately something beyond gender: it is an attitude, a way of responding and objecting to gender binarism (Butler 1991, 13–31; Case 1989, 282–299, also in Cleto 1999, 91). In the most influential essay on camp from a lesbian perspective, “Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” Case pointed to butch-femme style as lesbian camp. Case also critiqued camp’s ‘aristocratism’ and ‘queenly’ semiotics for ignoring the many uses of camp in working-class settings. Case introduced the dynamic butch-femme couple as playfully inhabiting the lesbian feminist camp space by “replacing the Lacanian slash with a lesbian bar” (283).

Queer media scholar Katrin Horn has also challenged the homonormative camp tradition of the ESC. She argues that camp’s new politics and pleasures also have post-closet dyke potential beyond gay men, making camp still relevant as a queer aesthetic and cultural category. In *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture: Serious Excess* (2017) she elaborates on the notion of lesbian camp, writing “A drag queen with a beard, surrounded by animated flames, who sings about the rise of the ostracized, and dedicates her victory to the vision of a pan-European gay rights movements, is not the *opposite*, but the *epitome* of camp” (2017, 3).

Horn also points out that not many gay men have seen the connection between Austria’s win, “Rise Like a Phoenix,” performed by Conchita Wurst in 2014, and the 2007 winner, Marija Šerifović – a butch lesbian in a loose tuxedo, dark glasses, and short hair, who belted out a dramatic ballad, “Molitva” (Prayer), in her native Serbian. Horn reads Marija Šerifović’s performance as *lesbian camp*, a discourse absent from ESC’s

queer history: “Marija Šerifović was accompanied by a group of high-femme background singers clad in fitted, curve-accentuating tuxedos, high heels, and long hair, whose clasping hands, at the end, formed hearts connecting all the women on stage, including the butch-coded lead singer” (2017, 3, Vänskä 2007, 66–81).

This is an important point because camp has for a long time been seen as a gay male form (and norm) of irony and camp. Entries by Conchita Wurst and Verka Serduchka have been interpreted as camp drag performances that theatrically evoked gender norms and heteronormativity, placing gender in quotation marks. Out-dyke performances such as Šerifović’s have remained invisible in the ESC camp discourse. Horn’s project to reclaim camp is linked with the ‘Great Dyke Rewrite,’ a notion coined by film scholar B. Ruby Rich (2013) to describe a shift in lesbian and queer women’s engagement with popular culture and what it means today. Horn writes about the more lesbian and feminist friendly definitions of camp as follows:

At its core, camp is defined as a parodic device that uses irony, exaggeration, theatricality, incongruity, and humor to question the pretext’s status as “original” or “natural.” This approach is informed both by “classic” discussions of camp as an originally gay-coded strategy, such as Jack Babuscio’s and Richard Dyer’s, and by later texts which open camp to feminist and queer readings, in particular Pamela Robertson’s and Fabio Cleto’s. For certain additional aspects of camp, such as parody and gendered excess, Linda Hutcheon, Helene A. Shugart and Catherine Egley Waggoner provide useful definitions. (2017, 6)

Horn observes that two convergent cultural developments of the 1990s created an environment in which camp could finally materialize as a prominent strategy in films for dyke audiences. First, the proliferation of ‘lesbian chic’ in mainstream media, which influenced lesbian media consumption and representation, and consequently a willingness to engage in more playful ways with questions of gender and sexuality. Second, the success of New Queer Cinema, which paved the way for queer themes in

feature films and a re-evaluation of intertextuality and camp aesthetics (37). According to Horn, these developments provided “both the access to and visibility in popular culture which have hitherto been claimed as lacking for lesbian subjects and thus precluded them from participating in camp discourses widely regarded as a male prerogative” (44).

B. Ruby Rich’s hope for ‘the Great Dyke Rewrite’ of popular culture has made it possible to modify mainstream genres offering a critical engagement with and intervention into the history of lesbian representation. By considering intertextual references and deconstructive practices in viewing more inclusive representations of queer women, Horn sees camp as a valuable concept that imagines queer communities through alternative media consumption as well as through disruptions within heteronormative frameworks (2017, 4). For Horn, the denaturalizing, parodic effect of camp’s stylistic excess adds a critical perspective and distance to popular culture. Thus, she claims, camp appears as a way of dealing with popular culture that goes beyond assimilation or opposition. Horn’s dyke rewrite of camp offers a solution to the problem of how queer women can participate in the mainstream media landscape without having to deny their identities (4).

Troubled geopolitics

The dyke, and eventually feminist, rewrite of camp in the ESC is nonetheless engaged in conflict as soon as geopolitics appear on the horizon. One recent example is Israeli singer Netta Barzilai, who won the 2018 ESC in Lisbon with her entry “Toy.” Her body positive appearance and explosive performance style, involving chicken-inspired dance and vocal moves, contained a feminist #Metoo-themed warning to ‘stupid boys’ and references to Wonder Woman (a role that Israeli actress Gal Gadot had recently played). The geopolitical conflict became apparent when Barzilai celebrated her victory as she held her trophy by saying: “Thank you so much. I love Israel. Next year in Jerusalem.”

Barzilai’s spontaneous reference to Jerusalem is an old Jewish saying taken from the conclusion of the Passover Seder.¹ The head of the family, after reciting the story from the Haggadah, laments that although this

year we may be in exile, let's hope that when we celebrate Passover again, it will be "Next year in Jerusalem." It has become a proverb, although in Barzilai's case it should have been "next year in Tel Aviv." However, the reference was not obvious to the wider public and taken out of the Jewish Passover context, it pierced straight to the symbolic core of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The ESC win (Israel also won in 1978, 1979, and 1998) was welcomed by the Israeli government because of its utility for promotional purposes. The country could shift attention from politics to entertainment and mobilize pinkwashing, a strategic appeal to LGBTQ+ friendliness through marketing strategies. The pinkwashing emphasized Israel's self-proclaimed exceptionalism and homonationalism as being Western and 'civilized,' while stigmatizing e.g. Muslims and Arabs as not. Before and during the 2019 ESC, held in Tel Aviv, petitions were circulated in support of boycotting Israel. Iceland's entry, performed by Hatari (a techno industrial punk rock band and performance art group) was fined 5,000 € on account of Hatari waving a Palestinian flag during the voting session to express their discomfort over performing in Israel, breaking the ESC rule that "No lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political or similar nature shall be permitted during the ESC." Madonna, singing her hit "Like a Prayer" as a guest performance at the 2019 ESC, also made a political statement by letting one of her dancers hold an Israeli banner while another dancer carried a Palestinian flag.

Barzilai's "Next year in Jerusalem" is just one example of how geopolitics have taken over the ESC. According to Carniel, some nations, like the Scandinavian countries, have the luxury of not being interpreted as political. They are seen as having mainly regional affinities, while the regional affiliations of post-Soviet Eastern European countries may be further influenced by historical connections, with German–Turkish relations reflecting the effects of migration (2015, 140). The geopolitics of the voting blocs in the ESC show specific 'punishing' and 'rewarding' patterns among the participants. For example, the Azerbaijani and Armenian juries regularly award each other's entries zeros, regardless of song quality.

In 2017, political conflicts between Russia and the Ukraine resulted in Russia withdrawing from the ESC, following a lengthy government-level dispute about entry permits to the Ukraine; the Ukraine in turn withdrew in 2019, after another conflict between the countries. Bloc voting between the different European nations, and, more recently, voting by television viewers, have been used as a source of data providing quantitative indicators of political affinities between European countries (Raykoff and Tobin, 2007, Tragaki 2013).

Since the ESC is not just a vocal competition, but also and above all a clash of nations, it is by definition contested terrain. Therefore, geopolitics may always be a problem for the ESC, no matter how many queers participate in the contest and are included in its large fanbase. As gender scholar Jasbir Puar, who introduced the term homonationalism, observes,

While queering the nation has impelled politically salient dialogue regarding reproduction of racial and national lineages and norms, nationalizing queerness has primarily served to reiterate discourses of American sexual exceptionalism. As nationhood and queerness are both indebted to modernity, and modern sexual identities are built on histories of colonialism, nation formation and empire, and racialization, the nation is founded on the (homo)sexual other. (2007, 48–49)

In the same way, the ESC reiterates discourses of Western European sexual exceptionalism. “Eurovision offers queer audiences an important opportunity to experience belonging to Europe,” Carniel insists (2015, 152). However, the ESC’s definition of Europe is rather arbitrary, as it includes Israel and Australia as well as dictatorships such as Azerbaijan, which won the ESC in 2011 and, as is customary, hosted the contest the following year. Conchita Wurst, in dedicating her winning song, “Rise Like a Phoenix,” “to everyone who believes in a future of peace and freedom,” added that “we are united and we are unstoppable” (Baker 2015, 84). Nonetheless, the concept of the ESC as a queer peace project remains intertwined with troubled geopolitics.

Informed and inspired by the queer of color critique and new queer migrant communities in Europe, I think that it would be refreshing if scholars would investigate how class and race intersect with white privilege in the ESC. The dichotomies of East and West, in addition to the tensions between North and South, have been well documented and analyzed by scholarship on the ESC (Baker 2015, Fornäs 2017, Raykoff and Tobin 2007, Tragaki 2013, Vuletic 2017). However, postcolonial power and white privilege in the ESC have not received as much attention. The scholarship on the ESC should show an interest in new forms of camp and encourage analysis of entries by artists of color, trans people, and migrant LGBTQ+ people whose contributions have largely remained invisible in scholarly literature on kitsch, camp, and the ESC.

Staying with the trouble

The death and disappearance of camp (and of the ESC for that matter) have been announced many times and the criticism has not all been about external threats, such as mainstreaming, but also, as Katrin Horn points out, addressed camp's internal challenges. As early as 1964, folklorist Jan Brunvand observed that camp's 'death' is not so much due to its popularity, but to the disappearance of the Edwardian-styled British camp: queer male youth were no longer modelling themselves on Oxbridge exemplars (cited in Cleto 1999, 360).

Feminist scholars, such as Pamela Robertson (1996) to name one, have also reflected on the unblemished whiteness of camp, its class-related structures, and its feminist potential. Performance artist and queer studies scholar Kareem Khubchandani points out that many white queer scholars worry that camp is disappearing because it is a 'gay way of knowing,' and gays are rapidly becoming incorporated into the mainstream. He states that "new forms of camp by queer people of color, trans people, and immigrant LGBTQ+ folks are being born as we speak. Camp always emerges on the margins" (Kessler 2019).

Love it or hate it, the ESC is there every year. The ESC might not dissolve the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art, but it certainly challenges the more ascetic forms of the performing arts. Playing with

taste taboos, the ESC still uses camp creatively. Perhaps, as Richard Dyer writes, the ESC as entertainment “presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would *feel* like, rather than how it would be organized. It thus works at the level of sensibility, by which I mean an affective code that is characteristic of, and largely specific to, a given mode of cultural production” (2002a, 20, italics mine). The pleasure that entertainment provides sometimes is (or rather *feels*) necessary: we are in this together, we are all here, and we all *feel* (Coffelt 2019, 7).

This is what performance does to an audience and it is where the ESC finds such a broad base: because of its unique position in popular culture in general and queer culture in particular, it appeals to a large audience, both queer and straight. Although the ESC as a peace project might be naïve, it can still be a good and pleasurable thing. However, as Allison Coffelt reminds us, the spell is broken when the audience awakens to what it really is (5). Similarly, the ESC allows its queer audiences to sense the utopia, rather than to really own it. I think that this is as far as the ESC can take us as camp entertainment. The rest is geopolitics and, as feminist scholar Donna Haraway would say, we need to stay with the trouble.

TIINA ROSENBERG is professor of Theatre Studies at Stockholm University, Sweden. She has previously been professor of Gender Studies. Rosenberg’s latest book, *HBTQ spelar roll – mellan garderob och kanon* (LGBTQ plays a role – between the closet and the canon, 2018), is a history of queer performance in Sweden.

REFERENCES

- Baker, Catherine. 2015. “Gender and Geopolitics in the Eurovision Song Contest: Introduction.” *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2(1): 74–93. Accessed March, 18, 2020. https://www.academia.edu/12507661/Introduction_Gender_and_Geopolitics_in_the_Eurovision_Song_Contest.
- Bergman, David (ed.). 1993. *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Broch, Hermann. 1955. “Einige Bemerkungen zum Problem des Kitsches.” *In Dichten*

- und Erkennen. Essays–Band I. Gesammelte Werke 6, 295–309. Zürich: Rhein Verlag.
- Butler, Judith. 1991. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, edited by Diana Fuss and Michèle Aina Barale, 13–31. New York: Routledge.
- Carniel, Jessica. 2015. "Skirting the Issue: Finding Queer and Geopolitical Belonging at the Eurovision Song Contest." *Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2(1): 136–154. Accessed March 10, 2020. http://www.contemporarysee.org/sites/default/files/papers/carniel_skirting_the_issue.pdf.
- Case, Sue-Ellen. 1998. "Toward Butch-Femme Aesthetic." *Discourse*, 11(1): 55–73. Accessed March 11, 2020. https://www.academia.edu/3386910/Towards_a_Butch-Femme_Aesthetic_quick_view_-_Sue-Ellen_Case_-_Discourse_Vol._11_No._1_BODY_MASQUERADE_Fall-Winter_1988-89_pp._55-73.
- Cleto, Fabio. 1999. *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Coffelt, Alison. 2018. "Slippery Kitsch and the Aesthetics of Power." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*. 21:5 (2017), 1–9. Accessed March 18, 2020. <https://www.tandfonline-com.ezp.sub.su.se/doi/full/10.1080/17409292.2017.1435764>.
- Dettmar, Ute & Küpper, Thomas. 2007. *Kitsch. Texte und Theorien*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun.
- Doty, Alexander. 2000. *Flaming Classics. Queering the Film Canon*. New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, Richard. 2002a. "The Idea of Entertainment." In *Only Entertainment*, 5–9. London & New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, Richard. 2002a. "Entertainment and Utopia." In *Only Entertainment*, 19–36. London & New York: Routledge.
- Dyer, Richard. 2002b. *The Culture of Queers*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Fornäs, Johan. 2007. "Euro-Visions: East European Narratives in Televised Popular Music." In *Europe Faces Europe*, edited by Johan Fornäs, 179–236. Bristol: Intellect. Accessed, March 9, 2020. <https://www.academia.edu/people/search?utf8=✓&q=Fornäs%2C+Johan.+2007.+Euro-Visions%3A+East+European+Narratives+in+Televised+Popular+Music.+In+Europe+Faces+Europe%2C+edited+by+Johan+Fornäs%2C+179-236.+Bristol%3A+Intellect>.
- Halberstam, Jack [Judith]. 2005. "Queer Studies." In *A Companion to Gender Studies*, edited by Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg and Audrey Kobayashi, 62–70. New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing.
- Holliday, Ruth & Potts, Tracey. 2012. *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Horn, Katrin. 2017. *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture Serious Excess*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Kesslen, Ben. 2019. "What is 'camp'? This year's elusive Met Gala Theme." NBS News.

- Accessed March 18, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/what-camp-year-s-elusive-met-gala-theme-n1002441>.
- Liessmann, Konrad Paul. 2007. "Kitsch! Oder warum der schlechte Geschmack der eigentlich gute ist." In *Kitsch. Texte und Theorien*, 305–308. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun.
- Motschenbacher, Heiko. 2016. *Language, Normativity and Europeanisation. Discursive Evidence from the Eurovision Song Contest*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newton, Esther. 1972. *Mother Camp. Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Newton, Esther. 1999. "Role Models." In *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 96–109. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Raykoff, Ivan & Tobin, Robert D. 2007. *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*. Farnham: Ashgate
- Rich, B. Ruby. 2013. *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Robertson, Pamela. 1999. "Mae West's Maids: Race, 'Authenticity', and the Discourse of Camp." In *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 393–408. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Sayej, Nadja. 2019. "Andrew Bolton Says true Camp is 'Impossible to define.'" *Garage*, May 6, 2019. Accessed March 18, 2020. https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/7xg8qd/andrew-bolton-met-gala-camp.
- Slater-Williams, Josh. 2019. "John Waters on Camp, trump, and Being Mr. Know-It-All. The Face, August, 27, 2019. Accessed March 18, 2020. <https://theface.com/culture/john-waters-trump-locarno-film-festival-film-pink-flamingos>.
- Sontag, Susan. 1964. "Notes on Camp." In *Camp. Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, edited by Fabio Cleto, 53–65. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Tragaki, Dafni. 2013. *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Tuv, Jan-Ove et al. (eds.). 2011. *Odd Nerdrum: Kitsch, More than Art*. Oslo: Schibsted Förlag.
- Vuletic, Dean. 2018. *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Vänskä, Annamari. 2007. "Be Spectacular and Over the Top: On the Genealogy of Lesbian Camp." *SQS Journal*, 2: 66–81. Accessed March, 17, 2020. <https://www.google.se/search?sxsrf=ALeKko3WC0Qryp6H-AGrChEF3Vw265TZyA:1585562569531&q=Vänskä,+Annamari.+2007.+Be+Spectacular+and+Over+the+Top:+On+the+Genealogy+of+Lesbian+Camp.+SQS+Journal,+2:+66-81>.

Winterson, Jeanette. 1994. *Written on the Body*. London: Vintage.

Ziv, Amalia. 2007. "Diva Interventions: Dana International and Israeli Gender Culture." In *Queer Popular Culture: Literature, Media, Film, and Television*, edited by Thomas Peele, 119–135. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

NOTES

1. I want to thank Teddy Primarck for pointing this out.