

This One Loves That One: Queerbaiting at the Eurovision Song Contest

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With audiences surpassing the NFL's Super Bowl, the Eurovision Song Contest is not only the largest annual television event but also its queerest. Some have labeled the contest the gay FIFA World Cup or Olympics.¹ Although it is not a gay event per se, Eurovision has become over the years a de facto celebration of queerness. Most queerbaiting scholarship focuses on drama series, but queerbaiting functions differently in nonnarrative event television like Eurovision.² At Eurovision, there are no characters or storylines as such. Even so, producers and performers are able to suggest queer content and meaning in a variety of ways, including the selection of hosts, the scripting of their banter and other interval entertainment, and the deliberate queering of performances.

First staged in 1956, Eurovision is an annual competition for Europe's best original song and is renowned for its camp spectacle.³ The contest has generated a large queer following, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s.⁴ Since the late '90s, Eurovision's gender politics have gained greater prominence in the staging, promotion, and global significance of the event. Catherine Baker has identified three stages in the queer politics of Eurovision.⁵ During the first visibility phase (1997–2007), the performers, audiences, and producers began to openly acknowledge the queer appeal of the contest. In the second organizational phase (2008–2013), these queer audiences were not just acknowledged but deliberately appealed to. Baker identifies the third, geopolitical phase as 2014–2015, but this is arguably ongoing. In this phase, the Eurovision stage has become an important site for articulating queer politics and human rights. Here, the political boundaries are drawn (or redrawn) to constitute liberal progressive Western Europe and its conservative Eastern Europe other. These various stages demonstrate the instrumentality of queer identities for larger cultural, market, and political ends. This is an important element to the underlying rationale of queerbaiting as a practice in cultural industries.

These stages demonstrate the changing relations between producers and audiences at Eurovision. In her work on narrative television, Eve Ng emphasizes the importance of historical contingency in understanding these shifting relations and the resulting impacts upon the texts produced.⁶ Similarly,

Baker's stages of queer politics chart a particular historical trajectory for producer/audience relations at Eurovision. These relations have enabled nations to stage performances that have moved from subtext to overt displays of support for queer politics. Eurovision is not simply a song contest. It is a competition of nations with long and complicated histories with one another. As such, it is a highly politicized event. Queerbaiting performances emerge as a tactic to win over audiences on the basis of broad political values of liberalism. The strategic dimension problematizes altruistic readings of the performances. It emphasizes these texts as a product of producers who assess and utilize the sociopolitical milieu and values of their audiences.

Eurovision's queer appeal has been used to signal new geopolitical boundaries based upon differing values and often utilizing human rights discourses.⁷ Some conservative states have been highly critical of Eurovision's acceptance of queer identities, cultures, and rights. These states are often located within the historical "east," such as Turkey, or in the former Soviet bloc. The song contest has strict rules about politics and the use of flags in the broadcast. Flags are limited only to those of nations officially recognized by the United Nations—except for the rainbow pride flag.⁸ To some nations this concession represents a privileging of liberal ideals. The increased representation by queer performers exacerbates this, as does the rise of the queer kiss as the new costume reveal. That is, same-sex kisses are now used as a climactic moment in the stage performance. Finland used this tactic in 2013, Lithuania in 2015, and Sweden during an interval act when hosting in 2013. The Finnish and Lithuanian kisses have additional political significance, given the impact of geographical proximity to Russia on Finland's approach to social issues and Lithuania's history as a former Soviet state.⁹

Russia has been among the most vocal of these critics of Eurovision's liberal politics. When Conchita Wurst won in 2014, various Russian authorities decried her victory and persona. Politician Vitaly Milonov raged against Wurst as "blatant propaganda of homosexuality and spiritual decay,"¹⁰ the Russian Orthodox Church described her as an abomination, and President Vladimir Putin criticized her for aggressively flaunting her sexuality with disregard of others' morality.¹¹ Yet Russia is the culprit of two of Eurovision's greatest queer moments: t.A.T.u.'s appearance in 2003 and Dima Bilan's winning

performance in 2008. These in turn can be used to help distinguish between queerbaiting and a queer reading.¹²

First formed in the late '90s and comprising Lena Katina and Yulia Volkova, t.A.T.u (meaning “this one loves that one”) gained international success outside Russia with their single “All the Things She Said” (2002) and its follow-up “Not Gonna Get Us” (2002). While these are genuinely good pop songs, t.A.T.u gained most of their notoriety through their use of faux lesbianism as a commercial ploy. This was openly acknowledged by both the performers and their management.¹³ t.A.T.u’s use of lesbianism as a spectacle of male heterosexual fantasy did not entirely undermine their queer appeal.¹⁴ As GarlandGrey reflects in *Bitch* magazine, there was a truth in their stage presence:

<ext>The story of [“All the Things She Said”] is a familiar one to a lot of queer people—two young people meet, fall in love, want to spend every waking moment with one another, but those around them contrive to keep them apart. Sometimes lovers are separated by being sent to another school or to a conversion camp, sometimes one or both of them are murdered.¹⁵

<tae>t.A.T.u’s Eurovision performance is understated in comparison to their music videos. GarlandGrey suggests the producers were fearful that they would indeed kiss. This is not a reading entertained in Dana Heller’s in-depth analysis of the duo’s performance.¹⁶ Rather, Heller suggests that t.A.T.u “mocks the desires it mimes.”¹⁷ By doing so, it deliberately and simultaneously exploits both heterosexual fantasy and the liberal, queer politics of the West.¹⁸ Even if GarlandGrey is correct about the producers’ anxieties of the duo performing same-sex affection on stage, the absence of these antics makes an otherwise lackluster (and off-key) performance more powerful. The crowd cheers when Katina and Volkova brush hands early in the song and is hushed in the moments when a kiss might have been possible. These gaps have historically been the meat of queer readings and are now utilized to great effect by queerbaiting producers and writers.¹⁹ The absence could also be read as an indictment of the falsity of Western tolerance (the anxieties of the producers) rather than the falsity of Katina and Volkova’s relationship. Despite t.A.T.u’s open admission that their “relationship” was a performance, fans nevertheless hoped for a flipping of this narrative—that is, the possibility that the performance was in fact a truth masquerading

as a lie flouting a Western fantasy of repressive Russian morality by pretending to mock Western tolerance and permissiveness but actually engaging in it under the noses of all.

t.A.T.u signify the beginning of what Julie Cassiday has called Russia's gay trajectory in the 2000s.²⁰ In this period, queer appeal was used deliberately to secure a victory. This view is corroborated by Yana Meerzon and Dmitri Priven.²¹ The "gay trajectory" culminated in Dima Bilan's homoeroticized winning performance of "Believe" in 2008. Bilan was accompanied by a virtuoso violinist (Hungarian Edvin Marton) and a champion figure skater (Evgeni Plushenko), both of whom are male. The performance invites a queer reading, but it lacks the broader context or narrative that is found in t.A.T.u's notoriety. The queer audience is only baited inasmuch as they are provided with a "seductive spectacle of male virtuosity and vanity," but the interactions between the three performers are minimized.²² Unlike Katina and Volkova's restrained acts of affection, Bilan, Marton, and Plushenko do not even make eye contact. Instead, their gaze is trained on the audience, focused on presenting themselves as figures of desire for the audience, not each other. Even as Plushenko whips around in response to Bilan's hand on his shoulder—a moment with great queer potential—he looks at the audience, not at Bilan. The performance is homoerotic in that the three performers are presented for consumption by the audience, many of whom may be gay men, but not for each other.

Russian Eurovision entries are perhaps more heavily scrutinized when they include potentially queer content. This is perhaps due to the country's repressive policies on homosexuality and the outspokenness of Russian officials in response to performers such as Conchita Wurst. The use of queer content by nations sympathetic to gay rights is more readily celebrated. It is seen as a nod to the contest's queer audience rather than an attempt to bait them into a queer narrative. Commentators read moments such as the same-sex kisses by Finland's and Lithuania's performers as acts of political support with messages of LGBTI acceptance rather than an exploitation of the audience's desires.

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2 See, for example, Joseph Brennan, “Queerbaiting: The ‘Playful’ Possibilities of Homoeroticism,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018): 189–206; Cassandra M. Collier, “The Love That Refuses to Speak Its Name: Examining Queerbaiting and Fan-Producer Interactions in Fan Cultures” (master’s diss., University of Louisville, 2015); Anna Kozak, “‘People Might Talk’: Queerbaiting and Fan Culture in the BBC’s *Sherlock*,” *Media Commons*, November 21, 2016.

<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/question/what-elements-do-you-believe-motivate-reaction-fan-culture-and-how-do-they-relate-recent--5>; Cassidy Sheehan, “Queer-Baiting on the BBC’s *Sherlock*: Addressing the Invalidation of Queer Experience through Online Fan Fiction Communities” (undergraduate poster, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2015); Hannah Mueller, “A Questionable Bromance: Queer Subtext, Fan Service and the Dangers of Queerbaiting in Guy Ritchie’s *Sherlock Holmes* and *A Game of Shadows*,” in *Gender and the Modern Sherlock Holmes*, ed. Nadine Farghaly (Jefferson: McFarland, 2009), 174–91; Eve Ng, “Between Text, Paratext, and Context: Queerbaiting and the Contemporary Media Landscape,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 24 (2017).

3 See, for example, Peter Rehberg and Mikko Tuhkanen, “Dancing Time: Dissociative Camp and European Synchrony,” *SQS*, no. 2 (2007): 43–59; Paul Allatson, “‘Antes Cursi Que Sencilla’: Eurovision Song Contests and the Kitsch-Drive to Euro-Unity,” *Culture, Theory & Critique* 48, no. 1 (2007): 87–98.

4 Lemish, “‘Kind of Campfire’”; Baker, “‘Gay Olympics.’”

5 Baker, “‘Gay Olympics.’”

6 Ng, "Between Text."

7 Milija Gluhovic, "Sing for Democracy: Human Rights and Sexuality Discourse in the Eurovision Song Contest," in *Performing the 'New' Europe*, ed. Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 194–217; Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic, "Introduction: Eurovision and the 'New' Europe," in *Performing the 'New' Europe*, ed. Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 194–217; Catherine Baker, "Introduction: Gender and Geopolitics in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2, no. 1 (2015): 74–93; Jessica Carniel, "Skirting the Issue: Finding Queer and Geopolitical Belonging at the Eurovision Song Contest," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2, no. 1 (2015): 136–54.

8 Luis Fuster, "Eurovision 2016: Flag Policy Released, Includes Banned List," *Wiwibloggs*, April 29, 2016, <http://wiwibloggs.com/2016/04/29/eurovision-2016-flag-policy-released-includes-banned-list/139630/>.

9 Jens Rydström, *Odd Couples: A History of Gay Marriage in Scandinavia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

10 "Eurovision Winner Conchita Wurst Has Last Laugh over Russian Critics," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 14, 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/eurovision-winner-conchita-wurst-has-last-laugh-over-russian-critics-20140514-zrcso.html>.

11 James Edgar, "Putin Attacks Eurovision Drag Artist Conchita for Putting Her Lifestyle 'Up for Show,'" *Telegraph*, May 26, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10856197/Putin-attacks-Eurovision-drag-artist-Conchita-for-putting-her-lifestyle-up-for-show.html>.

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13 Dana Heller, "t.A.T.u You! Russia, the Global Politics of Eurovision, and Lesbian Pop," *Popular Music* 26, no. 2 (2007): 195–210.

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- 14 Katharina Wiedlack and Masha Neufeld, “Not Rockers, Not Punks, We’re Lesbian Chicks: Staging Female Same Sex Desires in Russian Rock and Pop,” in *Lesbian Geographies*, ed. Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2015), 153–76.
- 15 GarlandGrey, “Sexual Inadequacy: t.A.T.u. and Synthetic Queerness,” *Bitch*, June 2, 2011, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/sexually-inadequate-tatu-and-synthetic-queerness-draft>.
- 16 Heller, “t.A.T.u You!”
- 17 Heller, “t.A.T.u You!,” 208.
- 18 See also Wiedlack and Neufeld, “Not Rockers.”
- 19 Nordin, “From Queer Reading”; Ng, “Between Text.”
- 20 Julie A. Cassidy, “Post-Soviet Pop Goes Gay: Russia’s Trajectory to Eurovision Victory,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 1 (2014): 1–23.
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- 22 Cassidy, “Post-Soviet Pop,” 15.