

Queer Workings of Digital Affect: The Hypermediated Body of Conchita Wurst

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the internet hype surrounding the Eurovision Song Contest victory of Austrian drag artist Tom Neuwirth/Conchita Wurst in Copenhagen, 2014. In particular, it looks at the resonating affective intensities that have shaped the circulation of Conchita's body image on YouTube and Tumblr. Drawing from the interactive dynamics of these platforms, the (hyper-)mediated eventfulness of Conchita's Eurovision will be examined as (1) derived from the anomalous entanglements of everyday media use, (2) transformed and transforming in its spread through a variety of viral memetic practices, and (3) characterized by both dominant and deviant articulations of visual social engagement. The complexly modulated queer workings of these entanglements will be argued to perform through networked and seriated dynamics of digital affect.

KEYWORDS

Digital Affect, Virality, Visual Social Media, Eurovision, Conchita

Introduction: The Body Image Event of Conchita

“We are unity and we are unstoppable!” Countless animated and still visual social reappropriations of this message can be found on Google images. What Google returns for “We are unity and we are unstoppable!” are body image combinations. Often, these combinations include text, looping movement and seriation, often they are taken out of context, in most cases, though, they reference a specific, spectacularly mediated event: On May 10, 2014, Austrian singer and performance artist Thomas Neuwirth wins the 59th annual Eurovision Song Contest in Copenhagen as bearded diva Conchita Wurst. With tears in her eyes and a message of tolerance and respect, Conchita raises the Eurovision trophy aloft in a strong, dynamic gesture, proclaiming: “This night is dedicated to everyone who believes in a future of peace and freedom. You know who you are – we are unity and we are unstoppable!” A host by her side in a confusingly similar, gold glittering evening gown nods her head in agreement and smiles rather awkwardly as if she were wondering whether her own look is feminine or original enough: Who is being imitated by whom at the moment? What kind of body is at stake? How do we imagine what this body might become? Everywhere is light and more glitter. Conchita is about to attend her final winner performance. The audience is euphoric. The media pays attention. The show is over – the image starts to circulate. The affect moves on!

Spectacle: The (Hyper)mediated Eventfulness of Eurovision

In this paper, I approach the unfolding of 2014 Conchita Wurst’s Eurovision spectacle as a resonating techno-social body image event: As one of the incidents in a longer series of spectacular events under the brand name of Eurovision, the “becoming Eurovision” of a homosexual bearded drag queen not only initiated a new cascade of symbolic confrontation with LGBTQ cultures and gender issues. Within the framework of spreadable media entertainment, Conchita’s “bearded lady” inspired a wider mixture of embodied visual social media practices. As much as they were (counter-)imitative, these practices also proved themselves highly contingent. Their networked affordances gave shape to a variety of fluctuating relations of belonging, assembling viral capacities of digital networks and lived experiences of Eurovision audiences into a shared space of antagonistic participation. Building on recent explorations of networked affect and digital virality, I will focus on the “anomalous” (Parikka and Sampson) forces stemming from these entanglements in their mediated capacity to shift the everyday dynamics of visual social exchange beyond the binary logic of the normal versus abnormal. Against this background, I will argue that, in the context of Eurovision 2014, queer workings of Conchita’s body image event triggered investments of affect and meaning that were reproductive to the same extent as they were “out of line.”

According to Richard Grusin, the repetition of media spectacle in digital environments is marked “less by the hypermediacy of formal features or technologies of mediation than hypermediacy ... of affective participation” (*Premediation* 2). From this perspective, the hypermediated experience of the

annual Eurovision Song Contest can be addressed through qualities of affective engagement that are both habitual and disruptive. Designed to generate and capture attention of the audiences on a temporary and yet sustainable basis, this highly polarizing popular media event continues to revive, alter and reproduce social, cultural, medial and bodily zones of (dis-)comfort since 1956. With fifty-two participating countries to date, the ESC popular vote (combining international audiences and national juries) takes place at the intersection of many different interests. Through the years, its repeated temporality has contributed to a high level of public engagement, “playing out tensions within Europe” and simultaneously creating “utopian moments of European community” (Pajala 88) in a range of debates about (bad) music tastes, national identities, sexual preferences and political attitudes. Extending Guy Debord’s notion of the society of spectacle that refers to “the ways in which we now think in and relate via images” (Pettman xi), the hypermediated eventfulness of Eurovision operates through affective modulation of our interactive and participatory experiences. The “pro-, anti-, neutral, amused, bemused and confused” (Highfield 34) expressions of this digitally generated mode of capture re-attach Eurovision’s contested meaning within the relations of the same and the different, in which the manifold experiences of popular culture are carried out. Accompanying each repetition, as Jodi Dean states in her re-examination of Debord’s “integrated spectacle” (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*), is a new affective micro-investment into an ever-intensifying image environment that drives our (inter-)actions and desires across a variety of trajectories (“Affect and Drive”).

After the winning song *Rise like a Phoenix* had reached Number One in the Russian iTunes download chart, some Russians, for instance, shaved off their beards, posting before-and-after selfies of themselves in a bizarre viral flash mob “prove you’re not Conchita” (Tomchak and Zand). Further provocative social media statements of church officials, celebrities and politicians in a number of (predominantly Eastern) European countries continued to intensify the resonance of the event by connecting Conchita’s body image with the idea of “the end of Europe” (Hodgson). Respectively strengthening the “picture of a backward, homophobic Eastern Europe and a progressive LGBT-friendly Western Europe” (Ulbricht, Sircar and Sloopmaeckers 156) in the West, these frictions continued the workings of what, from its very beginnings, had been experienced as Eurovision’s main attraction: In the recurrent dynamics of its annual media spectacle, the celebrated (Euro-)vision of European diversity grows more and more pronounced from year to year, yet always in conjunction with the dynamics of its radical rejection specific to contemporary context. With regard to political conflicts between Eastern and Western Europe, for example, Catherine Baker has argued that “the geopolitical frame of Putin’s governance in Russia and its implications for Europe would probably have informed popular discourses about Eurovision 2014 in Copenhagen even without Conchita Wurst” (12).

Additionally, the tense atmosphere that the audiences face during the annual event of Eurovision is inscribed within Eurovision’s very hypermediated logic. Part of this logic is that, as grotesque and provocative or boring and conformal as the actual national music acts might turn out, they always

already involve “the multiplication of mediation among sociotechnical, commercial, and political networks” (Grusin *Premediation* 2). Spreading “beyond the camera’s projection of a live act from the main stage to Europe’s living rooms” (Bohlman and Polychronakis 66), the serialized drama of international competition takes the form of proliferation of diverse media formats, affective investments and bodily practices. To facilitate the interest in the competition and to expand the experience of Eurovision into the environment of social media, it encourages a variety of viewer groups to follow and comment on the event – “the casual Eurovision viewer, the dedicated fan, the anti-fan and ironic viewers..., LGBTQ audiences, those opposed to alternative sexualities ... (and these groups are obviously not mutually exclusive)” (Highfield 34). This controversy-based mode of public engagement which, in its media saturated reenactment, significantly relies on the use of media technology, shapes the event of Eurovision as a series of collectively anticipated and spectacularly “premediated” (Grusin *Premediation*) escalations of national, sexual, religious and other identity-based conflicts.

In Austria, unsurprisingly, when it was announced that a bearded drag queen had been chosen by the state broadcaster ORF to represent the country, more than 31,000 people liked the Anti-Conchita Facebook Page “No to Conchita Wurst at the Eurovision Song Contest” while another 4,956 signed an online petition on change.org, calling on ORF to rethink its decision. [1] At the same time, LGBTQ activists, Eurovision fans and random viewers kept providing both supportive and provocative commentary while all kinds of do-it-yourself beard images were spreading across all kinds of media and national borders. In its circulation, the “Eurovisioned” (Weber) queerness of the beard mobilized and was mobilized by a wide range of intermingling affective expressions. Fascination, astonishment, celebration, disgust, love, hate, confusion, obsession and fear were mutually reinforcing one another, unfolding towards and against Conchita’s spectacular act of deviancy. In what follows, I propose to investigate these multiple figurations of affect as dynamics of transformation central to the queer workings of today’s visual social media exchanges. By that I mean a range of deviant and regulatory processes through which tactics of today’s human-media assemblages to pursue queer potentialities are informed. The self-perpetuating, modulating and contagious forces that arise through reflection and projection thereof I will describe in terms of digital affect.

Movement: Queer Workings of Digital Affect

As Elspeth Probyn observed several years before the emergence of web 2.0, images that we wish were queer *become* queer on the “surface” of the social, in “relations of proximity and distance” (60) with other images and bodies. Following Deleuze, she describes how, in visual social relations, *desire* unfolds as “travelling” in images, drawing connections that constitute the image of the body as “always reworkable or transformable in relation to the affective constellations that determine it” (51). In this paper, I am focusing on the ways in which digitally mediated, platform-specific constellations of bodies and images can limit or extend the becoming of bodies (Coleman) through two resonating affective intensities:

[1] For more information on this Facebook Community Page see: https://www.facebook.com/NEIN-zu-Conchita-Wurst-beim-Song-Contest-723559711002948/?hc_ref=ARS6FtkX0xBcNXZIZu2TV1MCnIx9ONCfNpJAp2JOy6ROcJVqYTxSeUZcnnO2Rx6RKQQ&fref=nf. The change.org online petition can be accessed under: https://www.change.org/p/österreichischer-rundfunk-conchita-wurst-nicht-zum-esc-2014?share_id=FpkoENXDHE&utm_campaign=mailto_link&utm_medium=email&utm_source=share_petition (24.11.2017).

The first, *seriating*, intensity of digital affect is shaped by the recurrent contact between things, technologies, bodies and images that derives from the imitative desire for social contagion as theorized by Gabriel Tarde (*The Laws of Imitation*) and Gilles Deleuze (*Difference and Repetition*) and taken up more recently in the idea of virality. Understood in this sense as the outcome of “mostly unconscious associations and oppositional forces of imitative social encounter” (Sampson 18), visual social desiring relations require neither an active subject nor are they directed towards a passive object. Instead, by spreading in viral feedback loops of today’s media, they “stir[s] the social into action and bring[s] about constant adaptations of stability and instability” (27). As desire circulates in visual social formations of digital popular culture, its imitative forces are passed on in an ongoing series of modifications. What makes it contagious, is its capacity to create “packets of sensations and relations that ... go *beyond* those who live through them (they become other)” (Deleuze *Negotiations* 137).

The second intensity of digital affect refers to a differently orientated notion of affective contagion located in *networked* accidents of desire that spread through and “disrupt social assemblages brought together, for instance, by shared beliefs and assurances” (Sampson 6). In the everyday framework of digitally generated media encounters, this “networkability of the desire-event” (29) is centered around the “binding techniques” (Paasonen, Hillis and Petit 16) of accumulation, modulation and distribution of “how bodies or objects may produce or experience intensity as they pass from one state to another” (2), online, offline and in-between. Ridding visual social dynamics of desiring production of their fixed attribution within a structure of signification, the networked intensity of digital affect makes use of these techniques to provoke micro-movements of anticipation and connection: The “bodies ... in terms of their thick materiality alongside their manifestation as textual depictions, images, or surfaces encountered on the screen” (6) move and are moved as they interface with one another, creating dispositions that orient and disorient their capacities to affect and be affected in resonating ways.

It follows that the viral movement of Conchita’s body image invites us to approach dynamics of its social resonance and dissonance in their co-emergence. The overall atmosphere of deviancy it produced can be neither described as simply incorporated within Conchita’s performance, nor as attached to any other “supposed point of authenticity” (Probyn 60). Instead, the enabling and/or constraining experiences of Conchita-related visual social engagement took shape through networked and seriated dynamics of circulation, combination and modification. While taking their ability to return “the process of affiliation to indeterminacy and contingency” (Puar *Terrorist Assemblages* 172) into account, I will discuss their queering potentialities in terms of capturing and modulating otherness in digital environments of popular media culture. A Sara Ahmed notes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the popular strategy of “idealization of movement or transformation of movement into a fetish” allows “bodies that can move with more ease ... more easily shape and be shaped by the sign “queer”” (152). Queer workings of digital affect, in this sense, also can be seen as contagious entanglement

through which dynamics such as movement and ideas such as “freedom from norms” continue to be reworked within the very same norms by means of amplification of proximity between particular forms of belonging rather than others. Important about the affective capacity of this entanglement to incite imitation is that it goes beyond questions of queerness as sexual identity. It carries affective traces related to immediate reactions of the users as well as their history of the moments of being moved by other images and bodies. Experiences of connection and disconnection it re-enacts suggest that in digital media environments not only specific bodies can be read as contagions, “but that all bodies can be thought of as contagious” (Puar *Terrorist Assemblages* 172). Against this background, to think the affect of Conchita’s Eurovision through its networked and seriated intensities means to understand the “embodied, embedded and everyday” (Hine) thresholds between the social, the visual and the digital as having a specific assembled agency – a contagious and contingent force of drift and displacement that thrives on affective intensification.

Body: The Viral Unfolding of Conchita-Event on YouTube

To exemplify the affective resonance of Conchita’s body image event across different trajectories of visual social encounter, I am drawing on 392 comments made by 252 users in the YouTube comment thread of the video “Eurovision Song Contest 2014 – AUSTRIA’S WIN!!!”. The video was uploaded on May 11, 2014 at 01:01 a.m. by Serbian user AlecZander, who, with 19 messages, was the most active commentator in the thread. Providing direct reactions to Conchita’s performance from May 10, 2014 as well as more general comments on the annual event of Eurovision, it contains posts and interactions made between May 11, 2014 and August 11, 2017 with the main peak of intensity in May 2014. The video shows Conchita Wurst’s acceptance speech followed by the final performance of “Rise like a Phoenix. With 244.659 views, it appears among top 5 related videos in the YouTube’s suggestion section for “Conchita Wurst – 2014 LIVE Eurovision Grand Final” that was published by the official YouTube channel of ESC on May 10, 2014 less than two hours earlier. [2]

[2] The material on the studied video was collected and analyzed with the help of the DMI YouTube tools (Rieder). It covers the whole comment thread as it was accessible in November 2017. The posts have been given anonymous numbers: the first represents the hierarchical order of the commentators structured by the amount of their engagement in the thread (count of posts): 19 posts/1; 17 posts/2; 10 posts/3; 8 posts/4; 6 posts/5; 5posts/6-7; 4 posts/8-9; 3 posts/10-21; 2 posts/22-58; 1 post/59-252. The second number refers to the chronological order of the comment in the thread.

Due to its viral video-sharing logic and its capacity to invite viewers for commentary from around the world, YouTube is considered one of the most important mediated spaces of engagement in Eurovision performances (Bohlman and Polychronakis 66). Visual social re-enactments of controversial events circulate on YouTube, extending their affective “stickiness” (Ahmed *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 90) in human-media assembled loops of participation. This stickiness runs through both audiovisual and social expressions of re-use and redistribution of the event, imitating affective dynamics of previous comment threads against the background of further networked suggestions of related visual material. As Burgess and Green have shown, comments attached to popular videos reflect the communicative specifics of public engagement on YouTube in general. Most of them are characterized by “emotive, hyperbolic “for-or-against” rhetoric, where raw racism [and sexism] is countered by equally raw moralizing” (Burgess and Green 103), while more informed perspectives

have to struggle for space. In this way, similar to the comment dynamics of the official ESC live video, the thread of “Eurovision Song Contest 2014 – AUSTRIA’S WIN!!!” evolved around three sticky “nodes of affective intensity” (Paasonen 35) that enabled both extending and limiting encounters with Conchita’s body image.

The first situates Conchita’s body within the desire of Eurovision to increase its cultural, economic and political relevance through deliberate exploitation of deviant sexualities. Connecting diverging opinions on how the drag act of Conchita’s female beard sums up the “euro-freak contest” (89/20, 2014-05-11, 3 likes) as a “perfect stage to declare perversion as a norm” (81/131, 2014-05-12, 1 like), it emerged from the confrontation with comments expressing fascination for Conchita’s appearance, voice and performance in “the best ESC final ever” (106/1, 2014-05-11, 11 likes). Activated by his/her/their or, as some commentators suggested, “its” (97/68, 2014-05-11, 2 likes; 161/255, 2014-05-23) body image, both positive and negative visions of Eurovision mobilized waves of anticipation of what might be coming next: Speculations on “zoofiles [sic], bands of polyamorous “families”, and guess what else ... perverts in one super duper Eurovision band” (81/131, 2014-05-12, 1 like) co-occurred with celebrations of “a victory against the intolerance ... of some fascist people” (138/44, 2014-05-11, 20 likes). Claims such as “proud to be European” (17/70, 2014-05-11, 17 likes), “this woman ... is a GREAT role model for kids, she’ll give them courage to be who they are” (26/78, 2014-05-11, 7 likes), or “How brave!” (15/260, 2014-05-23, 7 likes) were provoking both empowered and cynical comments about the future of “PEACE AND FREEDOM” (175/362, 2015-03-10, 7 likes; 135/41, 2014-05-11, 23 likes). At the same time, prophecies of “Europe giving us androgynous Jesus Christ look [of] a perverted new generation” (145/277, 2014-05-26, 1 reply) were flourishing, while distanced observations of how “this song contest sucks more and more with every year” (29/196 2014-05-18) proliferated along with vitriolic, almost ecstatic outbursts of hate:

no no this is not a woman. he wears beard and man voice.
 this is not a woman i am a woman and as a woman i will not
 stand people call such schizophrenic humans as "woman".
 He is not brave and hes not a good rolemodel cuz he doesnt
 know who he is otherwise he wouldnt wear lady clothes or
 would wear lady clothes without a beard. He cant even decide
 what he wants and who he is, hes a ridiculous provocator, a
 puppet of producers and media. pathetic and disgusting. By
 the way Conchita means "pussy" wurst means "sausage" so i
 guess he cant even decide if he likes pussy or sausage in his
 a**.... f*cker. [sic] (36/96, 2014-05-12, 3 likes)

As Sara Ahmed has argued, hatred as an investment into a “negative attachment to others” (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 51) generates communities of the hated and the loved “simultaneously in the moment of alignment” (51). Understood as central to organization of the community dynamics online, the affective life of this attachment depends on its reactivation within “the continuation of the image of the self in the faces that

together make up the “we” (52) – a collective image that makes possible alliances not only of haters but also of those who love. Similarly, reactions to Conchita’s “bearded lady” continued to fluctuate between the image of the hated other and the image of (self-)admiration, making relations of proximity and distance within the thread almost impossible to tell apart.

Within these relations, the second affective node emerged from the repetition of the acts of “facing” Conchita’s beard as “fake” (89/20, 2014-05-11, 3 likes; 228/221, 2014-05-20), “sick” (2/200, 2014-05-19, 16 likes, 39 replies), or even “scary” (97/68, 2014-05-11, 2 likes). By directing attention toward the impracticality of the female beard as belonging to a gay man wearing a dress, such acts of alienation could not help but confirm the affective force of at least three figurations of the bearded “gowned” body – “the “bearded lady”, the “(inverted) Christ” [or gay Jesus] and the “bearded drag queen”” (Weber 161). Through their confusing re-activation, both familiar and strange, yet neither masculine nor feminine, the constructed nature of Conchita’s body image became engaged in the desiring dynamics directed toward “mobilization of the value of tolerance for intolerant ends” (Ulbricht, Sircar and Sloodmaeckers 167). Evolving around the popular vision of Europe as a site of diversity, these dynamics proliferated expressions of support for LGBTQ rights and anti-homophobia only in order to denigrate a particular form of belonging: Eastern Europeans. Accordingly, comments such as “well said Conchita Wurst Russia is no longer welcome at Eurovision Let’s demote Russia from Eurovision [sic]” (110/12, 2014-05-11, 16 likes, 25 replies) divided the thread into those defending Conchita (and themselves) from transphobic accusations and those defending themselves (and the nation) from the “threat” of “Gayrope* [sic]” (4/116, 2014-05-12, 1 like) and Conchita’s alleged “mental illness” (26/154, 2014-05-13, 2 likes). As proposed by Tarde, the rhythmical oscillations of hate and love in such desiring dynamics often work as one part of a natural continuum of imitation and counterimitation: In “counter-imitating one another” or in “doing or saying the exact opposite of what [we] observe being done or said”, we “are becoming more and more assimilated” (xvii). Tradition can become perversion, tolerance is used for intolerant ends, love generates hate and vice versa.

After one of the users expressed contempt for Conchita’s beard as a means of “trying to make a mockery of transgender people” (6/27, 2014-05-11, 26 likes), supportive responses focusing on how it would be fantastic if “we wouldn’t care about “hey...that woman with a penis has a beard”” (54/38, 2014-05-11, 11 likes) started to proliferate. Mutually intensifying one another, comments celebrating “Conchita enjoying having a beard for personal reasons” (11/62, 2014-05-11, 5 likes) and statements such as “I love him!! beautiful voice Beautiful face big big talent !! [sic]” (238/211, 2014-05-19, 2 likes) were complemented by messages simultaneously expressing political hope and frustration on a collective basis:

Congratulations from Russia! For thousands Russian LGBT Conchita is a real hero. By the way, now this song is number one on Russian iTunes charts and on Yandex Music (Yandex is the most popular searching engine in Russia). And Russians

gave Conchita the 3rd place on Eurovision (by televoting, but our jury gave her only the 11th). And for me it's the sign that things are getting better in Russia, even though sometimes it feels like I'm surrounded by homophobes. Now, thanks to Conchita, I know, that it isn't so. Many people here almost hate her, but here are also a lot of those who loves her. (212/152, 2014-05-13, 24 likes)

Along with the intensification of these mixed dynamics, the jubilations of the beard within the thread merged into a strong tendency of the comments to draw together “different versions of Eurocorporeality” (Lampropoulos 166). Mobilizing ideas of either presumably progressive or presumably perverted Western Europe in relation to the ideas of either presumably backward or presumably family-friendly East, it expressed the resonating ways in which “corporeality is fictionalized in Eurovision narratives” (166). Based on multiple re-iterations of investments into sexual, national and religious belongings of the respectively opposed Eastern or Western European “other”, this third shifter of attention *affected* further expressions of love and scenarios of collective LGBTQ-empowerment to the same extent as it *was affected* by additional outbursts of homophobia and nationalism in return. Acting and reacting from the in-between of these intermingling bordering practices, the users' investments into narratives of freedom, liberation and human rights reconstructed the course of the debate as co-emerging with political themes that were specific to the current event of Eurovision and its recurring tensions. Consequently, Conchita's bearded body image was re-imagined as a continuation in a series of repetition and alteration of popular Eurovision stereotypes. As one of the users observed, commenting on the overall dynamics of the thread:

Let's see... Dana International (transgender) wins Eurovision in freaking 1998 => everybody loves it! Verka Serduchka (a drag act with christmassballs and all) places second (for Ukraine nonetheless) => everybody loves it! Conchita Wurst (a drag act with a beard) wins the contest, and suddenly the internet explodes! So what you are all saying is, if she (seeing her as a female act) had swapped the beard for some boa's and feathers it would've been ok? Or maybe, if one of the eastern european countries had sent Conchita it would've been ok aswell? See the hypocrisy there? [sic] (52/359, 2015-02-16).

As users of different national, political, sexual and gender backgrounds commented on the thread and shared links to other Eurovision-related material, the intermeshing patterns of the comments were shifting from those randomly creating antagonism through disjointed investments of fascination and hate to those of networked imitation. Their workings “in relation to ... traditional ‘European’ debates about ‘European’ integration” (Weber 144) as well as in relation to Conchita as “both one thing *or* another (normal *or* perverse) and simultaneously one thing *and* another (normal *and* perverse)” (144) can be seen as part of the dominant “reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality” that Jasbir Puar

(“Rethinking Homonationalism” 337) has described as homonationalist. Yet, although mostly (counter-)imitative in its mediated nature, the thread also managed to create more visceral and situative reactions along the axis of “neither/nor”: In this way, the most-liked comment of the thread states directly with regard to Conchita’s performance: “she is happy and isn’t hurting anyone so any argument against her is invalid” (82/108, 2014-05-12, 57 likes). All in all, the mixed investments of affect evolving around Conchita’s presence in the spectacular space of Eurovision can be described as imitative, antagonistic and disorientating. Addressing their intermeshing forces involves questioning the dynamics of their spread: If, following Ahmed, “people “blink” and do “double turns” when they encounter such bodies” (*Queer Phenomenology* 161), then what kind of familiar and strange media encounters does it take to slide this affective disorientation into a “*disorientation in how things are arranged*” (162)? What do these resonating and dissonating mediations of Conchita’s body do and what might they mean in visual social networks?

Meme: The Secondary Visuality of the Beard on Tumblr

[3] One way of understanding circulatory dynamics of viral contagion in digital networks is derived from Richard Dawkins’ (*The Selfish Gene*) memetics, where the meme is discussed as a unit of cultural information which is able to spread analogous to the genetic principles of fidelity, fecundity and longevity. In this paper, I draw on Tony Sampson’s (61-97) and Olga Goriunova’s (55-56) critique of the deterministic analogy of meme and gene resulting from this tradition. Against the tendency to treat viral contagion as “the passive passing on of a competing idea” (Sampson 72), I suggest exploring the circulation of viral memetic content in terms of mediation. Encouraging us to follow affective and performative dynamics of human and non-human agency in their co-emergence (Kember and Zylinska), the concept of mediation focuses on questions of relational transformation – “how relations of continuity and discontinuity are being made and unmade by describing the emergence of new kinds of connectivity” (Lury, Parisi and Terranova 6).

In digitally mediated environments of visual social participation, affective intensities of engagement with Eurovision re-emerge from a three-fold fascination with the “spectacle of otherness” (Hall 231-232), its repetition across a variety of popular media platforms, and its contextual dynamics driven by the forces of re- and premediation. While the remedial force operates to “refashion a current or past event in new form” (Grusin “Mediashock” 37), its premediative counterpart assembles networked investments of digital media use into an imitative, future-oriented series of encounters. Affective connections and disconnections between these forces proliferate in relation to the live event of the competition, echoing previous Eurovision experiences in relations of attachment, anticipation, use and re-appropriation. In doing so, they touch the viewers and proliferate in embodied ways. At the same time, they are equally contributing to the ways in which Eurovision matters: Visual social media content circulating across platforms features both of these aspects in users’ documentations of their Eurovision experience. In counter-imitating one another, memes, gifs, selfies, supercuts, reaction videos, and other collective media artifacts that people use to attach themselves to popular media events, not only differ in their own intensity and meaning. In their capacity to resonate, they increase the affective value of the event itself.

For instance, let us imagine the scene from the introduction in an endless GIF-loop – Conchita’s victorious Eurovision moment being insistently reiterated, the body performing the movement and starting all over again, the words “We are unity and we are unstoppable” appearing and disappearing on the screen, excitement increasing in its re-enactment and/or fading away with each new repetition. The GIF, which stands for Graphics Interchange Format, is widely used on the Internet and, like every meme, is shaped by the ease of its distribution through repeatable use, but also by its originality as cultural text and media device. [3] As one of the most dynamic visual social forms of memetic content, the animated GIF is particularly interesting in its

mediating capacity to reference and change the “here-and-now” quality of popular media events. In the interaction with GIF-generators GIF-creators can customize the animation by defining the number and the speed of the image frames, as well as the length of time the GIF takes to play pro iteration. By “reorganizing the images into new rhythms of sensation” (Ash 129), the rhythm of the GIF can be used for different purposes, deviating each time from previous user intentions and creating multiple competing actualizations of the event: The linking of the visual and the social in its animated spread, “is characterized by the attempt to make the movement strange again ... By virtue of its looped repetition, movement is displaced from the circumscribed meaning it had in its original context” (Hagman).

Following Jodi Dean, I understand the repetition- and circulation-based workings of Conchita-GIFs as a feature of “secondary visuality” under conditions of communicative capitalism. Characteristic of memetic communication that “blends together speech, [gesture], writing and image into something irreducible to its components” (“Faces as Commons” 2), secondary visuality indicates an important tendency towards “collectivization of the weird, the rendering of what might have once been seen as singular as common” (5). On Tumblr, a platform known for its excessive GIF-use and strong affinity with LGBTQ cultures (Cho; Miltner and Highfield), the movement of Conchita’s body image evolved into what can be described as “mediated capacity of the body to experience itself as “more than itself”” (Hansen 7). In his exploration of Tumblr’s queer ecosystem, Alexander Cho provides context for this generative experience: “It was disorientating, no one explained very much with words ... just post after post of explanationless images, traded from one anonymous Tumblr user to another” (43). Embracing the ways in which the users were channeling and “trading” in their Eurovision experiences across the site, GIFs that were circulated with the tag “Conchita Wurst” in May 2014 created an atmosphere of shared affectivity. In the weird memetic re-enactment of Conchita’s face and body, popular GIFed content continued to affect new adaptations, further and further disconnecting adaptations from their origins.

From 193 GIFs of 1919 uploaded images and 2355 posts that, along with multiple re-iterations of Conchita’s acceptance speech, were tagged with “Conchita Wurst” on Tumblr in May 2014, five following GIF scenarios attracted the most attention:

The first is showing a two-panel animation of Conchita’s face captioned “*You just get one life*,”. In the next panel the expression of the face changes as the caption reads “*and you better make it FABULOUS*”. This post with the current note count of 31897 was shared on May 17, 2014 as a reference to Conchita’s interview on the Graham Norton Show. On Tumblr, such reaction gifs result in an impressive number of notes, precisely because they are used to express feelings of others as “mine” – a tag that not only indicates the editing of the image by those who uploaded it but also its affective connection to or “personal” (also a popular tag) belonging with the user. Notes get added to a Tumblr post whenever anyone likes it or reblogs it on their own Tumblog. Accompanying specific GIFs, these visible markers of iterative approval operate as seismographs of the GIF’s affective intensity.

The second most popular GIF from May 10, 2014 with 31438 notes is a four-panel juxtaposition that celebrates Conchita's performance along with three other Eurovision 2014 acts by Iceland, Poland and Ukraine. Presenting the highlights of each national act in each new panel, the GIF showcases two intermingling popular visions of Eurovision – as annual festival of kitsch and as political tool of nation branding (see Highfield 31-35). In the left two panels, the drag act *Rise Like a Phoenix* captured in a close-up of Conchita's face appears along with the campy performance of “No Prejudice” by Iceland's children's music punk band Pollapönk. On the right side, Ukraine's defiant performance “Tick-Tock” featuring a dancer running in a giant hamster wheel next to the singer Mariya Yaremchuk is juxtaposed with Poland's hip hop-folk act “We the Slavs” by Donatan & Cleo that was exchangeably criticized (and celebrated) for its explicit sexism, aggressive nationalism and soft-pornographic imagery. Resonances and dissonances between these images are connected to the power of the GIF to move and touch those interacting with it. For some, the GIF might appear as just another campy celebration of Eurovision's plurality in the registers of internationality and diversity. For others, the very same juxtaposition can be read as a visual display of attitudes connected to Tumblr's own “queer ecosystem” (Cho 43).

The third GIF-variation from May 10, 2014 does precisely that. It celebrates Conchita's triumph on Eurovision stage in four panels, each zooming in and out of the movement of the body along with four separate captions “YOU KNOW”, “I WILL”, “RISE LIKE”, “A PHOENIX”: Its current note count is 29838. Considering its simple message, its pointedly expressed remediation of Conchita's performance, and its wide spread, the main function of this GIF can be approached through its capacity to incite fascination and captivation. By these means, popular GIFed remediations of spectacular events replace the logic of source and adaptation through that of continuous dis- and re-engagement with the immediate moment of the moving image. Its capacity to grab attention, “to grasp, to snatch, to capture ... during each stage of production, consumption, interpretation and circulation” (Senft *Camgirls* 46) amplifies with each new contact, with each new act of remix and appropriation in visual social networks.

The fourth GIF is a Photoshop of Conchita's face edited into the scene of Albus Dumbledore's big phoenix escape from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. In the first two panels of the GIF, a Photoshopped combination of Conchita's face and Dumbledore's body disappears in flames. Underneath, again, a quote from Conchita's Eurovision song can be read, “From the fading light I fly Rise like a phoenix”. The third panel of the GIF shows another Harry Potter character Kingsley Shacklebolt along with a new caption which, paraphrasing Shacklebolt's famous comment on Dumbledore, declares: “You may not like her, but you can't deny Conchita has got style.” The GIF was shared on May 9, 2014. It has 17384 notes. [4] Such acts of creating, re-blogging and liking Tumblr-GIFs not only contribute to the fan-specific cult of Eurovision. As Dean has shown, they are not simply “indications of adoration” (“Faces as Commons” 5). They work, on the one hand, because of the “affect they transmit as ... imitative moments in the

larger heterogeneous being we experience and become” (5). On the other hand, they do require and express popular knowledge, shifting different meanings of Eurovision in relation to other more or less relevant, more or less exciting products of media intertextuality, remix and creativity.

The fifth GIF scenario was shared on May 10, 2014, presenting a remediation of Conchita’s Eurovision semi-final performance in a set of three panels with the current note count of 11758. The first panel illuminates Conchita’s silhouette on stage from behind, zooming out of the smooth movement of the body with the caption: “Once I’m transformed”. The second presents a panoramic view of the stage with Conchita imitating the movement of the red and gold phoenix wings projected onto the background. The caption of this panel again makes use of the lyrics to “Rise like a Phoenix” – “Once I’m reborn”. The third panel zooms in closer on Conchita’s face, her lips moving to the rhythm of the song, pronouncing the words of the third caption over and over again: “I will rise like a phoenix”. Articulated in this way, GIFed facial expressions and bodily gestures suggest that the movement captured in the looped repetition of the image may be stripped of its original context (Hagman). At the same time, a particular contextual “here and now” quality of the event is carried through affective intensities that the movement of the GIF affords. What happens within this movement is a “scoring of affect fed back on itself” (Cho 51) that constantly feeds forward into next contextual adaptations.

Generated in “encounters among people, online platforms, images, texts, and computer technologies” (Paasonen 28), the memetic capacity of today’s media events to grab attention, to provoke imitation and to generate “catchy” networks of affect and meaning (Katz and Shifman) is ensured through social media circulation. The intrinsic performativity of viral memetic content, “however stereotypical and imitative it might be, is not (only) about collective copying” (Goriunova 57). It comes to work through assembled human-technical investments of “multiple sites, agents and ecologies, which dynamically interlock to form networks that propel its coming into being” (56). On Tumblr as well as other platforms enabling anonymous or pseudonymous communication, the “unequal, unconformable, dissimilar, and incongruous” (Parikka and Sampson 7) layers of these investments never appear “irregular in the sense that their content is outside the series” (7). Instead, they are embedded in the ongoing mediated intensification of the atmosphere of “micro-shocks” spreading on an everyday basis – short-lived events of potential deviation that can “be felt without registering consciously” (Massumi 4, see also Grusin “Mediashock”). In accordance with this logic, GIFed expressions of Conchita-related micro-shocks of surprise, confusion and empowerment were operating as generative anticipations of further even more confusing, yet strangely familiar, memetic adaptations yet to come: On Tumblr alone, what came out of these entanglements came to act through practices of sharing catchy imitations of Conchita’s beard as various as bearded Disney princesses and other male and female pop stars; as a designer stubble-alternative to the Anonymous mask; as Mona Lisa, as Mozart, and as Jesus; as both Putin’s political opponent and secret love interest; as a fictional “Tolerance-edition” of Barbie and a customized Lego minifigure, as Conchita Wurst-sausage,

Conchita-bananas and many more. Proliferating in these material-semiotic relations, queer intentions attached to Conchita's sticky body-image were re-invested into "common, generic" (Dean "Faces as Common" 3) intensities of media use. Contrary to the affective dynamics of the YouTube thread that were evolving around specific qualities *of* the beard as "normal" and/or "perverse", the memes re-enacted the beard-image into an image *for* – "for circulation in the rich media networks of communicative capitalism" (3).

Conclusion

As they circulate, digitally mediated expressions of Eurovision sentiments become sticky content precisely because of the contradictoriness of their contextual embeddedness in visual social desiring relations that connect and disconnect images and bodies. The shifts in these relations are carefully modulated. Often, they go "hand in hand with the return of sexual polarizations and stricter gender roles, both in the West and in the rest" (Braidotti 49). Often, they extend the queering potential of the event, mobilizing relations "between imaged bodies and viewing bodies in ways which are not entirely unpredictable, but which do not fall seamlessly into expected paths" (Kyrölä 197). Invested into Conchita's "Eurovisioned" capacity of "stepping beyond gender", which, as Rosi Braidotti argues, is conveyed "in the sense of a generalized androgynous drive" (49) of the postmodern capitalist condition, social circulation of memetic content reflects and projects this double-fold logic of simultaneous displacement and refixing of binary oppositions. Within these dynamics, the mediated habituality of Eurovision maintains itself in a series of complexly entangled representational and embodied practices that we have learned to resonate with, recognize and experience with different intensities at different times of our lives. Rather than signifying change, their formations define the deviating meaningfulness of Conchita's Eurovision body image event in the sense of its affecting and affected importance. The capacity to relate to its unfolding is not inherently transgressive. It is about queer potentialities of what Richard Grusin calls "the affective life of our media everyday" (*Premediation*). It is about the power of digital media environments to facilitate "paradoxical moments in which points of fascinated attention are in composition with overspills of disorientation" (Sampson 49). It is about relationships of the image to re- and pre-mediated spatiality and temporality of the bodies and the "becoming-abstract of the flows of desire" (Deleuze and Guattari 144) in their re-productive iterations. It is about examining the contingent affordances of today's visual social media events while understanding what makes them contagious as an open transitive field of simultaneously unfolding dominant and deviant experiences.

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