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Conchita's Euro-vision: On aesthetic standards and transphobia battles

Conchita's Euro-vision: On aesthetic standards and transphobia battles

[Rodanthi Tzanelli](#) [1] 21 May 2014

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What is the role of gender in consolidating social identity and subjectivity? How has Conchita Wurst changed our aesthetics and political ethos?



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The winner of the 2014 Eurovision competition, Conchita Wurst, was a surprise of a different order:

not only had the Austrian singer been earmarked as an oddity in her own country, she had consciously fashioned herself as an activist artist. Her own press statement in the aftermath of the Eurovision results ('[Europe showed that we are a community of respect and tolerance](#)' [13]) hints at some radical revisions to Europe's social contract, according to which recognition is not determined or impeded by biological fixities or social conventions but based on flexible definitions of individual needs and characteristics. This may be the first widely televised step against transphobia, but its implications need unpacking.

Born in 1988 as Thomas ('Tom') Neuwirth, but better known as the drag persona of [Austrian reality shows](#) [14], Conchita has been target of several transphobic campaigns in Austria and abroad. 'Wurst' (sausage) figures in a Germanic phrase that points to this celebration of difference within originality ('[Das ist mir doch alles Wurst: It's all the same to me](#)' [15]), as is the case with the universal stereotype of the 'Everyman' or 'Ordinary Joe': the hero(ine) whose insignificance deceives spectators, suggesting that they can only anticipate narratives of banality from this fictional character's everyday life. In Conchita's case it has all been about celebrity TV, after all: her emotional over-acting and sleek singing can define 'the camp' in the era of Internet and TV reproduction. Following this train of thought, her polished surface can only reveal the usual empty shell tabloids explore daily in their invariably sexualised articles.

But even tabloid gossip contains depth. In fact, these days tabloids remind us that Conchita was not born just for prosaic audience consumption. With a rise in popular support of right-wing parties across Europe following the 2008 global recession (Austria has been a worrying case in point) and an unprecedented spread of standardised ideals of beauty by global cultural and cosmetic industries that dichotomise gender and sexuality (they are addressed either to men or women), the singer's aesthetic presence in a global event can only be read as a political intervention of sorts.

It is constantly argued that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but eyes are trained by social institutions, such as the media, to see, expect and interpret reality in specific (plausible) ways. Conchita's porcelain face conforms to such conventions, but her well-trimmed beard clashes with them. Not only is she close to obligatory portrayals of Jesus, her Eurovision entry connects to formulaic ideas of Christian resurrection: the 'Rising Phoenix' is an archetypal image of life after death, community rebirth or even radical nationalist insurrection in countries with troubled history, such as Ireland. Reactions to her selection for the Eurovision by [Austrian national broadcaster ORF](#) [16] (more than 31,000 people liked an '[Anti-Wurst' Facebook page](#)' [17]) suggest that links between national identity to gender and sexual propriety survive in our globalised world.

The 2014 Eurovision fostered a convergence between narratives of resentment ([the winning song's lyrics](#) [18] are about an imagined, deferred revenge) and image (Conchita's natural beauty, enhanced by cosmetics and new technologies) to outline a world-wide social change in aesthetic standards. Aesthetics are not just about beauty but concern, specifically, the politics of perception and action: can we admire beauty without excluding alternative versions of it?

Notably, Conchita's [Eurovision entry](#) [19] was visually complemented with her gold attire and a set of flaming wings projected behind her on the stadium's scene. This audio-visual synergy presented as a cherubic character rather than a 'disgusting' drag queen. The combination responded to petitions calling on Belarus' state broadcaster [to edit Wurst's performance out of its Eurovision broadcast](#) [20] because it turned the show 'into a hotbed of sodomy' (a move followed in Russia). Where audiences were used to hyper-sexualised female singers (a theme also attacked through mockery in the German and Polish entries in more conventional feminist ways), they were presented with an ambivalent message: 'trans dirt' can be glamorous and recognised in artistic circuits, hence beautiful and socially accepted.

Theorists of gender and sexuality stress the significance of public performance of gender and the role of repetition in consolidating one's social identity and subjectivity: we are (exist), as gendered and sexual human beings, in relation to our peers and society; our public presence plays a role in this recognition and our social integrations. But we can also constantly become what we aspire to be by challenging social norms and expectations. Narratives of gender and sexuality meet half way – or so they should in a society respecting individual and sub-group rights. In this respect, collecting 12 points from many European countries – amongst them, several with over-active fascist-populist

movements – produces a series of controversial discourses: first, European audiences are beginning to accept the Euro-pop consumption of marginalised social identities (homosexual, transvestite, drag and what is known in gender studies as 'queer' [21]). Second, the artistic elites (Eurovision judges) appear to promote new tolerance agendas that incorporate art into policies of equality (still not harmonised at European level). Finally, popular venues, such as that of Eurovision, can streamline such agendas into global public consciousness in as imperceptible ways as those employed by harmful propaganda machines of old times (e.g. the Third Reich).

One may object, claiming that the result was based on popular vote, but votes are based on aesthetic preference. This amounts to a revision of aesthetic perception (what we see, hear and understand as beautiful, pleasing *and just*) that does not validate gender and sexual hierarchies (orders of propriety, beauty, eroticism, desirability, femininity or masculinity). Can this have real, positive consequences for disenfranchised groups, such as that to which Conchita belongs, or will the 'movement' collapse into a machination that ensures high viewing percentages and no real citizen engagement in equality battles?

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[13] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27360706>

[14] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conchita_Wurst#cite_note-8

[15] <http://derstandard.at/1397521434127/Chat-mit-Conchita-Wurst>

[16] <http://wiwibloggs.com/2013/09/14/editorial-why-orf-must-stand-by-conchita-wurst/31701/>

[17]

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/NEIN-zu-Conchita-Wurst-beim-Song-Contest/723559711002948>

[18] <http://www.eurovision.tv/event/lyrics?event=1873&song=31403>

[19] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaolVEJEV4>

[20] <http://wiwibloggs.com/2013/10/20/will-belarus-remove-conchita-wursts-performance-eurovision-broadcast/32965/>

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