

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Alternative Femininities, Voices, and Queer Body Politics in Alma's "Dye My Hair"
Riihimäki, Hanna-Mari; Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena

Published in:
Made in Finland

Published: 27/10/2020

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Document License
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:

Riihimäki, H-M., & Pääkkölä, A-E. (2020). Alternative Femininities, Voices, and Queer Body Politics in Alma's "Dye My Hair". In T-M. Karjalainen, & K. Kärki (Eds.), *Made in Finland : Studies in Popular Music* (pp. 187-199). (Routledge Global Popular Music Series). Routledge. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe202201147721>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

14.

Alternative Femininities, Voices, and Queer Body Politics in Alma's "Dye My Hair" *Hanna-Mari Riihimäki and Anna-Elena Pääkkölä*

Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss Finnish pop singer Alma's music video "Dye My Hair" (dir. Youth Hymns 2016) with reference to different themes pertinent to how this artist has come to be regarded as one of the most promising Finnish artists working in the field of global pop. The career of Alma (born 1996 Alma-Sofia Miettinen) and her music have gained significant international momentum in the last few years. Her solo project began in 2016 and includes collaborations with other artists. Alma's debut album is scheduled to be released in 2019. The song "Dye My Hair" was written by Alma, Joe Walter, and Pascal Reinhart, and it has 46.5 million hits on Spotify by August 2019. The music video "Dye My Hair", which was filmed in England, has received almost 12 million views on YouTube by early November, 2019.

Alma is one of a small number of Finnish artists to achieve success in the global music scene, with international musicians and producers supporting her in an unprecedented way in Finnish popular music history. In this chapter, by compiling a short historical summary of Finnish women artists and offering an audiovisual music video analysis of "Dye My Hair", we argue that Alma's success depends on the timeliness of her sound, look, performance, and the "alternative femininity" constructed in her star persona. In particular, the later part of 2010s has experienced a shift in acceptable depictions of femininity and women in popular culture, where more balanced representations of women are called for. As one of the most powerful forms of current media, music videos have the potential to create and repeat, but also to repeal and rebuild, representations of acceptable femininities (Railton and Watson 2011; Hawkins and Richardson 2007). Alma's music video achieves the latter by offering a noticeably different image of an artist than the stereotypical mainstream pop star, which we see as a strategy coalescing with the zeitgeist of the 2010s. We argue that Alma's approach to pop music speaks to millennial audiences in a way not previously possible for a Finnish artist, which is groundbreaking also for women singers in the sphere of mainstream pop internationally.

This research draws on the writing of feminist musicologists, such as Sheila Whiteley (2000) and Lori Burns (2010; 2002), as its main inspiration: we aim to present and promote Finnish female musicianship, shed light on the history of women performers, and promote Finnish female performers' audibility in international academic discussion. In our research, we explore a largely unexamined field: global mainstream popular music that is made for and performed by a Finnish woman. Feminist studies of music videos, like those of Carol Vernallis (2013; 2007), Diane Railton and Paul Watson (2011), and John Richardson (2007), inform our case study. We approach our material from three viewpoints: alternative femininities, the voice and the body, and queer fat studies (Wykes 2014; Longhurst 2014). Our chapter contributes to music video research incorporating current feminist theory, and to the broader field of Finnish popular music research. This chapter is part of Riihimäki's article-based PhD dissertation, *Feminine Counteractive Strategies in Pop Music Videos* (working title, forthcoming) in the field of

musicology, and Pääkkölä's postdoctoral project, *Depictions of Finnishness in Finnish Popular Music from 2000 to Current Times*.

Finnish women in popular music

Before discussing Alma's work, it is illuminating to contextualize the discussion with a short history of Finnish female musicians. Such a task includes first determining where is the most useful starting point. As the purpose of this chapter is to study a current singer, establishing a historical context for Alma as a mediated star is probably of the greatest significance. This brief timeline starts, therefore, in the 1950s, when television became a formidable mediating force in the formulation of "stars" and singers in Finland. Also, as the article deals mostly with the voice, we have focused on Finnish women singers' voices, and by extension, ideals of femininity. Our timeline is divided into four categories. For brevity, we introduce only a few artists per category in the text (see table 1). While all of the artists mentioned (or omitted from this list) deserve more attention in future research, it is beyond the scope of this article to do more than provide this context for the purposes of the present discussion.

Period	Voice types	Mentioned in the article	Other examples
1950s to 1960s	Post-World War II era "dollies"	Laila Kinnunen, Katri Helena	Annikki Tähti, Brita Koivunen, Carola, Marion, Paula Koivuniemi
1970s to 1980s	Edgier voices and personalities	Vicky Rosti, Kaija Koo, Kikka	Lea Laven, Muska, Maarit, Agit Prop movement, Anki, Eini, Anja Niskanen
1990s to mid-2000s	Rock gals and girl groups	Maija Vilkkumaa, Nylon Beat	Mascara, TikTak, Taikapeili, Anna Eriksson, Jonna Tervomaa, Siiri Nordin, PMMP, Chisu
Mid-2000s to 2019	Pop singer-songwriters	Alma, Sanni, Vesala	Ellinoora, Eveliina, Anna Abreu, Mira Luoti, Anna Puu, Saara Aalto, Erin, Nelli Matula

Table 1. History of Finnish women popular music artists, 1950s to 2019.

In the post-war era, the ideal female voice was a soft, agile, and sunny one. Affected by the public images of the international film stars like Doris Day, a feminine, unthreatening singer full of positivity was the accepted form of femininity. Laila Kinnunen represented a virtuosity that resonated with Finnish culture through themes of loss and melancholy (emphasized by Kinnunen's history as a war child), but mixed with an optimism that invested the singer with international appeal: at a time when Finland was embracing global culture, Kinnunen performed

in several languages and countries, most notably as the first Finnish competitor in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1961 (Henriksson 2004, 198, 200-201). Often singers were considered to embody traits of national symbolism. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is Katri Helena, whose voice is often said to “sinivalkoinen ääni” (blue-and-white voice). Contrary to Kinnunen’s jazzy voice and international profile, Katri Helena’s early music is based on a hybrid of *iskelmä* (Finnish schlager) and instrumental rock (Von Bach and Hakasalo 1986, 423). Katri Helena’s voice is sunny but straightforward, with only scant use of vibrato and omitting other decorative vocal mannerisms. Her representation of femininity accentuates traditional and spiritual values, and her songs are mostly in Finnish. Unlike Kinnunen, who was seen sporadically onstage from the 1970s onwards, Katri Helena only retired in spring 2019 (but still has Christmas concerts lined up in late 2019).

The 1970s and 1980s demarcate a different space for Finnish women singers. Rock ‘n’ roll and folk aesthetics entered Finnish popular music, which led to voice ideals that allowed more raunchy, tight, and rock-based voices. The representation of femininity changed as well: lush hairdos and dresses changed to denim trousers, boots, and leather jackets. Vicky Rosti – who started in the early 1970s with covers of Suzi Quatro that suited her edgy voice, and continued her career with influences from blues, country, and disco music – represented Finland in the Eurovision Song Contest in 1987 (Aho and Taskinen 2004, 54-57). Two musicians, Kaija Koo and Kikka, exhibit the polarized representations of femininity found in the 1980s: while the former started her career as a rock singer and went on to perform art pop without emphasizing her femininity or alternatively performing in a more ethereal idiom (Aho and Taskinen 2004, 102), the latter explored a Samantha Fox-like exaggerated femininity based on raunchy sexuality and camp aesthetics. Koo’s voice was a smoky alto, sensual with a hint of rock tone; Kikka was a bright pop soprano. The first was embraced, the second ridiculed. Koo’s career continues at the time of writing; Kikka died in the mid-2000s, unappreciated and slut-shamed by the media throughout her career.

Just as the 1990s global music market embraced the concept of “girl power” (Hains 2012), Finland was no exception. The music produced in the early 1990s was not, however, overtly feminist; Finnish culture was to embrace feminist attitudes in mainstream popular music only later in the 2000s. Instead, Finnish girl power was mainly found in pop-like sounds of such groups as Taikapeili and Nylon Beat, the latter of which embraced a camp sensibility: most notably, their nasally tinted singing voices tended to irritate older listeners while endearing them to their more youthful peers. These girl groups were every bit as mediated as the Spice Girls were in the UK. However, Maija Vilkkumaa was the first figure to come out of this scene (through an apprenticeship with the girl group Tarharyhmä) as a solo artist who gave the impression of being in complete control of her music. She composed, wrote lyrics, and combined these with hard rock sounds, earning the title the “angry young woman” of Finnish rock (Aho and Taskinen 2004, 197; Richardson 2007). Vilkkumaa’s lyrics depicted the experiences of women in “lähiöt” (the suburbs) and the expectations of women in society, offering a space for feminine empowerment through her hoarse yet strong mezzosoprano voice.

The 2010s and the rise of hip hop and synthpop, alongside reality television formats, facilitated the conditions for the proliferation of female singer-songwriters who are writing their music according to their own rules about female sexuality and substance (ab)use, mental health issues,

and feminist empowerment. While some formidable artists are familiar to audiences already from early 2000s pop groups, others are newcomers who are effectively changing ideals of femininity and female agency through their work. As examples of the two, Vesala and Sanni both mix pop aesthetics with other genres. Vesala, a pop art singer-songwriter already known from her earlier alternative pop band PMMP, covers a voice range spanning raunchy, chesty, and even brutal singing to an ironic falsetto, creating new expressive possibilities for female empowerment and avant-garde femininities. Sanni represents the new generation of singer-songwriters whose voices also resonate with younger listeners, even though her lyrics sometimes convey raunchy depictions of female sexuality (Poikolainen 2018). Resembling the style of the Finnish 1990s girl group, Nylon Beat, Sanni's voice has a nasal tint, but is less camp; in the studio, her voice is channeled through filters and other sound effects to give an impression of creative free play. Her profile is similar to Alma's with witty lyrics and modern sounds, which aesthetically match her blue/red dyed hair, representing modern constructed femininities.

“Dye My Hair” as an empowering performance of alternative pop femininity

Articulations of alternative (different to normative) femininities (Negus 1997; Whiteley 2000) are at the forefront of Alma's music video, which presents Alma and two monstrous backup dancers parodying old-fashioned concepts of “acceptable” femininity through their gestures and singing. This effect is also achieved through Alma's voice, sometimes technologically manipulated to a lower, unnatural register with a pitch shifter effect. As the voice can represent a person's identity in the same way as their looks or bodies (Jarman-Ivens 2011), a thorough examination of voice production in the song is required to establish how the altered voice queers sonic spaces of effeminacy. Body politics in the music video are best examined through feminist fat studies (Kyrölä 2014; Pääkkölä 2017), which shed light on how Alma's body represents the queer (Wykes 2014) side of global – but also more specifically Finnish – female fat bodies.

Gender-related norms change, but slowly. In popular music practices, a number of artists, for example Janis Joplin, Tori Amos, k.d. lang, and Madonna, paved the way for more free and diverse representations of femininity (e.g., Whiteley 2000; Burns and LaFrance 2002). Still, when focusing on global pop music and videos, gender norms have been quite inflexible (Railton and Watson 2011, 10), and alternative examples that challenge conventional “standards” – most commonly, thin bodies, beautifully made up faces, feminized outfits and garments, somehow sexualized characters or ones whose femininity has been somehow underlined – are scarce. But some alternative role models can nevertheless be found.

Alterity is created when representations of femininity are not what we expect them to be, when they evoke new perspectives and cross boundaries. It is counterproductive to attempt to define what would be a “correct” or “ideal” mode of presenting femininity in pop music. Following the example of feminist-oriented music research, the focus here lies in the politicization of these representations. Images (and audiovisual practices) are used as the starting point for discussions of how women are portrayed in the media and the position women in society (Puustinen et. al. 2006, 29). The next section of the article discusses audiovisual constructions of alternative femininity in Alma's “Dye My Hair”. We also discuss ways of disrupting and questioning the dominant discourses surrounding pop music femininities, that is, the larger understanding,

assumptions, and expectations of being a female pop musician and pop artist (Burns and LaFrance 2002, xi, 2-4; Railton and Watson 2011, 9-10).

“Dye My Hair” music video elements

The music video “Dye My Hair” consists of various takes in seemingly empty factory-like surroundings, where in addition to Alma we see two dancers. Commensurate with music video aesthetics, this video entails disruptive cuts, which interrupt an ongoing condition of flow (see Vernallis 2007, 125). “Dye My Hair” is also divided into typical music video segments that follow musical phrases and features (Vernallis 2001, 31). At times, the images seem related to chord changes, sometimes they pick up a rhythmic element, and some visual passages seem to match song phrases. The frame moves, either physically or through cuts, from one room to another, sometimes staying in one space for a longer period of time.

Alma is mostly seen directly addressing the camera. Only the dancers’ moves are clearly choreographed, although Alma makes gestures synchronized to and emphasizing the music. In addition to her characteristic neon colored yellow-green hair, Alma has two different looks: a darker leather jacket, black polo-necked shirt and trousers outfit, and white knee-ripped jeans and a long-sleeved print-shirt. The two backup dancers have an almost identical appearance: black tops, which reveal the dancers’ waists and arms, black shorts, and white sneakers. Long blonde wigs trail down to the dancers’ upper thighs and their skin glows with a metallic tint; also, their nails have been treated to look like metal blobs.

The video does not have a straightforward narrative. Alma and the nearly faceless characters are shot together and separately, somewhat aimlessly moving around the scenery. The video employs shots of various lengths. For example, close-ups serve to emphasize not only the artist but also parts of the lyrics or musical elements (Vernallis 2001, 26-28). Furthermore, extreme close-ups, which reveal only parts of the face, can reinforce a mood of intimacy and increase the level of intensity that is implied between the singer and the audio-viewer (Richardson 2007, 423). These methods are also employed in this music video. Lights are directed to, and come from, multiple directions and vary in their intensity. Fog is also used as a staging element. The main colors in the video are hot pink and bright green, also present in the lighting choices, but the atmosphere is more dark and heavy than bright, light, and cheery. “Dye My Hair” uses other visual effects to establish the mood as well, for example, blurring and slow motion.

The music consists mostly of electronic sounds and Alma’s singing voice. A distinct addition to the musical layers is the chorus’s repeated phrase: the processed and effect-rich “I would dy-y-ye my hair blonde for you”. This works also as the song’s hook and sounds machine-like and somehow “othered”. The song structure is quite basic, A1-B1-C1-A2-B2-C2-B3-C3 (B being the pre-chorus and C the chorus), and is comprised of six different chords, mainly following the key of D flat major. We will not provide a more precise and detailed analysis of musical structure here, as our discussion, for the most part, focuses on the singing voice and how it is treated (see Lacasse 2000). The music video has multiple meanings, which materialize through the voice, bodies, and the video’s manifest political message.

Thematic analysis: “Dye My Hair” music video

The analysis is divided into three intertwined themes, 1. voice, 2. body, and 3. political message, and their relations to the music video's audio-visual means of expression. These particular themes were chosen because they best represent the aspects of the music video relevant to the designated feminist perspective. The analysis is supported by previous extensive research on music videos, for example the work of media scholar Carol Vernallis, feminist musicologists (Hawkins and Richardson 2007; Pääkkölä 2016), and other interdisciplinary feminist research (Kyrölä 2014).

The voice may be comprehended in more ways than one. It can be the narrator's voice within the song addressing "you" or "her/him". The voice may also refer to the songwriter's voice, regarding both the lyrics and the musical decisions. In addition, other fictional or real characters' voices may be heard. Above all, there is the singer's usually quite recognizable voice, which interprets the contents of a song for the listener (see Richardson 2007; Frith 1996, 183-184.) The body may be understood in many ways, too; for example, bodily experiences related to dancing, singing and listening to the music, however, are not addressed here. The main focus is on the singing voices, or the voices of the performing characters, their movement, and the body's outside relations (Frith 1996, 218), such as clothing and hairstyles. The body may be understood as a medium where the internal externalizes, for example through movement, and the external communicates with "the outside world" (ibid). This segment discusses how these features create alternative connections to femininity and how the music video thus becomes a political message that challenges dominant gendered norms while articulating a sense of value and power.

In the song, we mostly hear Alma's "natural" singing voice; there are only a few effects and genre-related mannerisms. Her voice is somewhat girly, at times gritty or slightly cracked. The melody's lowest note is g flat below middle c, and the highest is d flat, an octave away from middle c. The A-sections circle around the tonic and below it, and in the B and C sections, d flat next to middle c is the lowest note. Alma sings mostly alone, at times her voice has been doubled, and some segments include a second melody part. The most noticeable aspect in regard to voices in the music video is the hook phrase, "I would dy-y-ye my hair blond for you", which is enriched with a special effect and thus sounds machine-like, perhaps even monstrous. The effect has most likely been achieved with a pitch shifter device combined with other effects, which lowers Alma's voice substantially, a full octave. In doing so, the voice has been transformed into an instrument among other synthesized sounds, thus dissolving its subjectivity and converting it into something that is "faceless" in a way (see Pääkkölä 2016, 173; Frith 1996, 196). This detachment from Alma is underlined by the fact that she is not seen singing along with the effect-manipulated phrase in the music video. The processed voice is heard in other parts as well, but this can be understood as a merely musical solution, which is not accentuated in the music video in any way. It can be argued, though, that this manipulation, or vocal staging (Lacasse 2000), of Alma's voice is merely a device to add value and interest to a perhaps otherwise more banal pop song. This voice manipulation both creates a pleasurable hyper-real escapist soundscape and highlights the temporality of the present moment, creating a "sensation of being in the moment" (Hawkins 2004, 183-184).

Considering only the sounds without audiovisual relations, the lowering of Alma's voice may imply an emphasis on Alma's authority. Her own "natural" voice is quite high and "feminine",

so perhaps sound technology has been used to dramatize Alma's singing. Voice, and the use of it, is ripe with power structures, although context should always be taken into account. A lower voice is stereotypically more likely to be connected to masculinity, authority, and power. A higher voice is more commonly associated with femininity and innocence or youth, partly with submission and weakness as well. In addition, without gendered emphasis, a higher voice can be related to kindness, docility, and sociability. A lower voice connects to trustworthiness and competence, but on the other hand, also to affective experiences of threat and aggression (see Shanahan and Huron 2014; Johnson 2008).

The pitch shifter also converts the voice into being an inhumane, unreal, and as previously noted, a machine-like monstrous sound. Therefore, the main message arising from the lyrics, I would dye my hair if you asked me, becomes an ironic construction of what the feminine (human) subject *would* do for another person. This aspect is highlighted in the homonym of the word "dye". In countless popular songs, we hear the phrase "I would die for you" (e.g., Prince, The Weekend, Miley Cyrus). Especially Greece's Eurovision song contest entry from 2001, Antique's "(I would) Die for You" bears a resemblance to Alma's song. In this respect, "Dye My Hair" truly can be understood as a parody of a common theme in love songs where characters are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to demonstrate their love. Alma herself has commented on the subject:

It was a joke in the studio. I was just writing some party songs with a techno vibe. Someone mentioned writing a love song. I thought it was crazy. For me at that time love songs were something Bruno Mars did about catching a grenade, you know clichés. I was like, "I would dye my hair for you." So we made a song about it. If I would ever really dye my hair for someone they would have to be out of this world. (Alma, quoted in Nunn 2019.)

On the other hand, this gripping vocal effect also constructs a different kind of voice identity. Towards the end of the video (2:48), one of the dancers forms the words "I would dye my hair blonde for you" with her metallic tinted lips, whilst revealing metal-covered teeth. We can see only her mouth and nose from under the blond, thick wig which also covers much of her static body (starting as a medium shot from the waist up and zooming in on the face). In addition, there is an effective blackening of the screen before and after the event. This is repeated a moment later (3:05) in a short glimpse of an extreme close-up. Thus, the onwards-leading, machine-like voice is given a face (as compared to the aforementioned detachment from Alma) in the music video and therefore a new agent, a subjectivity (see Pääkkölä 2016, 132-133, 173).

Throughout the video, the dancers' motions seem fragmentary, weird, and machine-like. The choreographed motion is at times reversed in editing, but the movements are otherwise sporadic. Specific dance styles create an eerie weirdness, or uncanny feel, which remains even when the imagery moves forward in time. The Uncanny (Freud 1955; Pääkkölä 2016, 82) refers to something which arouses dread, something that cannot quite be explained, or when something familiar starts to seem odd and unfamiliar. In comparison, Alma's movement seems "normal", although at times slowed down, and progressing continuously forward in time: reverse motion techniques are not used.

The audiovisual strategies found in music videos may open new and illuminating perspectives on the lyrics, sounds, and voices (Hawkins and Richardson 2007, 605-606). Examining only the lyrics of “Dye My Hair”, one might, for example, assume that the song is about a character who is independent but would still be ready to transform herself for another person. But in the music video, this lyric-generated narrative is questioned and subjected to ironic scrutiny. Even if this was the original intention of the song, the video helps to emphasize it. The words “dye my hair” gain additional meaning also through Alma’s own hair color. In a short period of time, she has become very well known as the Finnish singer with neon-green hair. In addition, Alma’s outfits in the music video are not feminized or sexualized, but follow along the lines of her quite gender-neutral style. Alma’s distinctive image may be considered as challenging “traditional” external features connected to femininity in pop music. This may also be a conscious and calculative means of creating a specific artist image. PME Records artist page states distinctly that Alma is “the polar opposite of a plastic pop princess” (pmerecords.fi). Principally, an artist’s appearance, to a certain extent, has an effect on how she or he and their music are categorized and understood (Frith 1996, 219; Negus 1997, 184). Perhaps Alma’s expression as manifested through her image can be thought of as a means for more agentic identification.

People are constantly and quite heavily judged because of their body size and shape. This is partly done knowingly, partly unconsciously, and in an internalized way (Harjunen and Kyrölä 2007, 10; Kyrölä 2014). In addition to Alma’s distinct style, her body size may be considered to break the normative pop music femininity, which traditionally adhere to notions of acceptable bodies and beauty ideals inherent in different times and cultural climates. People who diverge from these norms – people with different body types, sizes, and forms, especially larger ones – are rarely presented (Hains 2012, 179-180; Milestone and Meyer 2012, 93-99). However, it should be noted that discussion about culture-specific notions of fatness are currently quite prevalent, and the questioning of fat bodies’ purely negative associations has begun, while the stereotyping of overt thinness has also become a cause of concern (Kyrölä 2014; Kyrölä and Harjunen 2007; Pääkkölä 2017). Today, women who perform up-tempo, electronically influenced dance music are usually slim figured, like the American performer Charli XCX or Nordic performers Dua Lipa, Zara Larson, and MØ, with whom Alma has also collaborated. Frequently, their femininity has been stereotypically highlighted as well. “Dye My Hair” also presents slim, scantily dressed dancers, but they do not seem to be sexualized or idealized female characters. Indeed, their appearance and movements seem to subvert traditional feminine traits. In “Dye My Hair”, the bigger, not overtly feminized body is constructed as the source of authority and the normal one, while the slimmer bodies appear as weird and eerie. The sexualization of artists, characters, and dancers is quite common in pop music videos (Railton and Watson 2011, 17-19), but here it is audiovisually questioned and parodied.

Just like Madonna in earlier research (e.g. Whiteley 2000), Alma and her music video “Dye My Hair” in our interpretation can be connected to the circuit of pop(ular) feminism. Feminism can act as a tool for change in the realm of pop music by upending stereotypical portrayals of femininity for political aims (Whiteley 2000; Railton and Watson 2011). In this regard, feminist theory can be made more accessible to the youth, following in the footsteps of the concept of girl power (see Whiteley 2000, 215-216; Hains 2012, 25-48). Alma has also declared in an interview that she wants her music to “bring all the weird kids together” (Gore 2018), which indicates agency and sets forth her goals about making music.

There are still, and perhaps especially in the world of entertainment, quite rigid norms according to which a person is categorized as either “normal” or “abnormal”, “suitable” or “unfit”, acceptable or not, although the specific features in question are each representative of their time. Perhaps Alma’s rise towards fame in popular expression may be considered “evidence” of a sort of an emergent change in the cultural atmosphere. This point is more carefully considered in the next section.

Queer body images, Finnishness, and pride

I think I am something new to this pop world right now. (...) I think in this moment we need a different kind of pop artist and I am one of them. (Alma, quoted in Nunn 2018.)

Here, we extend the discussion to encompass emerging themes of queer and fat pride in Alma’s work. “Dye My Hair”, in its seeming simplicity, offers some thought-provoking and timely interventions in issues that indicate a queer outlook in Alma’s music and image. Since her interview in *Gay Times* in March 2019 (Corner 2019), where Alma confirmed the rumors surrounding her lesbian sexuality, a queer angle is all the more applicable to the analysis. Reading the video as participating in queer politics demands an intersectional angle: queer theory has been enmeshed with feminist fat studies (especially Wykes 2014) in a synergic relationship, which gives scholars tools to interrogate how queer identities and fat bodies occupy comparable positions in society. Building on these earlier discussions, we discuss the queer fat body in the Finnish context.

Even before Alma’s coming out in 2019, she has spoken about writing music “for the outsiders” (Gore 2018). This is a point relevant to theories of personal narrative (see Hawkins and Richardson 2007), since Alma has openly discussed being bullied in school, mainly through social ostracizing (Kukkonen 2016). This further calls for adopting a queer perspective when analyzing Alma’s music. As the scholarly understanding of the term “queer” implies, anything that falls outside the normative can be considered a “queer” issue (Wykes 2014, 4; Pääkkölä 2016, 22). In Alma’s case, her non-normative positions, which has been used as pretext for bullying, comes from four different angles: being LGBT, being female, being fat, and being a musician (see Taylor 2011). Overcoming the stigma of these non-normative positions to become a “queer female pop star” (Corner 2019) represents a personal narrative of success that seems to resonate with young audiences globally.

The overlapping categories of queerness, fatness, and musicianship may also be considered in light of theories of embodiment. Jackie Wykes argues that “body shape and size are profoundly implicated in questions of gender and sexuality, often in ways that are far more complex and intimate than the conventional discourses of ‘body image’ and ‘self-esteem’ can allow” (2014, 4). As both homosexuality and fatness have been culturally and medically assigned as conditions of non-normativity and illness, personal failure, and symptoms of immorality, discourses of shame and shaming are closely attached to queer fat bodies (Longhurst 2014, 19). By adding music to the mix, the queer fat body becomes a vessel for musicianship, and in Alma’s case, performs (instead of shame and displacement) artistry, stardom, and creative control. Adding gender, it is often assumed that female musicians are the performers and not makers of music, or

that they are disenfranchized in the music industry (see Warwick 2004; Hawkins and Richardson 2007). From this viewpoint, Alma seems unique in the genre of her choosing, global mainstream pop music, where she participates as a white Finnish queer woman singer-songwriter, performing creative agency and self-determination.

Robyn Longhurst argues that body shapes and sizes are performative, insofar as she notes that “I perform my body size and shape just as much as I perform my sex and gender, that is, I repeat or reiterate norms surrounding my body size and shape” (2014, 15). In regard to hip hop music, Joan Gross (2005, 66-68) writes that “phat” bodies are normally juxtaposed with those of slim (female) backup dancers in order to connote the (male) star’s control and physical power (see Pääkkölä 2019). In “Dye My Hair”, Alma can be seen to gender bend this traditional hip hop scenario, as a big woman performing with slim backup dancers. As the music (main groove), singing phrases (the half-spoken verses), and Alma’s movements in the video include traces of hip hop, and Alma’s white hoodie attire in the video resembles hip hop fashion, she appropriates some intertextual masculine/butch/queer power in her performance. But, as we have noticed in our analysis, the dancers do not perform stereotypical femininities; therefore, Alma’s queer femininity does not gender her as masculine, manly, or even butch in any simple way. Rather, the subtle nods towards hip hop afford her authority, power, and authenticity. Her voice is also typically feminine, a clear and strong pop soprano with a raspy tint adding to her body’s performance of gender-queerness.

Nowadays, many millennials identify as LGBT (GLAAD 2017), which reveals that the negative repercussions of coming out have lessened considerably (at least for the white, cis-gendered, and higher class individuals). The repercussions of fat shaming are more problematic. Considering the disclosure or hiding of fat bodies, Robyn Longhurst (2014, 17) points out that while a fat body is difficult to hide entirely, behavioral aspects of living as a fat person include some that are dictated by secrecy, including eating disorders, internalizing societal normativity, and hiding health conditions. What makes Alma’s star character a relatable one is that Alma is shown throughout the video in the middle of the shots, center stage, addressing the camera in a close-up, performing stardom in a similar way to skinny stars, and not performing “fat girl” stereotypes. She performs accessibility and desirability, normalcy and stardom. This is what makes Alma an appealing pop musician in contrast to many of her genre peers who perform in fantastical settings, with fictional bodies, or surrounded by upper-class riches. Alma promotes the new millennium’s more accepting attitudes to sexuality, body size, and femininity.

Did it have to be a specifically Finnish artist who opened up this new type of embodiment in Alma’s genre? The short answer is no. Adele has already paved the way throughout her career as a bigger-bodied female singer-songwriter who teeters between working-class normalcy with her off-stage character and wide Cockney accent, but her performances depict glamour and upper-class sensibilities. Alma does not wear diamonds but a hoodie, and her straight-laced voice use cuts through with hints of irony and humor, not tragedy. Her performance of lower-class aesthetics also contributes to the acceptance of fat bodies, which are usually negatively associated to lower classes and moral degeneracy (see Pääkkölä 2019). The song’s lyrics depict a self-determined woman who (against stereotypes of fat female bodies) does not mooch for gifts or drinks, but who “got [her] independency”, even though the impending romance is making her, understandably, and in a femininely submissive way, falter. Furthermore, Alma’s voice is

produced in softer tones than in most dance music tracks, not to sound hard and mechanical but to produce a sense of ease and “girliness”. This also attributes agency to her voice and, lyrically, supports the idea that her body size does not equate with stereotypes of sloth or degeneracy. Her power is in denying old stereotypes and revealing the non-normative as acceptable.

Comparing this to the Finnish class system, where differences between classes are not as pronounced as, for example, in the UK, Alma’s casual mixing of class markers (a “street” hoodie, a “young rebel” leather jacket) can be explained through the Finnish (sometimes utopian) concept of “normalcy”, which entails the idea that standing out too much from the crowd is something to be frowned upon. Olli Löytty (see Lehtonen et al. 2015, 53-60) theorizes the Finnish “normalcy” as something that must be followed so that the values of the homogenic culture can be upheld. This also can be one factor in Alma’s bullying history: sexual minorities and fat bodies both constitute an “outside normalcy” that can lead to social exclusion, as in Alma’s case. It does, however, facilitate a viewpoint on stardom not easily available to US and UK stars, who are accustomed to different class systems. Furthermore, adopting a historical viewpoint, the bigger Finnish female body (which does not challenge a man’s physical strength) was seen as a formidable one (Koivunen 2016, 167; Pääkkölä 2017). A large woman is seen as symbolic of Finnishness insofar as she is untouchable, determined, hardworking, and tough rather than motherly; in this context, the large Finnish woman symbolizes the hardships that post-war Finland had to overcome. In a way, Alma’s success is a continuation of this story: her survival of bullying motivated by her body size and sexuality, her determined career path, her performance of queer fat pride in “Dye My Hair”, and her musical success have already been turned into a demonstration of Finnish national(ist) storytelling, of which this article is a good example: we consider Alma’s success as groundbreaking in Finnish popular music.

Closing words

In this chapter, we provide a glance at the history of Finnish women pop artists since the 1950s and delved into Alma’s music video to consider her trajectory in the global music market. We argue that Alma’s popularity rests on her timeliness in depicting alternative femininity and queerness through her voice, body, and star image in the global millennial context. The music video “Dye My Hair” constructs an alternative femininity, for example by appropriating existing representations, and by parodying them by emphasizing distinct, unforeseen aspects of “traditional” femininities. The music video highlights Alma’s authority by contrasting her with the assumed natural and normal, and by recasting her backup dancers as unfamiliar, for example. Furthermore, bodily and vocal actions set her up as embodying queer pride and body positivity. These representations are empowering: femininity in pop music can also exist outside of its mostly stereotypical frames of reference and expectations. Finnish culture, in our view, has granted Alma strategies for normalizing alternative femininities and bodies, even though she herself experienced the Finnish culture of “normalcy” as restrictive in her youth.

In comparison to many other current artists, Alma and her (constructed) image challenge mainstream pop genre norms of femininity. This is also true of the music video we discuss here and its editing, lighting, choreography, and makeup (in addition to music and lyrics), which afford thought-provoking questions and bring alternative imagery to an expressive field where

we commonly find only narrowly defined femininities. Because of this, we hope and believe that Alma's expressive strategies will be both far-reaching and enduring in the global music industry.

Acknowledgements

This article is a part of Pääkkölä's post doc research project, *Depictions of Finnishness in Popular Music of 2000s*, funded by Finnish Cultural Foundation (2016-2020).

Bibliography

Aho, Arja, and Anne Taskinen. 2004. *Rockin korkeat korot: Suomalaisen naisrockin historia*. Helsinki: WSOY.

Burns, Lori. 2010. "Vocal Authority and Listener Engagement: Musical and Narrative Expressive Strategies in the Songs of Female Pop-Rock Artists 1993-95." In *Sounding Out Pop: Analytical Essays in Popular Music*, edited by Mark Spicer and John Covach, 154-192. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Burns, Lori, and Mélisse Lafrance. 2002. *Disruptive Divas*. New York: Routledge.

Corner, Lewis. 2019. "Alma is ready to be the queer female pop star she always wanted to see." *Gay Times*, 19 March. Accessed 9 April 2019. <https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/amplify/119948/alma-is-ready-to-be-the-queer-female-popstar-she-always-wanted-to-see-amplify-by-gay-times/>.

Frith, Simon. 1996. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1955 (1919). "The 'Uncanny'." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 217-256. London: The Hogart Press.

GLAAD. 2017. "Accelerating Acceptance: A Harris Poll survey of Americans' Acceptance of LGBTQ People." https://www.huffpost.com/entry/20-percent-millennials-lgbtq-glaad-study_n_58dd140be4b05eae031d8f9c.

Gore, Sydney. 2018. "Alma is taking over the world with her clubby collaborations." Accessed 9 April 2019. <http://www.thefader.com/2018/04/03/alma-interview-heavy-rules>.

Gross, Joan. 2005. "Phat." In *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession*, edited by Tom Kulick and Anne Meneley, 63-76. London: Penguin Books.

Hains, Rebecca C. 2012. *Growing up with Girl Power, Girlhood on Screen and in Everyday Life*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

- Harjunen, Hannele, and Katariina Kyrölä. 2007. "Johdanto: Lihavuustutkimusta toisin." In *Koolla on väliä! Lihavuus, ruumisnormit ja sukupuoli*, edited by Hannele Harjunen and Katariina Kyrölä, 9-46. Helsinki: Like.
- Hawkins, Stan. 2004. "On Performativity and Production in Madonna's 'Music'." In *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*, edited by Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennet, and Stan Hawkins, 180-190. Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate.
- Hawkins, Stan, and John Richardson. 2007. "Remodeling Britney Spears: Matters of Intoxication and Mediation." *Popular Music and Society* 30(5): 605-629.
- Henriksson, Juha. 2004. "Jazziskelmän ja naissolistien aika." In *Suomi Soi I: Tanssilavoilta Tangomarkkinoille*, edited by Pekka Gronow, Jukka Lindfors, and Jake Nyman, 193-204. Helsinki: Tammi.
- Jarman-Ivens, Freya. 2011. *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson, Bruce. 2008. "'Quick and Dirty': Sonic Mediations and Affect." In *Sonic Mediations: Body, Sound, Technology*, edited by Carolyn Birdsall and Anthony Enns, 43-60. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Koivunen, Anu. 2016 [2003]. *Performative Histories, Foundational Fictions: Gender and Sexuality in Niskavuori Films*. Helsinki: SKS.
- Kukkonen, Milla. 2016. "Kiusaaminen ja vanhempien sairaudet eivät lannistaneet laulaja Almaa: Ystävät pitivät minut elämässä kiinni." *MeNaiset* 1 December. Accessed 4 November 2019. <https://www.menaiset.fi/artikkeli/ajankohtaista/ihmiset/kiusaaminen-ja-vanhempien-sairaudet-eivat-lannistaneet-laulaja-almaa>.
- Kyrölä, Katariina. 2014. *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lacasse, Serge 2000. *'Listen to My Voice': The Evocative Power of Voice in Recorded Rock Music and Other Forms of Vocal Expression*. PhD diss., University of Liverpool.
- Lehtonen, Mikko, Olli Löytty, and Petri Ruuska. 2015 [2004]. *Suomi toisin sanoen*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Longhurst, Robyn. 2014. "Queering Body Size and Shape: Performativity, the Closet, Shame and Orientation." In *Queer Interventions: Queering Fat Embodiment*, edited by Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, 13-26. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Milestone, Katie, and Anneke Meyer. 2012. *Gender and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Negus, Keith. 1997. "Sinead O'Connor – Musical Mother." In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, edited by Sheila Whiteley, 178-190. London and New York: Routledge.

Nunn, Jerry. 2019. "Finnish singer Alma is taking over the world." *GoPride.com* 21 April 2018. Accessed 18 April 2019. <http://chicago.gopride.com/news/interview.cfm/articleid/1177849>.

Pmrecords.fi. 2019. Accessed 4 November 2019. "Alma." <https://pmrecords.fi/artisti/alma/>

Poikolainen, Janne. 2018. "'Ei oo lasten terveellistä fanittaa tuollaista' – Lasten musiikinkulutuksen muutos ja siihen liittyvät jännitteet poptähti Sannia koskevassa mediakeskustelussa." *Kasvatus & Aika* 12(1): 25-43.

Puustinen, Liina, Iris Ruoho, and Anna Mäkelä. 2006. "Feministisen mediatutkimuksen näkökulmat." In *Sukupuolishow*, edited by Anna Mäkelä, Liina Puustinen, and Iris Ruoho, 15-44. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena. 2019. "Nicki Minaj in 'Anaconda': Intersectional Feminist Fat Studies, Sexuality and Embodiment." In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*, edited by Lori A. Burns and Stan Hawkins, 361-379. London: Bloomsbury.

Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena. 2017. "Mahtava peräsin ja pulleat purjeet: lihavuus, naiskuva ja seksuaalisuus kolmessa suomalaisessa populaarimusiikkikappaleessa." *Etnomusikologian vuosikirja* 29: 1-26.

Pääkkölä, Anna-Elena. 2016. *Sound Kinks: Sodomasochistic Erotica in Audiovisual Music Performances*. PhD diss., University of Turku.

Railton, Diane, and Paul Watson. 2011. *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Richardson, John. 2007. "Double-Voiced Discourse and Bodily Pleasures in Contemporary Finnish Rock: the Case of Maija Vilkkumaa." In *Essays on Sound and Vision*, edited by John Richardson and Stan Hawkins, 401-441. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press.

Shanahan, Daniel, and David Huron. 2014. "Heroes and Villains: The Relationship Between Pitch Tessitura and Sociability of Operatic Characters." *Empirical Musicology Review* 9(2).

Taylor, Donald M. 2011. "Bullying: What Can Music Teachers Do?" *Music Educators Journal* 98(1): 41-44.

Vernallis, Carol. 2013. "Music Video's Second Aesthetic?" In *New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, edited by John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman and Carol Vernallis, 437-465. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vernallis, Carol. 2007. "Strange People, Weird Objects: The Nature of Narrativity, Character and Editing in Music Videos." In *Medium Cool: Music videos from Soundies to Cellphones*, edited by Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton, 111-151. Durham: Duke University Press.

Vernallis, Carol. 2001. "The Kindest Cut: Functions and Meanings of Music Video Editing." *Screen* 42(1): 21-48.

Von Bach, Peter, and Ilpo Hakasalo. 1986. *Iskelmän kultainen kirja*. Helsinki: Otava.

Warwick, Jacqueline. 2005 [2004]. "'He's Got the Power': The Politics of Production in Girl Group Music." In *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*, edited by Sheila Whiteley, Andy Bennett, and Stan Hawkins, 191-200. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Warwick, Jacqueline. 2014. "Pop." *Grove Music Online*. Accessed 4 November 2019. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.utu.fi/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002259112?rskey=goE7EG&result=11>.

Whiteley, Sheila. 2000. *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. New York: Routledge.

Wykes, Jackie. 2014. "Introduction: Why Queering Fat Embodiment?" In *Queer Interventions: Queering Fat Embodiment*, edited by Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, 1-12. Farnham: Ashgate.

Discography

Alma. "Dye My Hair". In *Dye My Hair* EP. Warner Music Finland/PME Records. 2016.

Audiovisual Material

Alma. 2016. *Dye My Hair*. Music video. Directed by Youth Hymns. Released 16 December. Accessed 4 November 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6LULI0GS6M>