

Vuletic, Dean: *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*. London: Bloomsbury 2018. ISBN: 978-1-4742-7626-9; XV, 272 pp., 7 bw illus.

**Rezensioniert von:** Klaus Nathaus, Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History, University of Oslo

A „mainstream“ event that has come to represent marginal identities, a celebration of worthless „kitsch“ that is worth tens of millions of Euros to its hosts, a presentation of national clichés in the name of „Eurovision“, and a television show that now reaches hundreds of millions of viewers each year, but has rarely produced international stars: contradictions like these make the European Song Contest (ESC) and its history a veritable conundrum. However, historians have seldom tried to unpick it, possibly because it appears too „light-weight“ to warrant „serious“ analysis. Since its first instalment in 1956, critics have frequently treated the event as a bit of a joke, while its fans have come to express their enthusiasm with a healthy dose of self-irony. In contrast to common flippancy, Dean Vuletic ascribes the ESC an important role in the history of post-war Europe. Pointing to the remarkable longevity and the popular participation the contest encouraged, he proposes that it is a fruitful site to study European values and the cultural diplomacy between European nation states.

Vuletic's book is largely based on primary sources from the archives of international organisations, most importantly the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), as well as national broadcasters in Czechia, Poland and Germany, which enables him to get both Eastern and Western European experiences into view. The study covers the period from 1945 until 2016 and is divided into five chapters, three of them on the Cold War years, two on the time since 1990. Beginning with the organisational history of the contest as part of the programme exchange within the EBU in chapter one, Vuletic explores a variety of pertinent topics. In chapter two, he considers how the display of nations on the ESC stage related to the idea of Europe and argues that „the contest has been more effective in fashioning na-

tional identities rather than shaping a European one“ (p. 10). Chapter three looks at the attitude of Eastern European states toward the event and shows that overlapping interests, practical co-operation and migrating performers (like the Czech singer Karel Gott, who represented Austria at the ESC in 1968) traversed the boundaries between the blocs and passed through the Iron Curtain. Apparently, relationships in European broadcasting were never as hostile as the political bloc confrontation suggests. Eastern European broadcasting organisations tried to establish the Intervention Song Contest (ISC, 1977–1980) as a viable Eastern Bloc alternative to the ESC. But the short-lived event never managed to step outside the shadow of the Western contest, which supplied the ISC with artists and was broadcast in Eastern Europe. Vuletic explains the ISC's problems with a lack of cultural, economic and political coherence as well as a technological gap between East and West (p. 100).

Chapter four moves on to the post-1989 period and is concerned with the attempts of (South) Eastern European nations like Georgia, Croatia, Azerbaijan and Turkey to establish favourable relations with „old“ Europe. The fifth and last chapter on „the values of Eurovision“ focuses on the celebration of cultural and sexual diversity that has become a prominent feature of the ESC, at least since 1998, when the transgender singer Dana International won the contest for Israel and the live audience was placed next to the stage, making apparent to television viewers to what extent the event was cherished by gay men. The other value Vuletic sees expressed in the contest is democracy. Since audiences began to phone in to support their favourite act following a change of rules in 1997, the event has turned into „Europe's biggest election“ (p. 1). Further aspects such as the (Anglo-)Americanisation of popular music, the financing of the contest and the allegation that audiences from certain countries help each other for political reasons and keep „better“ songs from winning the contest are dealt with throughout the course of the book. This comprehensiveness makes Vuletic's study highly useful.

What the book does not offer though is an overarching argument. The conclusion,

for instance, mostly presents more empirical examples and offers in lieu of a reflection on the essence of the contest a claim that reads more like the demand of a stakeholder than a historian's interpretation: „[T]he ESC needs to rediscover its history of cultural diversity and social criticism, the most laudable qualities of the contest that were especially notable during the Cold War but were afterwards dumbed down by Anglicization and commercialism, and to consciously display the cultural interconnectedness that really defines European identity in the post-war era“ (p. 215). This blunt statement sits uneasily with Vuletic's own analysis. Has not the celebratory display of diversity coincided with the Anglicization and commercialism since the 90s, and have these forces not so much „dumbed down“ the contest (which was hardly intellectual fireworks to begin with) than pushed for a kind of cosmopolitanism that may have facilitated the performance of marginal identities more than any explicit „social criticism“?<sup>1</sup>

Concomitantly, the book's unspecific title suggests a relationship between song contest and post-war Europe, but the study never fully clarifies the exact nature of this relationship. Was the ESC a sort of commentary of political developments in Europe? Was it a mirror of identities, a site for the negotiation of values or an instrument of cultural diplomacy? Was it a motor of European integration, and if so, how did this revue of musical fluff and national clichés forge bonds and encourage identification among people of different nationalities? Was the contest really as politically symbolic as Vuletic frequently states, or was it rather irrelevant for politics? The 2014 instalment, when the bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst won the competition for Austria before two weeks later the country's right-wing populists increased their mandate in the European parliament (p. 209), suggests that pop may not be a reliable indicator for the political culture of a country.

Lacking conceptual reflection, Vuletic's book does not sufficiently address the many contradictions that make the ESC such an interesting puzzle. Evaluating the various lines of interpretation, his literal reading of the contest and its songs seems less convincing.

I think that the key to an adequate understanding of the ESC lies in its organisation, whose genesis Vuletic traces in the first chapter. There he makes clear that the contest had not been conceived as a means to foster European cultural integration but as a form of co-operation that was driven by the „practical internationalists“ (p. 30) of the European Broadcasting Union in order to produce and exchange content in a cost-effective way. Technical and financial considerations shaped a venture that got the name „Eurovision“, but was devoid of visions for a culturally and politically unified Europe. The technocratic, pragmatic character of the contest becomes apparent in the scope of potential contestants. In Principle, these could hail from the whole European Broadcasting Area, which was defined in the early 1930s and stretched to the West of the USSR and as far as North Africa and the Levant. In practical terms, it allowed for the inclusion of Yugoslavia (1961) and Israel (1973) already during the Cold War era. True to the technocratic heritage, the political institutions of Europe never had a sustained interest in using the contest as a means to consciously foster cultural coherence among the European people.

The consequence of this organisational set-up was a display of the most banal nationalism<sup>2</sup>, which both integrated nations and was open to performances of marginal identities. In the relative absence of a shared political vision or even support from the European political institutions, it appears that the competition itself attracted the attention of Europeans and mobilised considerable resources from national stakeholders. While the ESC may not have provided an opportunity to demonstrate cultural excellence, not turning up at all at this prestige tournament was not an option. It would have meant loss of face, comparable to failing to qualifying for the football world cup finals. Huge investments on increasingly

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of cosmopolitanism see Motti Regev, *Pop-Rock Music. Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*, London 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Two pertinent references that could have opened up Vuletic's analysis to further explore the meaning of nationalism in the ESC are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983, and Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London 1995.

lavish productions, tongue-in-cheek performances that subvert the generic conventions of Europop and the professionalism of polished pop-productions are among the face-saving strategies commonly chosen by competing nations; the allegation that the game is rigged (frequently voiced by British commentators who regard „their“ music business as superior) is yet another move to avoid humiliation. Put differently, it may well be that nations participate in the ESC not because they have something in particular to say, but because they face the danger of being embarrassed in front of transnational experts and audiences.<sup>3</sup>

Such speculation is beyond the remit of a review, but it appears necessary to briefly illustrate how pop in general and the ESC in particular might be taken seriously while still accounting for its essential triviality. Dean Vuletic's book is an important intervention in this research. Less invested in conceptual thinking, but comprehensive in its coverage, it will become a go-to book for any scholar who is interested in the song contest and its history.

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<sup>3</sup>For more on international prestige competitions see Tobias Werron, On Public Forms of Competitions, in: *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies* 14 (2014), pp. 62–76, and Klaus Nathaus, Music in Transnational Transfers and International Competitions: Germany, Britain, and the US in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, in: Mario Dunkel / Sina A. Nitzsche (eds.), *Popular Music and Public Diplomacy. Transnational and Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, Bielefeld 2018 (forthcoming).