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# “So Disarmingly European”. Eurovision Song Contest and the European Identity

Lucio Spaziante

On March 18, 2020, due to Coronavirus, the 65th annual edition of *Eurovision Song Contest* (ESC), which in May should have been held in Rotterdam (The Netherlands), was postponed to 2021. A major television music event, the only one having expressly been thought of as an “European” event, as well as one of the longest-running programs on world television (being born in 1956), for the first time in its history, it did not go on the air. But despite its long duration and its undoubted relevance, ESC owns contradictory traits, if one thinks that during some phases and in some countries, it has been totally ignored or in any case for a long time neglected, with a reputation that has often seen it associate with adjectives such as retro, kitsch or camp (Raykoff 2007, p. 1).

Nonetheless, international media still continue following attentively its events, and also it is a highly studied object from the point of view of academic literature, in the most diverse national contexts, also for its paradoxical characters making it an extremely interesting case under various aspects: political, economic, media, sociological, semiotic, etc. (Ginsburgh and Noury 2008; Fricker and Gluhovic 2013; Motschenbacher 2016; Yair 2019). But above all, its complexity and contradictions make it a perfect example to investigate its “European” nature, as also emerges from the recent streaming live event created on 16 May 2020, replacing the event planned before the Covid-19 emergency with the presence of a live audience. On this time, among the many guests there was also Björn Ulvaeus, a former member of Abba (the cult band, famous for winning the ESC’s 1974 edition with *Waterloo*), saying in a pre-recorded video about ESC: “It still remains one of the most genuinely joyous events of the TV era and it is so disarmingly European”. So, what did Ulvaeus actually mean by saying “so disarmingly European”? Is it a positive attribute, alluding to ESC’s ability to eliminate contrasts? Something that would seem

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unresponsive to reality, given the controversies still in force. Or, did he allude to the naive simplicity of ESC, which however appears to be an unrewarding attribute?

We will try to argue around this question later, thinking about how this singing contest can be defined as European or be representative of Europe (Sassatelli 2009).

## 1 History of ESC

First, it is necessary to retrace some stages of the long history of ESC, whose meaning has varied over time. One wonders why there is only one and lonely annual television event that is characterized by the title of “European”. It is as if only once a year we have been remembering to be part of a medial Europe, which sounds a bit strange.

Everything started many years ago, following a chain of events originating from the end of the Second World War and the new international order that had to be built. Europe was divided into two blocks, the western one capitalist and the eastern one communist. This division was also depicted inside the creation, on February 13, 1950, of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), a media network organization that explicitly wanted to be apart from political institutions. It was born in a mirror-like way to the newly born eastern twin named OIR, which in addition to the European countries of the Eastern bloc then came to include, among others, Cuba, Vietnam, the People’s Republic of China and North Korea.

As is typical of many European institutions that continue to the present day, EBU was not born with political and value intentions, but as a simple technical consortium, in order to mainly facilitate issues related to copyright and to the use of frequencies (Henrich-Franke 2013, pp. 34–35). The Swiss Marcel Bezençon, one of the key figures in the organization, was who had the intuition of a sort of Common European Media Market, where the circulation of programs between the various national networks could reduce management and production costs.

The televising of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953 (. . .) was the first multinational transmission of a television program and allowed the audience in five European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands) to watch the same television event simultaneously. The coronation was the first real European transnational television event (Henrich-Franke 2013, p. 36).

This major event, not yet managed by EBU, was what prompted the creation of a new entity called Eurovision, adopting the idea of George Campey that the journalist launched on “Evening Standard” on November 5, 1951. The founding meeting was held in London on September 8, 1953, so paradoxically, given the current British climate of Brexit, we see how the birth of the media Europe was instead baptized in Great Britain (Fickers and Lommers 2010, p. 237).

The Eurovision was therefore born as a program exchange network between different national broadcasts, with a principle of solidarity that favoured small European states provided with less media production means. Most of the content

was sports, in addition to the news and just a small part of the programs was devoted to culture and entertainment. The sharing and circulation of content had to be facilitated beyond linguistic differences and, for this reason, a sort of standard was defined according to which telecasts were separated into three different elements: footage, sound effects and commentary voices.

This made it easy to keep the first two and replace the original comment with that of the commentator who spoke in the local language (Fickers 2012, p. 20).

This practice also had an impact on the television language, which acquired as its own an enunciative practice that provided for the overlapping of several discursive levels, within the same surface, coming from different space-time sources. In this way, still today, the spatial authenticity effect coming from the sound effects of a German stadium where a football game is held (in these Covid-19 emergency days, without supporters in the stands but clearly hearing the players' voices), can be mixed to the comment of a commentator who is at the same time located in Italy, without affecting the perception of authenticity. What appears natural today is the result of an audiovisual and cultural convention to which the Eurovision has contributed, since the beginning of television broadcasting in Europe.

Over time, the number of programs has significantly increased, especially soccer sports events such as the “old” European Champion Clubs’ Cup or the UEFA European Championship. They were introduced by the Eurovision logo and the related famous hymn (Prelude to the *Te Deum* by Charpentier) which served as a theme song, at the same time allowing the technical development of the connection. That logo and that music were able to create in the audience the feeling of participating to an important and international event, aggregated to a European community which in those moments rose to existence, even more than it could actually exist in reality (Fabbri 2013, p. vii).

Among the European television events, beyond sport, there is the famous case of *Jeux sans frontières* (only in Great Britain called *It's A Knockout*), born in 1965 for the will of General De Gaulle to create a show that consolidated the Franco-German friendship with Adenauer. The program was based on the *Intervilles* model, a French game show where different cities were competing, and which in turn had been created on the format of an Italian show, *Campanile Sera*, hosted by Mike Bongiorno from 1959 to 1962 (Bourdon 2013, p. 116). *Jeux sans frontières* was proposed to a large group of European nations that agreed to participate, and so it became

one of the longest-running and most followed productions in the history of television: 30 editions for 300 evenings with Eurovision connections, more than five billion viewers in Europe and shares that often surpassed those of the Olympic Games. In the 70s the whole of Italy stopped to see the show, ratings often reached 20 million viewers per episode (Fulvi 2015. My translation).

*Jeux sans frontières* continued after a few years' suspension until 1999, but with a much lesser impact than before.

## 2 ESC's Troubled Identity

It is therefore in this European media context that ESC developed, with its wide international reach and deep longevity, if you think that it began in a post-war context with the original name of the *Grand Prix de Eurovision Song Competition*, and it continues until to date. The event was born at a time when the various European nations were starting first experiments of international broadcasting, while actually an internal television programming had not yet been developed. It should be remembered that Fifties' television had just one or two channels and the airplay lasted only for a few hours during the day.

The technology required to make multinational transmission possible was very new. This was to be risky, but hopefully a ground-breaking process. Seven of the founding EBU nations participated in the inaugural event, including Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany, Italy and France (Wellings and Kalman 2019, p. 8).

A confident opening of the borders after the war trauma was the initial spark, searching for a collaboration between nations. The path taken through ESC was the encouraging of a trans-national European identity creation, first of all through the chance of *imagining a community* (Anderson 2006).

It should be remembered that in ESC formally it is not the artists who are competing with the songs, but the nations, which introduces a serious and direct involvement of what can be called a "national identity" (McCrone and Bechhofer 2015).

If the starting stakes were implicitly based on a value and political intent, then one can wonder if the initial premises on the role of ESC have been maintained. That is, what has ESC actually meant in its long journey, and what does it mean today, medially, socially and politically?

The image that on a visual and musical level ESC has acquired over time is that of a kitsch, retro and camp show, as already mentioned, where you could see and listen to music of not great value, with artists who especially in recent years in individual countries have come selected starting from talent shows and reality shows.

To quickly represent the negative image attributed to ESC, it is sufficient to mention the case of Great Britain, where the BBC for decades has chosen as commentator Terry Wogan, famous for his very ironic (to say the least) and cutting-edge conduct, which in fact turned ESC into a comedy show in *Takeshi's Castle's* style (TBS, 1986–1990). The character of his television commentary has recently been the subject of strong criticism for it having produced a local audience which has been strongly conditioned from a pro-British and strongly Eurosceptic point of view, and which was led to look at European cultural production as something between alien, exotic and ridiculous, linguistically, culturally and musically.

The function of Wogan's humour (. . .) is not to gird viewers against inevitable embarrassment but rather to unite them by pointing out aspects of the contest that are inscrutable or seemingly absurd, and offering readings of those aspects, thereby constructing a discursive

community that understands itself as perhaps a part of, but certainly different from, the rest of Europe (Fricker 2013, p. 63)

What instead makes ESC an interesting phenomenon beyond an aesthetic judgement and the many configurations it has assumed over time, is its very existence which can be viewed as paradoxical in an European reality so eternally crossed by political crises, and in a media landscape continuously changing. ESC has remained, in its way, a staple managing to survive and even increasing its success in terms of audience. Precisely its own history and the changes that have taken place within it, in relation to the participating nations and the changes to the regulations, make it an almost unique object of study, beyond the intrinsic value of the musical contents.

In its 70 years of life there has been a continuous succession of nations in ESC, that have entered or exited, depending on economic situations, internal conflicts or political conflicts. Just Italy, as instance, first in the 1980s and 1990s experienced an occasional and irregular participation, even deciding since 1997 to definitively abandon the event. It only returned in 2010, however placed among the Big Five, that is the founding nations which, on the basis of a bigger economic contribution, acquire the right to participate in the final. However, it should be specified that Italy represents a particular case because the international relevance of the Sanremo Festival. In this country it completely obscures the importance of ESC, which is however experienced as a marginal event, or not primary in any case.

In the history of ESC there have been numerous political controversies, sometimes related to voting rules, such as in the case of Turkey which joined in 1975 but since 2013 has withdrawn its presence due to disagreements (on the other hand, the Turkish singer Senhit has participated several times in representation of the Republic of S. Marino). Ukraine and Russia, on the other hand, had their complicated events linked to withdrawals for political conflicts.

Finally, there is the question of participants' European identity: among the members, in addition to Israel, which since a long time has been participating as part of the EBU, there is also Australia, where ESC was regularly broadcast as being part of EBU, which since 2015 has become a participating nation. But other nations not exactly European, such as Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan have also been included. The latter after winning the 2011 edition hosted the final in Baku the following year.

What appears as a distinctively “European” annual festival of culture is a product of the need to represent a multiplicity of states with diverse musical and historical traditions within a format constructed around the belief in the existence of some sort of European commonality that legitimises the format (Wellings and Kalman 2019, pp. 16–17).

### 3 European Identity and National Identities

Besides being a fertile case to study, ESC certainly represents a potentially rich heritage, remaining a cultural construction shared by millions of people. An annual event in which those using the word “European” are people and not just political representatives.

The Eurovision empire of song is shaped in the context of a cultural institution that serves the raising of “a common European awareness”, one of the prime goals of the European Commission and the EU elites who, since the 1990s (and especially the Maastricht Treaty), have been striving to promote the European idea through the medium of “culture” to the absent demos of Europe (. . .). Audiovisual policy has been one of the key sites for creating Europe as a popular master narrative, and television has been capitalized as a powerful field for the invention of new symbols (Tragaki 2013, p. 2).

If there is a negative trait emerging from various opinions, it is that actually ESC does not constitute, nor does it propose, a real form of European identity, but it tends to reproduce individual national oppositions and local belonging, rather than collective feelings. On the other hand, it would be strange if this would not have been happening. In fact, how could a single musical television event, moreover characterized by a competitive and non-collaborative form, feed a feeling of collective belonging not finding other places to express itself? Therefore, ESC does not constitute an effective narrative on “united Europe” but rather represents a mirror of its own contradictions.

What should be placed at the centre of the discussion on ESC is that in any case we are not talking about a parliament, or even a congress of delegates from the EU, but about a live television singing contest, so it is above all around the show, on television, and above all to music what we need to talk about.

This is a world of music in which the popular as a genre is reinvested with notions of place, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, class, nation—new distinctions, in other words, embodied in the translocal, transnational, interracial nexus of realities performed in the “European popular”, the Eurovision song, today. This “European popular” emerging on the ESC stage, is destined to colonize the world, or at least the music market, in a process where genres from all over the globe are rediscovered and transformed into signs of a liberating diversity made in Europe (Tragaki 2013, p. 8).

As already mentioned, songs in the contest represent individual nations, therefore there is also a question of cultural representation and of correspondence with respect to a local stereotype and more generally a European stereotype.

The contest as ritually re-narrated by presenters and participants might be considered a historical fiction in terms of the founding myths of post-WW2 reconstruction, post-Cold-War unity and de-historicised diversity on which it depends – a recent past that Eurovision viewers are invited to wish Europe had really enjoyed (Baker 2019, p. 117).

In several cases, the individual nations have in fact drawn, during the various editions, from their own internal and local narratives, or have readjusted and reconstructed, or “built”, media performances that evoke elements of their national identity. One example among others is

the 2018 Danish entry by the singer Rasmussen, meanwhile, opened a dense intertextual web connecting Eurovision, the television series *Vikings* (2013–) and *Game of Thrones* (2011–19), and Scandinavian “Viking” history. Rasmussen, and the five long-haired, bearded white men who joined him on stage waving tattered flags and marching in long black coats, were widely called “the Danish Vikings” by fan media and commentators (Baker 2019, p. 111).

## 4 Cultural Identity and Otherness

Another relevant issue concerns some frequent situations when the individual national representation was questioned, due to the singer’s ethnic origins. This is the case of Gaitana, an Ukrainian artist of a Congolese father, about which a far-right Ukrainian party member had declared, in the 2012 edition, that “Ukraine is represented by a person who does not belong to our race” (Karpyak 2012). In the same edition there is also the significant case of Loreen who won the contest representing Sweden, being defined by the media as “of Moroccan Berber origin” (Fricker 2013, p. 75). On this occasion, the right-wing politician Björn Söder published a post on Facebook, asking provocatively if it was really Sweden having been won the contest, attracting strong criticism, even from within his own party (Forsberg 2012). A story that has been repeating in a similar way more recently, with even more articulated elements that therefore need a proper premise.

As every year, in February 2019 was held in Italy the Sanremo Festival, a here already cited song contest, very famous at home and abroad. Since 2015 the Festival winner has the automatic right, unless waiver or delayed acceptance, to represent Italy in ESC. This was the case of Mahmood, a born and raised near Milan singer, from an Egyptian father and a Sardinian mother with whom he regularly speaks in dialect. His tune *Soldi* contains some Arabic sentences, as well as it shows musical elements, in singing style and in melody, in some way attributable to Arabic music.

That *Soldi* could win what is widely regarded as a traditional festival of Italian music, seemed to be a moment redefining “Italianess” (Webster 2019).

And not surprisingly, this success received a comment on social media from the right-wing political leader Matteo Salvini, at the time Italian Minister of Interior, who was asking if we could talk about “Italian” music in the Mahmood’s case. He also added some populist comments about the “detachment between political elites and the people”, to which Luigi Di Maio (leader of the Five Star Movement) associated himself too, given that Mahmood’s win was due to the crucial contribution of a jury, and not of an audience voting.<sup>1</sup>

On the basis of what we have already seen for Sweden, these political comments are somewhat predictable, while more noteworthy is what happened in Tel Aviv, site of the ESC’s last edition on May 14, 2019, in a press conference preceding the final.

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<sup>1</sup>See for a brief summary Hawlin (2019).

Here Mahmood has been the subject of embarrassing questions from international journalists, not completely documented on his story and work, who were reproducing equally stereotyped points of view, albeit of a different kind if compared to the populist ones. From an Israeli journalist he was asked how he felt about being on stage in Israel, given his Egyptian father and Arabic sentences in the song. His shrewd response was: “I am one hundred per cent Italian, I lived with my mother, so I feel as an Italian singer in Israel”.<sup>2</sup> In another question he was asked, taking him for granted been of Muslim religion, how he could practice Ramadan because of ESC, and he replied specifying he is a Christian. Finally, a Macedonian journalist has asked if he was coming from the *ghetto*—using that proper word and creating so a bit of linguistic perplexity until, thanks to the interpreter’s help, he has specified that he was just coming from a suburban neighbourhood of Milan. The context of the press conference was becoming so embarrassing that it provoked a Twitter post by Dominic Cummins (@ThePenisDeMilo) saying: “European ‘press’, please stop with the stupid questions at the Eurovision press conferences. The year is 2019 – maybe think harder in advance about what you are asking and be more considerate?”.<sup>3</sup>

## 5 Conclusions

ESC offers various discursive and value components interconnecting each other, and it owes its cultural depth to its long history and the vastness of the nations involved and of number of potential viewers. It is a high budget television show but it is also a musical performance, partly made live, partly resulting of videos and post-production editing. At the same time, it exhibits an organization of different media networks and nations, outlining a territory that is much more than European, going from Russia to Australia. So, it is a real *brand*, very well known in the world, although full of contradictions and with values not always positively considered. On the other hand, it represents a sort of permanent laboratory constantly changing, just as the European identity itself is mutant and problematic, if we think that ESC includes an entity like Great Britain which contributed to its foundation, then putting itself in an historically Eurosceptic position. It represents a culturally relevant media showcase also thanks to the shared integration of LGBTI+ issues (Gluhovic 2013), as we are reminded by the winning of the drag queen Conchita Wurst in Copenhagen’s 2014 final, as well as, for opposite reasons, by the Hungary withdrawal from the event, which took place in November 2019. But above all ESC is a privileged observation point for examining the “public perception of otherness (musical, cultural-ethnic and political), offering interpretative ideas on “processes

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v%44Zy7rbZ9lyg>.

<sup>3</sup>See <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/05/16/mahmood-imbarazzo-alleurovision-ce-il-ramadam-come-fai-e-il-cantante-gela-cosi-il-cronista/5183759/>

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of identity building in change” (Barra et al. 2019, pp. 340–341. My translation). What is and what is not European, what is and what is not French, Swedish, Ukrainian, Italian is questioned from time to time in a textual apparatus that places radically different cultural entities in the same physical place, in dialogue with each other.

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