

Wild dances and dying wolves: simulation, essentialization, and national identity at the Eurovision Song Contest

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Eurovision as a site for the public representation of the nation and explores the tendency towards simulation in such representations. The contest's transnational audience and implication in commercial practices create pressures towards representing the nation through simplified, well-known images. A critique of globalization from south-east Europe argues that cultural production from marginalized countries which emphasizes local distinctiveness is a sign of structural inequality. This critique is tested against representational strategies from Ukraine, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. Eurovision is then related to tourism through an analysis of the representation of the Mediterranean in Eurovision performances, which reflect symbolic hierarchies constructed by travel writing since the Enlightenment. Finally, the paper considers the overarching representational power exerted by host states.

Key words: Eurovision Song Contest, popular music, folklore, national identity, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Ukraine

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This paper seeks to explore the tendency towards simulation in contemporary public representations of the nation through a historical account of the representation of national tradition in the Eurovision Song Contest since 2004. Eurovision offers two forms of opportunity for nations to be represented: the production of a live performance (and often a promotional video) by each competitor, and the promotion of the host city and country on the part of the state broadcaster organizing the event. This paper contends that the nature of the Eurovision audience (with viewers in more than 40 countries inside and outside Europe) and the commercial practices in which Eurovision is implicated create pressures towards public representations which play on simplified, well-known images of a country or region. In the process, representations live up to televisual constructions of the nation rather than the complexity of the nation itself.

The Eurovision Song Contest belongs to an “international event culture” of competition between states, although arguably differs from the content of most such events (sport) because the ingredients of participation – music, language, and dance – are all potential indicators of national culture (Björnberg, 2007, p. 15). Dayan and Katz (1992) see Eurovision as a “media event” in the sense that it highlights a “central value” or “aspect of collective memory” (pp. ix, 6), such as the “new age of pan-European co-operation” (Feddersen & Lyttle, 2003) said to have inspired it since its birth in 1956. There are strong grounds to also view Eurovision as a “media spectacle”, as Kellner (2003) terms cultural phenomena which embody social values and dramatize conflicts. The definitions of media events and media spectacles are similar, but their implications diverge. Dayan and Katz present a positive, Durkheimian reading in which watching media events on television integrates society (Couldry, 2003, pp. 56-8). Kellner (2003) more pessimistically draws his view of

media spectacle drawn from Debord, and warns that it works to perpetuate “hegemonic configurations of corporate and state power” (p. 12). The measure of European integration achieved through Eurovision could this be regarded as either consensual (following Dayan and Katz) or hegemonic (following Kellner).

The production of media spectacle involves a large degree of simulation in Baudrillard (1994)’s sense of the reproduction of something which has never existed in the first place (p. 6). Baudrillard’s early work on the consumer society (1998) identified “kitsch” as one sort of simulation, which contained “signs” and “allegorical references” rather than “real signification” (p. 110). He later developed this into the idea of hyperreality, in which nothing but simulation exists. The lack of social and historical contest in later Baudrillard is problematic, but the concepts of hyperreality, simulation and implosion (the breakdown of boundaries between formerly disparate spheres) are nonetheless important in understanding contemporary society (Best, 1994, pp. 54-5). One should therefore ask, with Kellner, what conflicts are being dramatized and symbolically resolved through the simulations taking place at Eurovision.

The sudden predominance of non-western European countries in the competition (between 2001 and 2007, Eurovision was won by Estonia, Latvia, Turkey, Ukraine, Greece, Finland and Serbia) suggests that a key conflict surrounding the event in the 2000s has been European eastward “enlargement” and its associated tensions. Before 1989, the only eastern European state to take part in Eurovision was Yugoslavia, as a deliberate effort to signal its difference from the Soviet bloc (Vuletić, 2007, p. 84). Most Yugoslav successor states, other central European and Balkan countries, the Baltic states, and Russia competed sporadically during the 1990s (only Croatia maintained an unbroken record). Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia-Montenegro made their debuts in 2003-05, followed by the Czech Republic and the ex-Soviet

republics of the Caucasus in 2006-08. Eurovision's own "enlargement", when a semi-final allowed all interested states to take part annually, occurred in 2004, the same year that 12 new member states were admitted to the European Union. When Bolin (2006) argues that the increase in eastern European participation has exposed Eurovision's political dimension as "a discursive tool" in defining Europeanness or striving for Europeanization (pp. 190-1), the argument recalls Kellner's idea of media spectacles as dramatization of conflict.

A further development associated with the increase in eastern European participation is the prominence of "a folkloristic musical style" in many of those countries' entries (Björnberg, 2007, p. 21). The staging of folklore involves the representation of tradition. Kapferer (1988), an anthropologist, argues that the construction of any tradition should be viewed as "an act of essentialism" because it entails selecting certain aspects and marginalizing others (p. 211). Applying this to the Eurovision Song Contest, essentialization would occur when a performance involves the construction of a national tradition (e.g. through folklore) or a tradition of Europeanness. For Karakasidou (1997), also an anthropologist, essentialism occurs when "the innate and primordial characteristics" of a national group are emphasized (p. 78). Essentialism may also be viewed from a post-colonialist perspective, as in the work of Bhabha (1994/2004), where it involves a claim to cultural authenticity or purity (p. 83), or Todorova (1994), who drew on Said's *Orientalism* to argue that the Balkans too had been subject to "othering" by the West (p. 454). The very concept of 'essence', according to Clifford (1988), is thus "a political cultural invention".

These power relationships underpin the more restricted definition of essentialization given by Shay (2002) in his work on state folk dance ensembles, where generalized or region-specific music and costume are used "to cover the

purported musical output of an entire country” (p. 14). Shay extends Appadurai’s claim that the state exerts “taxonomic control over difference” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 39) into a case that state sponsorship of a performance implies that the nation as a whole is being represented (Shay, 2002, pp. 28-9). This logic could be applied to Eurovision, which similarly takes place under the sponsorship of states (and sometimes with direct involvement of folk dance ensembles: the Croatian ensemble Lado supplied backing vocalists for the national entry in 2005 and 2006). However, Appadurai goes on to argue that “taxonomic control over difference” is only one way in which nation-states exploit transnational media flows. They also create “international spectacle[s] to domesticate difference”, and hold out “the fantasy of self-display on some sort of global or cosmopolitan stage” to small groups (Appadurai, 1996, p. 39). This should be taken into account in the case of Eurovision, given the strong grounds for viewing Eurovision as spectacle.

Drawing on the notions of simulation and essentialism, I first examine the representational strategies employed by Ruslana, the Ukrainian winner in 2004. Of all the recent simulations of national tradition at Eurovision, this proved the most appealing to viewers across Europe, and was followed by a marketing campaign for an English-language album along the same lines. I then consider Eurovision in light of a south-east European critique of globalization which maintains that cultural producers in the Balkans are compelled to become “resellers of local color” (Ditchev, 2002, pp. 246-7) by a foreign gaze which exoticizes difference – a pressure towards simulation. This critique is illustrated by an analysis of recent Eurovision entries from former Yugoslavia. Eurovision is then related to the structures of travel and tourism which have preceded it and interact with it. Lastly, I discuss the greater power of host states and cities to produce a public representation of the nation.

Ruslana: modernity and simulation

Ruslana's winning Eurovision entry "Wild dances" (2004) subjected a successful domestic product to a transnational gaze: Eurovision viewers rewarded it with 280 points, awarding victory to Ruslana and enabling Ukraine to host Eurovision in 2005. The "Wild dances" project can be seen as an example of essentialization on several levels. Its domestic development involved the essentialization of tradition in choosing to base its representation on the dances, costume and rituals of the Hutsul people, who live in the Carpathian region of western Ukraine. Since the Hutsuls were already a "focal point" of folkloric representation in Ukraine (Shay, 2002, p. 41), the ongoing Ukrainian tradition of representing Hutsuls was itself an essentialization in that it depicted them as a pure and timeless culture untouched by modernity or industry. However, the tension between authenticity and inauthenticity in Ruslana's presentation also provides grounds for considering the project as a *simulation* without any referent, of the type identified by Baudrillard.

The distinctiveness of Ruslana's music to Ukrainians (including the Ukrainian diaspora) derives from supposedly ancient Hutsul songs, rituals, and musical instruments, supplemented by contemporary pop instruments (electric guitar, synthesizer) and lavishly produced videos. Three singles from Ruslana's 2003 album *Diki tanci (Wild dances)* established her performance persona and 'brand' on the Ukrainian pop scene. By the time of the third domestic single, "Oj zagraj mi muzichenku" ("Play, musician"), the brand was well-established enough to be abstracted through a video which placed Hutsul dancers in Crimea (Ruslana, 2004d), another region of the country with a distinctive image of place (the Crimea is

Ukraine's main tourist centre). When Ruslana was selected to take part in Eurovision 2004, she was already a popular domestic singer. The song "Wild dances" was a new composition in the style of the *Diki tanci* album, with verses in both English and Ukrainian to improve its intelligibility.

Transferring "Wild dances" to Eurovision entailed a shift of meaning for its essentialized components. Since Eurovision is contested between states, the representations performed there appear to represent the nation as a whole. The specific elements of "Wild dances", identifiable as Hutsul while they remained within Ukraine, were thus instead attached to Ukraine itself. According to promotional material on Ruslana's website, such elements included "powerful and permeating ethnic drums", cries of "Hey", foot-stamping, whip-blows, and the *trembitas*, a horn which must supposedly be produced by "craftsmen" from a lightning-felled tree (Ruslana, 2004a). The introduction of "Wild dances" itself was an unaccompanied *trembitas*. Ruslana's post-Eurovision marketing made much of the age and mysticism of her sources. As the sleeve notes to her English-language CD read:

In the very heart of Europe in the majestic kingdom of the Carpathian mountains there lives an ancient culture of the mountains that possesses unique mystic rituals, mountainous rhythms and dances. Ruslana has united the mysteries of the mountains with a new energy and power. (Ruslana, 2004e)

This presentation shared much with the marketing of "non-Western" world music through images of "rejuvenation, novelty, authenticity, originality, the 'real', and the spiritual" (Taylor, 1997, p. 19). The mountain culture's supposed location at "the very heart of Europe" was also noteworthy as a description of a newly independent country on Europe's perceived eastern margin. However, the construction of world music as "unpolluted by the market system of the late capitalist West" (Taylor, 1997, pp. 19-20)

was not part of the “Wild dances” marketing, which, conversely, relied on that very system for meaning. The lyrics of two Ruslana songs mentioned Britney Spears and Quentin Tarantino, and her post-Eurovision press release spoke of her collecting “unique elements” such as:

New moves and dances, new ethnic sounds and rhythms, new elements of the costumes, new patterns and tattoos, mystic Carpathian rituals and mountain secrets, samples for disco remixes and new melodies for mobile ring-tones... (Ruslana, 2004c)

Essentialization is meant to involve a claim to authenticity. Here, however, the claim was made on behalf of the Hutsul people, not Ruslana; on the contrary, Ruslana’s “ancient” and “Carpathian” persona was intentionally revealed as a simulation. One profile of Ruslana described her as having attended conservatory in Lviv, a city renowned as “the cultural centre of Ukrainian-speaking Ukraine” (Wanner, 1996, p. 141). Besides music, she ran an advertising company with her husband (and producer). She apparently liked to listen “to Buddha Bar, Deep Purple and Bach” (all indicators of modernity), and used “ethnographic expeditions to the Carpathians” to gather her material (WuMag, 2004). The video for her follow-up single to “Wild dances”, “Dance with the wolves”, was originally conceived as a folkloric allegory of human trafficking. It ended up intercut with footage of Ruslana’s participation in the Orange Revolution, which had occurred in the meantime (Ruslana, 2004b).¹ I would like to suggest that this dimension distinguished “Wild dances” from more direct

¹ Ruslana had appeared on stage with opposition politicians at the Independence Square protests in Kiev, and was among the musicians to whose support the opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko referred in his final pre-election speech (Klid, 2007, pp. 119, 129).

representations of folklore at Eurovision such as Scandinavian evocations of Saami culture,² and locates it in the domain of simulation.

Eurovision and the Balkan globalization critique

Ruslana's success, combined with Turkey's victory in 2003 with a pop-folk song, encouraged a "trend of self-consciously 'ethnic' styles" at Eurovision (Solomon, 2007, p. 142). A critical approach to the "Wild dances" project and its aftermath might conclude that marginalized regions of Europe maximize their chances of success in the European entertainment marketplace, dominated by the large economies of north-western Europe, by presenting something exotic and distinctive in an attractively modernized package. Indeed, this has been the response of many academics and critics from south-east Europe to the international achievements of the film director Emir Kusturica, the musician Goran Bregović and the Bulgarian female voice choirs, whose works all depict the Balkans as backward or mystic 'others' to modern 'Europe'. The result, according to Dichev (2002), is that cultural production tends towards entertaining idiosyncrasy rather than "modernist [...] universalism" (pp. 246-7). This is frequently seen as "self-exoticism for western consumption only" (Volcic, 2005, p. 169), but the example of Ruslana (or Nox, a similarly premised Hungarian folk dance group who competed in Eurovision in 2005 after several years' activity in Hungary) suggests that a domestic demand also exists for such products.

The Balkan critique of globalization begins with the efforts of several historians to analyze how the idea of 'eastern Europe' was constructed by western writers and travellers (see Fleming, 2000). However, the film criticism of Iordanova (2001)

² See Jones-Bamman, 2001; Pajala, 2001.

emphasizes that the image of an exotic Balkans “cannot be declared a purely Western project” because Balkan intellectuals have consented to and developed it (p. 56).

Volcic (2005), in an ethnography of Serbian cultural workers, similarly concludes that they engage in borrowing, reproducing and selling back “exotic cultural constructions inherited from the West” (p. 168). Ugrešić (2004b), herself an author, sees contemporary ex-Yugoslav cultural professionals’ work as tending towards “self-orientalization” and affirming “stereotypes of the ‘wild’ and ‘bloody’ Balkans” to better reach western markets (p. 189). Elsewhere, she has even likened the global literary marketplace to a Eurovision Song Contest on the grounds that both demand national “stereotypes” and impose a state of kitsch on European literatures (Ugrešić, 2004a, p. 329).

Ugrešić’s comments invite an examination of recent approaches to Eurovision on the part of the Yugoslav successor states (former Yugoslavia being the main target of her critique). On the basis of the Balkan globalization critique, one would hypothesize that ex-Yugoslav Eurovision entries would emphasize local distinctiveness and folklore. The Serbian entrant in 2004 (Željko Joksimović), who finished as runner-up to Ruslana,³ certainly met this hypothesis: his song “Lane moje” (“My faun”) was based around a melody played on a kaval (wooden flute) by a soloist dressed in a shepherd-like costume, evoking pastoral timelessness (Mikić, 2006). Joksimović was commissioned two years later to compose the Bosnian entry, “Lejla”, which was similarly arranged and staged (musicians positioned in a circle with folkloric

³ His 263 points included a surprising 12 (maximum) points from Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Croatian-Serbian exchange of points was remarked upon in both countries, and cast brief light on the popularity of Serbian pop music in Croatia despite its absence from the national media.

instruments and dressed in white). The Bosnian broadcaster PBS-BiH intended from the outset that the entry's visual identity should "contain elements of old Bosnia-Herzegovinan jewellery and the rich ethno traditions of the people of BiH in a stylized modern variant" (PBS-BiH, 2006). The Bosnian film director Pjer Žalica was hired to direct its promotional video, which was set in old Mostar and included shots of the reconstructed Old Bridge (destroyed in 1993 during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina) and women in folk costume performing handicrafts.

However, the two previous Bosnian entries had used a very different strategy, which narrated similarity and modernity rather than difference. The 2004 entry, "In the disco", was set in a nightclub, and the 2005 entry, "Call me", was explicitly written to celebrate the fiftieth Eurovision ("different flags of nations gather/from the north to the south all standing/side by side"). Its arrangement echoed Swedish schlager (associated through Eurovision through Abba), and its video reinforced its westward-leaning symbolic associations by inserting the performers (a blonde-haired girl group called Feminnem) into archive Eurovision footage and on to Blondie and Eminem record covers. The 'hyper-western' narrative underpinning these presentations indicates that the dynamic identified by the Balkan globalization critique is not the only mode of representing the nation in former Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, the efforts to locate Bosnia within the west (and stage the nation as if it were part of Scandinavia) were themselves an essentialization of a particular quality to stand for the whole, passing over Bosnia-Herzegovina's well-documented ethno-political difficulties and troubled statehood. No less than "Lane moje" or "Lejla", the 2004-05 Bosnian entries therefore conveyed a certain narrative of national identity. Their quasi-Scandinavian Bosnia simulated a country which did not exist outside the idealism of its national broadcaster.

Beyond the Balkans (?): the case of Croatia

By aggregating the countries of south-eastern Europe, the Balkan globalization critique does not call attention to the capacity for cultural production to match up to the varying national identity narratives of individual countries. This is illustrated by Croatia's participation in Eurovision. Croatia's first entry as an independent state (1993) incorporated several conventions from Croatian popular music produced during the war in Croatia (1991-95), when 'Europe' was an important imagined audience.⁴ Musical, textual, and stylistic techniques were used to position Croatia within Europe (Ceribašić, 2000, p. 225; Pettan, 1998, pp. 23-5), and Croatian pre-selections for Eurovision during the war followed the example of many national television events by incorporating "key symbols of Croatian identity" (Senjković,

⁴ The song, "Don't ever cry", stereotypically depicted a wartime Croatian woman praying for an 18-year-old boy (a soldier?), and used as much English as was then allowed. 1993 also marked Bosnia-Herzegovina's Eurovision debut: "Sva bol svijeta" ("All the world's pain") also depicted victimhood, and was in the form of a Bosnian folk song (*sevdalinka*). TV Zagreb and TV Sarajevo, the predecessors of the Croatian and Bosnian national broadcasters, had both supplied several federal Yugoslav entries to Eurovision, and Yugoslavia's 1989 victory came from a Zagreb entry. The Zagreb entries were retrospectively claimed for 'Croatia' after independence from Yugoslavia, while Serbia-Montenegro too incorporated them into its Eurovision continuity. Serbia-Montenegro's 2004 pre-selection 'postcards' featured contestants singing ex-Yugoslav entries – including Zagreb's.

2002, p. 49) into their set design.⁵ These were the sort of routinized techniques which contribute to a powerful consciousness of national identity (Billig, 1995, p. 46). The idea of ‘Europe’ was so important to Croatia because of a widespread national identity narrative which attributes Croatia to Europe and its eastern neighbours to the Balkans. Croatian culture should therefore aspire to Europeanness and reject similarity to the Balkans, which stands as a fundamental other to this imaginary of the Croatian nation (Razsa & Lindstrom, 2004, p. 630). Federal Yugoslavia too had made decisions to associate itself with the west or the east when selecting its entries (Vuletić, 2007, p. 73), but independence made the choice all the more urgent for Croatia. The 1990s government viewed Yugoslavia as a front for Serbian expansionism, and its rhetoric constructed Serbia, Yugoslavia and the Balkans as hostile ‘others’ to the Croatian nation. A milder version of this discourse still informs the policy of the state broadcaster.

Producing attractive difference for the West, therefore, is not the only criterion by which broadcasters and television audience select a national entry for Eurovision. This was illustrated in 2004 when the Croatian R&B singer Ivana Kindl submitted a song which contained several musical and visual indicators of the ‘east’: its orchestration recalled Turkish pop and *arabesk*, its vocal tremolo was a standard feature of south-east European pop-folk, and Kindl was borne on stage in a sedan chair by bare-chested dancers. Kindl described the song as a pioneering attempt at “oriental R&B in Croatia” (Mikulić, 2004), referring to the trend in US hip-hop

⁵ In 1993, the stage was lit with tiny Croatian *šahovnice* (chequered crests), silhouetted maps of Croatia, and European stars. In 1995, each performer was introduced with an instrumental arrangement of “Moja domovina” (“My homeland”), a famous wartime song, and depicted in their hometown.

production of sampling Middle Eastern and Bollywood music (see Miller, 2004). However, critics' comments on Kindl's presentation suggested unease that Croatia might be represented to European viewers through overt easternness. The pop composer Rajko Dujmić, who had written several Yugoslav Eurovision entries in the 1980s, said that "Ivana should change the country she'll represent", ideally to Bosnia (Strukar, 2004), and one music critic called it "typical [...] of dance-folk from the Bosphorus and Dardanelles" (Gall, 2004). Both cases relied on the discourse of denying that Croatia shared any common culture with Turkey and the Balkans. In this example, a foreign gaze still structured the selection criteria, but the result was an internationalized style of music (a German-style schlager) rather than local colour.

The tension between representing Croatia's claim to westernness and taking advantage of the apparently successful strategy of folkloric details was maintained in the selection of its 2005 and 2006 entries. In both years, the chosen songs were composed by the singer-songwriter Boris Novković, whose music for domestic consumption does not contain folklorisms (suggesting that he regarded Eurovision as imposing different demands on performance). Novković himself performed in 2005: the song, "Vukovi umiru sami" ("Wolves die alone"), included bagpipes played by Stjepan Večković (a member of the state folk ensemble Lado), and the female backing vocalists wore ducat necklaces, a component of Slavonian folk costume (Bonifačić, 1998, p. 143), while the wolf is a common symbol in ex-Yugoslav epic folklore (Žanić, 2007, pp. 356-8).⁶ For Croatia's 2006 entry "Moja štikla" ("My stiletto"),

⁶ The song selection process in 2005 again involved a rejection of easternness, this time in the shape of a song by a pop composer (Tonči Huljić) who was popularly (if simplistically) believed to have single-handedly introduced 'Balkan'/'eastern' elements into Croatian pop. The song, "Nazaret" ("Nazareth"), revived the kitsch

Novković collaborated with one of Croatia's best-known pop stars, Severina Vučković.

The folkloric details of “Moja štikla” came from Lika and Herzegovina, adjacent regions of Croatia and Bosnia which Croats often experience as a “uniform cultural identity” (Senjković & Dukić, 2005, p. 54). A persistent stereotype of these regions as backward, eastern and nationalist also exists in Croatian cities (Jansen, 2005, p. 152).⁷ The polarized reaction in Croatia to the song's selection demonstrates an implicit demand that Eurovision entries should represent the nation appropriately. The hiring of Goran Bregović (who came from Sarajevo but had spent time in Belgrade during the 1990s) to arrange the song led to reports that it referenced Serbian folklore or his own back catalogue, while academic folk (“ethno”) musicians complained that folklore was being used in an inauthentic way. The authenticity and Croatianness of the song and dance styles in question were dissected in showbusiness interviews (Matić, 2006), and the song's cultural ambiguity was compounded by a tabloid's erroneous suggestion that it had been written in Serbian rather than Croatian (Babić, 2006). Several prevalent axes of judgement (Croatian vs. Serbian, “ethno” vs. “turbo-folk”, authentic vs. inauthentic, global vs. Balkan, Croatian vs. Herzegovinan) provided the conceptual framework for questioning the song's suitability as a public representation of the nation (Baker, 2006).

Biblical imagery with which Huljić had achieved fourth place at Eurovision in 1999 with a song called “Marija Magdalena”. At the time a journalist from the state daily *Vjesnik* had critically likened it to the Turkish entry (Horvat, 1999).

⁷ It has/had counterparts in Serbia (Gordy, 1999, p. 134) and federal Yugoslavia (Rasmussen, 2002, p. xix).

The “Moja štikla” strategy recalls the tendency towards simulation in “Wild dances”, with a performer situating herself as the subject, not the object, of essentialization. As a staged spectacle, however, it ended up no match for the Finnish metal band Lordi, who won the contest wearing monster costumes. Indeed, Severina did not even score highly enough to qualify Croatia for a direct place in the next year’s final. The 2007 selection abandoned the pop-folk strategy and produced a rock ballad – which proved to be Croatia’s least successful Eurovision entry ever and the first time Croatia had failed to appear in the final at all. The Croatian controversies over folkloric representation at Eurovision indicate the anxieties and constraints placed by narratives of national identity on public representation. Slovenia, where national identity involves a similar European/Balkan opposition, has avoided the folkloric strategy altogether, while Macedonia – seemingly the most comfortable in its relationship to the Balkans – annually selects pop-folk but without the folklorized staging of Ruslana or Severina. However, the Balkan critique of “consenting self-exoticism” (Iordanova, 2001, p. 61) certainly seems applicable to Eurovision – especially in the case of Boris Novković, whose work at Eurovision differs sharply from his usual pop-rock compositions. The products of this self-exoticism are essentializations. Their inventions and confections can easily amount to simulation.

Eurovision as tourist practice: the Mediterranean

The cases discussed above have illustrated ways in which eastern European musicians have responded to the annual opportunity for European exposure offered by Eurovision. The concept of a foreign gaze which seeks out difference as entertainment has led to simulations of national folklore, which are essentialized because they

present one region's customs as standing for the whole nation. Following the work of Wolff (1994), Chard (1999), and Urry (2002), I would like to argue that these expectations of peripheral regions of Europe originate from travel and tourism. Wolff (1994) argues that today's idea of eastern Europe can be traced back to 18th-century travel accounts (real and imaginary), particularly Voltaire's history of the Swedish King Charles XII's campaigns against Russia – where Voltaire had never been (pp. 89-90).⁸ The concept of an 'eastern Europe' allowed 'western Europe' to be constructed as its opposite. Interestingly in the context of Eurovision, Wolff also points to the thought of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in building up western expectations of eastern Europe. Herder's philosophy that the authentic spirit of the nation lay in folk song and dance made "the peoples of eastern Europe [...] special objects of folkloric attention, even into our own times" (Wolff, 1994, p. 310).

Mass foreign travel in the form of tourism has produced what Urry (2002) refers to as the "tourist gaze", where tourists' expectations about the foreign destination are "constructed through difference" to their everyday routines (pp. 1-2). Ideas about the existence and character of this difference come from "non-tourist practices"

⁸ In 2005, when Eurovision was to be held in Kiev, the male host of the Swedish selection came on stage wearing a stylized eighteenth-century costume in the Swedish national colours (blue and yellow) to represent Charles XII, who had been defeated at the Battle of Poltava (1709) in modern-day Ukraine. A tabloid feature on the winner Martin Stenmarck wrote that "296 years later [...] Revenge is here. It's called *Martin Stenmarck*", and added that he would "put up his sword against the Russian [sic] enemy, led by Tsar Peter the Great" (Lindner & Elfström, 2005; emphasis in original). Thanks to Keith Griffiths for bringing this to my attention.

encountered in everyday life, “such as film, television, literature, magazines, records and videos” (Urry, 2002, p. 3). Importantly for Eurovision, the tourist gaze need not involve physical travel when electronic media provide their own sort of access to foreign destinations (Urry, 2002, p. 90). Travel writing, as interpreted by Chard (1999), is also subject to expectations of difference, since it makes the assumption that the travel writer produces pleasure by imposing “a demand for some form of dramatic departure from the familiar and the mundane” (p. 2). Since Chard’s research concerned the 17th and 18th centuries, this ascribes centuries of precedents to the contemporary tourist gaze.

The effect of the ‘tourist gaze’ on public representations of the nation at Eurovision can be explored through the concept of the Mediterranean. Eurovision entries from Spain, but also from Greece, Cyprus, Turkey and Malta, often draw on the representational strategies of commercially successful Latin pop music, such as “bright colors, rhythmic music, and brown or olive skin” (Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211). Studies of Latin music itself often view this as a “de-contextualized, de-historicized” essentialization of Latinity (Cepeda, 2001, p. 65), and warn that it maintains the “hypersexualization” of Latinas and Latinos (Molina Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004, p. 211). I would like to suggest that the image of the “warm South” (Chard, 1999, p. 17), which was originally constructed by 18th-century travellers to Italy, can help account for the appropriation of fashionable and sensualized ‘Latinity’ in Eurovision entries from the eastern Mediterranean. The countries which regularly select ‘Latin’-style Eurovision entries all have large tourist industries which play on images of the sunny Mediterranean in their marketing. Moreover, the cultural stereotype of equating ‘Latin’ dance with dangerous sexuality (Edensor, 2002, pp. 81-2) has its counterpart in 19th-century representations of the warm South, which was

presented as both “dangerous” and “attractive” to the traveller (Chard, 1999, p. 37). The “warm South” is expressed through dance and also video: promotional videos from Malta and Cyprus are usually set on the beach,⁹ and Maltese videos have frequently been sponsored by the national airline Air Malta, which seems to have recognized Eurovision as a valuable site for tourist marketing and product placement. The process by which Greeks become ‘Latin’ is a clear instance of a public representation being simulated on the basis of a constructed image.

The implication of Cepeda’s, Molina Guzmán’s and Valdivia’s critique of ‘Latinity’ is that its stereotypes perpetuate inequality, an argument reminiscent of the Balkan globalization critique. Against such viewpoints, Featherstone (1995) contends that the flow of “images and information about other cultures and traditions” in late capitalism actually expresses “a right to be different” rather than cultural hierarchies (p. 47). Bolin (2006, p. 191) has compared Eurovision to the 19th-century world’s fairs, which themselves were structured around difference exhibited “before the Western eye” (Erlmann, 1999, p. 97). Their division into national pavilions which showed off local colour (Roche, 2000, p. 45) arguably anticipated the competition between countries at Eurovision (Bolin, 2006, p. 201). Both events, according to Bolin (2006), therefore supported “the ideology of nation building” (p. 192). They might therefore seem to promote an equal right to difference. However, the use of cultural differences as “global marketing strategies” (Maguire, 1999, p. 87) suggests that economic power differentials still need to be taken into account.

An awareness of the expectations and hierarchies surrounding tourism helps place Eurovision in a broader cultural and economic context. Eurovision certainly appears

⁹ Likewise videos from federal Yugoslavia, where tourism was a major source of hard currency (Vuletić, 2007, p. 89).

to be one of Urry (2002)'s "non-tourist practices" (p. 3), because it provides images of foreign destinations to television viewers. As such, it forms part of the "tourist spectacle" (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 81) which results from tourists' expectations of difference. However, Eurovision is more directly implicated in tourism through the institution of host cities, which provides another channel for the public representation of the nation. One should therefore consider how simulation and essentialization affect the practice of hosting.

The power of hosts: *Riverdance* and the Orange Revolution

The hosting of Eurovision offers a city, state, and broadcaster the opportunity to represent itself to Europe through the "master narratives" it attaches to the entire show (Bolin, 2006, p. 201). These are therefore a different order of public representation from the performances discussed above. 'Eurovision' as experienced in a host city comprises up to two weeks of rehearsals, press conferences, receptions and side events. The host broadcaster designs the stage, shows off its technological accomplishments, organizes opening and interval acts for the show, and produces 'postcards' depicting the city and state. Unlike most mobile international events (the Olympics, the MTV Europe Awards, etc.), the role of Eurovision host is awarded to the winner of the last contest rather than through a bidding process. This leaves organizers with only a year to put on an international competitive event, arrange facilities for competitors and work out how (and in what way) to make the city and country look attractive.

Eurovision may be compared to international sports events because both "focus[...] issues of national identity and prestige in an international setting" (Björnberg, 2007, p.

14). International sport too can be seen as an arena for publicly symbolizing collective identities (Roche, 2000, p. 168). Sports fans' "national stereotypes of [domestic and foreign] sporting styles" (Edensor, 2002, p. 79) rest on touristic expectations of difference, as do viewers' conceptions of how Eurovision entries from a particular country should look or sound (Ugrešić, 2004a, p. 329). For certain recently independent countries, such as Croatia, competing in international sport has been viewed as an affirmation of statehood because it shows the country has been recognized as a legitimate state (Bellamy, 2003, p. 114). Eurovision and sport also converge on a more practical level: contests are now held in arenas rather than theatres to accommodate a larger live audience, and Stockholm's Globen is equally "a highly regulated, supervised and commodified space" (Maguire, 1999, p. 102) whether it is hosting ice hockey or Eurovision. The blurring of these genres can be seen as an example of what Baudrillard (1994) called the "implosion" (p. 83) of different spheres of meaning. Eurovision thus becomes part of a system of international events where the public representation of the nation occurs.

Besides implosion, simulation too is at work in the practice of hosting Eurovision. This can be illustrated by the case of Kiev during Eurovision 2005, which became an almost instantaneous commemoration of the Orange Revolution. Side events in Kiev before Eurovision included stages in the city centre with Ukrainian musicians and Eurovision videos, and a midweek concert where Ruslana lit the so-called 'Ukrainian heart' like an Olympic opening ceremony – plus inevitable stalls selling "'orange' souvenirs" (Kurkov, 2005). Visa requirements for European Union visitors were abolished to facilitate tourism to the contest and were never reinstated, giving Ukraine an advantage over its 'rivals' on the tourist market, Belarus and Russia. At the end of the contest, the winner (Helena Papanicolaou from Greece) was awarded her trophy by

the new president, Viktor Yushchenko (Bolin, 2006, p. 195), the first time a head of state had carried out the duty. The Ukrainian national entry itself worked in harmony with these practices to reinforce an overarching narrative of Ukraine entering European (post-)modernity.

The Ukrainian entry in 2005, “Razom nas bahato” (“Together we’re strong”) by the hip-hop band Greenjolly, had previously been the supposed “anthem” of the Orange Revolution protests (Kuzio, 2005, p. 34). The national broadcaster interrupted the song selection process after the revolution to choose “Razom nas bahato”, which had not even been in the competition. The EBU insisted that specific political references attacking the outgoing, pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych were removed from the original version of the song (Raykoff, 2007, pp. 4-5). The Eurovision version replaced these lyrics with generalized expressions of rebelliousness, but remained linked to the revolution by band members in orange clothing, by a ‘postcard’ showing news footage from the demonstrations, and by the editorializing of commentators, who related it to Ukrainian political events. The BBC commentator Terry Wogan, for instance, stated:

This song has enormous significance for the Ukrainians. This was the anthem of the Orange Revolution which brought Yushchenko to power last year. This is what they sang in the streets of Kiev as they brought the old guard down. [...] It’s not a song, of course, it’s a chant. A chant for freedom. [...] I wonder how many votes it will get from politically correct countries [...] from Ukraine’s neighbours. I wonder how many votes it will get from Russia.¹⁰

¹⁰ Commentators help to construct the reality of an event for viewers through their narrativization (Kellner, 2003, p. 105). Their impressions of the host location, meanwhile, could even be considered a form of travel ‘writing’.

Interestingly, the band's name anglicized a Hutsul word meaning "wooden sleigh" (Helbig, 2006), connecting them to the same cultural area which had inspired Ruslana, although this seems not to have been of general knowledge or interest.

The public representations during the Kiev contest were an exceptionally rich instance of a principle that the hosting of international events involves putting "the local on show for the global" (Hartley, 1992, p. 181). Eurovision 1990 in Zagreb, like Kiev 2005, threw a spotlight on a new political regime and was coloured by the fall of Communism in eastern Europe, to which many entrants (including the winning song from Italy, which celebrated the Maastricht Treaty) also alluded (Vuletić, 2007, p. 94). Eurovision 2002 in Tallinn allowed the Estonian government to implement the climax of a development plan which had already identified the Eurovision Song Contest as a branding site in 2000; after winning Eurovision 2001, Estonia had commissioned the UK brand consultancy Interbrand (the authors of 'Cool Britannia') to devise the "Brand Estonia" strategy for maximizing inward investment to the country and promoting tourism (Bolin, 2006, pp. 197-8). Eurovision 2006 in Athens came two years after Greece had hosted the Olympics and the organizers had emphasized "Hellenic myth" as the source of "Olympic tradition" (Tzanelli, 2006, p. 485). The Hellenistic narrative continued into Eurovision, held in the Olympic basketball stadium, with an opening act themed around Greek gods and an interval celebrating millennia of Greek music.

Arguably the longest-lasting public representation of the nation by a Eurovision host also accounted for Eurovision's most commercially successful product in the 1990s, the Irish dance show *Riverdance*. *Riverdance* began as the interval act at Eurovision 1994, hosted in Dublin, and became an internationally well-known musical with residencies on Broadway and Las Vegas. Fagan (2002) argues that the

localisms of *Riverdance* were produced “with reference to a global cultural market” rather than to local demand (p. 140), and Strachan and Leonard (2004) likewise attribute *Riverdance*’s success to the “marketability of established tropes of ‘Irishness’ and internationally mediated notions of Irish culture” (p. 41). *Riverdance* responded to, and fed into, the promotion of so-called “Celtic” pop as “world music” (Taylor, 1997, p. 7), which echoed around Eurovision for several years thereafter in the shape of flute and violin accompaniments and lyrics about fairytales or the sea. The *Riverdance* phenomenon offers perhaps the clearest example of the public representation of the nation as a simulation of an essentialized and often folklorized image.¹¹ The privilege of hosting Eurovision enabled its transnational broadcast, and laid the foundations for its subsequent commercialization.

Conclusion

Hartley (1999)’s analysis of the Welsh model town of Portmeirion (the location for the TV series *The Prisoner*) concluded that towns may be led to “present themselves as their own simulacrum”, meaning that they appear most authentic only when they correspond to their televisual representation (p. 220). The possibilities for public representation at Eurovision produce the same effect, as seen in the imagined ‘Mediterranean’ which connects Spain, Malta, and Greece. The construction of the “Wild dances” project showed the process of simulation in practice, although in 2004 few audience members may have brought clear images or expectations about Ukraine to their viewing. Ukraine’s organization of Eurovision in 2005 attempted to fill the

¹¹ Since Eurovision regulations prevent more than six performers appearing on stage, the Irish broadcaster could not have submitted it as an ordinary entry.

'blank canvas' with a party-political narrative about Ukraine's cultural position within Europe. There was no room in this essentialization for the country's political divisions, the leanings towards Russia on the part of the losers of the Orange Revolution, or the disunity among the leading figures of the revolution which would lead to protracted governmental instability.

Eurovision has been seen to be an international mediated spectacle, like major sporting events, and a symbolic spectacle for the 'nations' (states and broadcasters) involved. Its connection with the expectations of difference inherent in tourism add the dimension of an exoticized spectacle. It remains to be seen whether Eurovision operates, as Kellner (2003)'s concept of spectacle suggests, to support "hegemonic configurations of corporate and state power" (p. 12). The applicability of the Balkan globalization critique to Eurovision, and the history of constructing difference in European travel and tourism, suggests that this is indeed the case. Wolff (1994)'s observation that Herder created "the idea of Eastern Europe as a folkloric domain of song and dance" (p. 331) might indicate that folklorization at Eurovision is the latest incarnation of a 300-year-old frame. Indeed, this is Björnberg (2007)'s interpretation of Eurovision's "return to ethnicity" when he argues that the "ethnic countries" of eastern and southern Europe embody "values of authenticity" to western Europe and represent themselves through localism, whereas the West's supposedly "non-ethnic countries" use abstracted or transnational representations (p. 22). The argument is compelling, but is complicated by the strategies of "northern exoticism" (Pajala, 2001) often to be found in Scandinavian entries and the French use of Eurovision throughout the 1990s to spotlight French regions and multi-racial Francophonie (Bithell, 2007, p. 160). Marginality, rather than easternness, thus seems to determine the objects of essentialization.

As a Kellnerian spectacle, Eurovision should dramatize and symbolically resolve conflicts such as the accommodation of eastern states in an enlarged Europe or the capacity of smaller states to compete on equal terms with large European powers. The apparent dominance of eastern entrants in recent contests might seem to tip the balance in favour of the east. Here one can return to the Balkan globalization critique, which calls attention to the structural inequalities of Balkan cultural production for global or European audiences. The pressure to devise an entertainingly exotic product is tempered somewhat by the identity narratives of particular nations: Bulgaria has transferred a successful world music model (female choral singing) to Eurovision (in 2007, with an ‘ethno-techno’ arrangement), but an equally well-known Balkan musical product – Roma music (as performed by, e.g., Taraf de Haidouks, Šaban Bajramović, Esmā Redžepova, or Fanfare Ciocarlia) – has not been prominent in Eurovision. The absence is most glaring in countries such as Serbia and Romania, where Roma music for domestic consumption is extremely popular: the Guča brass band festival (featuring Serb and Roma ensembles) is even constructed as a significant symbol of Serb nationhood (Čolović, 2006, p. 236).¹² The downplaying of Roma culture at Eurovision may be attributed to the negative ‘othering’ of Roma throughout the Balkans as different from the majority ethno-national groups of nation-

¹² One song in the Serbian national selection in 2007 (“Mambo jumbo serbiano”) included Guča in a list of Serbian national symbols (e.g. kolo dancing, roast boar, rakija, the basketball star Vlade Divac, and various musicians including Goran Bregović and the controversial pop-folk singer Ceca Ražnatović) which it called superior to symbols of global/western popular culture (Batman, Superman, Tarzan, *The Matrix*, Spiderman, Rocky, Bruce Lee, and Rambo). It was not selected.

states. The simulation of essentialized identity is therefore constrained by symbolic value judgements: Serbia does not simulate Gypsydom, nor Croatia Turkishness, for the purposes of Eurovision.

The principle of competition between nations in international sport, according to Bairner (2001), sustains “the importance of national identity” amid the “supranational tendencies” of late capitalism (p. 174). Extending this perspective to Eurovision raises the question of whether the transnational aspects of popular music can be reconciled with the branding of the nation. Bolin’s comparison of Eurovision with world’s fairs, which also provided “narrative possibilities for the imagining of national cultures” (Urry, 2002, p. 136), suggests that the contest’s underlying logic is one of spatialized difference. However, the production of difference is not the only criterion used when devising an event to be maximally attractive to viewers and advertisers. The fusion of Eurovision entries with other entertainment formats (talent shows or ballroom dancing competitions) by some broadcasters may be competitive on the domestic “attention economy” (Fairchild, 2007, p. 359), but leads to deterritorialized performances with little national character. Broadcasters’ choices to enter transnational musical forms such as pop-rock or schlager could be seen as reflections of “aesthetic cosmopolitanism”, which blurs “[t]he difference between what counts as ‘exterior’ or ‘interior’ to national culture” (Regev, 2007, p. 318). Nonetheless, even those choices are affected by decisions about appropriateness and inappropriateness in publicly representing the nation. Eurovision therefore shows how, as Appadurai (1996) argued, transnational media flows are exploited by states in their projects of constructing identities. The competition’s tension between the national and the transnational is thus resolved in the classificatory state’s favour.

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