

'I am the voice of the past that will always be': the Eurovision Song Contest as historical fiction

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***Abstract:** The Eurovision Song Contest has been called everything from 'the Gay Olympics' to 'a monument to drivel', but can it also be thought of as historical fiction – and what could that reveal about how narratives of national and European identity are retold internationally, or about how mechanisms of fictional narrative can structure popular cultural forms not necessarily considered fiction? Beyond the intertextual influence of historical/pseudo-historical fiction on how designers have staged certain contemporary Eurovision performances to mediate distant national pasts to a transnational audience, some entries have been structured as historical fiction more systematically by consisting of first-person narratives where the performer embodies and voices a character representative of what is being constructed as a collective experience in the national or European past. Often these concern historical memory of war and trauma, such as Eimear Quinn's 1996 winning Irish entry (where a mystical spirit narrated Ireland's 'hunger and pain'), Lisa Angell's 2015 French entry (the story of a survivor from a village destroyed by enemy soldiers) or 2016's winning Ukrainian entry, Jamala's '1944'. Yet beneath even this level, the contest itself might be considered a historical fiction in terms of its founding myths of post-WW2 reconstruction, post-Cold-War unity and dehistoricised diversity – a recent past that Eurovision viewers are invited to wish Europe had really enjoyed.*

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The Eurovision Song Contest has been called many things, but rarely historical fiction. This annual televised competition which fuses the genres of flagship entertainment property and international competitive event has been organised under the auspices of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) of public service broadcasters since 1956 (Vuletić 2018). Like other events of its scale, it now extends its liveness into the social media sphere, as viewers' 'second-screen activity' sharing images, clips and reactions spills into the feeds of users who are

not watching it live (Highfield, Harrington and Bruns 2013, 317). It invites its audience in more than 40 countries in Europe and outside it (Carniel 2019), to participate in what the conventions and rituals of the contest conjure as a transnational spectatorial community, which feeds off viewers' affective relationships to what Cornell Sandvoss has described as its 'interplay of territorial and symbolic belonging' (2008, 191). It creates 'playful' opportunities to reconfigure this interplay (Kyriakidou et al. 2018), particularly around the nexus of queerness and nationhood (Rehberg 2007). Yet the attachments it depicts and the meanings viewers make of them are still structured by grander narratives of national and European identity and indeed Eurocentrism (Sieg 2013b), which sometimes articulate and sometimes silence narratives which could be termed fictional about the past.

Like international sports tournaments, Eurovision functions as what Goran Bölin (2006, 190) and many others have termed a 'mega-event' – a term originally coined by Maurice Roche (2000) for the Olympic Games and international expos – that invites its audience to take pleasure in the spectacle of nations competing with one another. Indeed, the resemblance has increased since the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Swedish Television (SVT) started hosting Eurovision in arenas rather than theatres in 1998/2000, and since it began leaving increasingly large tourist footprints on host cities' urban space following Kyiv's first Eurovision in 2005 (Helbig 2013, 199). Eurovision celebrates a European collective whose boundaries once seemed ever-expanding when the contest echoed post-socialist European enlargement, and can now appear disarmingly fluid (Pajala 2012). Yet it simultaneously reaffirms the idea that the world is naturally divided into culturally and historically distinct nations; some Eurovision researchers thus see it as expressing 'banal nationalism' (eg Zaroulia 2013, 33), the sociologist Michael Billig's term for the discursive practices that reify nationalism as an organising principle in public consciousness (see Billig 1995). More recent nationalism scholars have been reconfiguring Billig's idea of banality through discourse into a more micropolitical, everyday lens (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). But this can point even more sharply to the role Eurovision has played in mediating everyday experiences of belonging to 'Europe' on the part of competing or non-competing nations, and also on the part of transnational communities based on fandom and/or sexuality which cross national boundaries and involve thousands of individuals every year.

Besides the structural and discursive factors embedded in what and how Eurovision broadcasts, Eurovision also gives rise to its own spaces of sociality. These include the mixture of 'playful nationalism and cosmopolitan fandom' (Kyriakidou et al. 2018, 604) that constitutes fans' experience of the live event, including Eurovision parties held in homes and bars for the grand final (where much humorous enactment of symbols and clichés of national identity is liable to take place) (Singleton, Fricker and Moreo 2007, 16) and fandoms where that

offline and online sociality continues year round. Eurovision has been particularly charged with queer associations, firstly since a large gay male fan base with some representation of other non-normative sexualities and gender identities had begun gathering around its kitsch value by the early 1980s, and secondly since its first openly gay and trans performers took part in the late 1990s (Iceland's 1997 contestant Páll Óskar and Israel's 1998 winner Dana International respectively). The victory of the Austrian bearded drag queen Conchita Wurst symbolically reaffirmed this link in 2014 (Baker 2017). The media scholar Peter Rehberg (2007) famously described Eurovision as a (then) rare site where queerness and nationhood can be celebrated at once, and Eurovision's added communal significance to queer fans who treat it as ritual has sometimes led fans and journalists to liken it to the Gay Olympics or the Gay World Cup, even the Gay Christmas or (in Israel) the Gay Passover (Lemish 2004, 51).

Eurovision is thus a 'nexus' where, as Jamie Halliwell (2018, 117) writes, 'different sexual orientations converge and network with others based on their like-minded interest' in the contest and its past performers. It is, or so its organisers once hoped, a space where international media attention could spotlight the condition of human rights and democratic freedoms in years when the contest has been hosted by semi-authoritarian regimes (Gluhovic 2013). It was even a focal point of international protest itself before the 2019 contest in Tel Aviv, when the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement called on queer viewers in particular not to be complicit in (according to BDS activists) the Israeli government's use of the arts and appeals to LGBTQ-friendliness to deflect international attention from human rights violations against Palestinians (Gauja 2019, 33–4). To viewers who do not watch Eurovision, including North Americans who began encountering it through the social media feeds of Europeans watching it live, it might primarily be a spectacle where media have primed them to expect national stereotypes, glittery costumes and politically-motivated skulduggery at voting time. In the often-misattributed words of the French critic Michel Bourdon, praising his country's decision to pull out for a year in 1982 as a blow in defence of high culture against mass entertainment, it was even memorably described as 'a monument to drivel' (Vuletić 2019, 43). Eurovision has been called all these things; it is much more counterintuitive to see it as historical fiction. Yet extending critical lenses on historical fiction towards Eurovision poses wider questions about how cultural artefacts which, in terms of genre, would not usually be considered fictional still engage in creative narrations of the past which implicitly furnish national and transnational collectives with historical myths. Indeed, at Eurovision, that furnishing is sometimes explicit not implicit.

Eurovision: performing identities for the European gaze

The structure of Eurovision, where more than forty three-minute performances selected by participating broadcasters now compete in two weekday semi-finals and a Saturday-night grand final, pits performers, songs and backstage delegations against each other in the name of nations for points which expert juries and voting publics will award on behalf of nations too. Elements of this process have varied over the contest's lifetime. For its first five decades it was one night a year, until the introduction of semi-finals in 2004 allowed all interested broadcasters to take part annually. Votes were awarded by expert juries only until 1997–8, when public televoting became the norm, and the current combination of jury and public voting was only instituted in 2009 after adverse reactions in western Europe to a string of eastern European countries winning the public vote in the 2000s. But despite these changes, the principle of songs, singers and juries representing nations is deeply embedded into Eurovision's logic as an event. Wrapped around the performances, according to the contest structure, are opening and interval acts, presenters' scripts, and the arena's and contest's visual identity and branding, all of which are decided by the host broadcaster – conventionally the broadcaster from the country which won the previous year. Host countries become the 'symbolic centre' (Bölin 2006, 202) of Europe while Eurovision is taking place.

In the contemporary political economy of public diplomacy and touristic promotion, the right to host Eurovision has been a particularly powerful platform for nation-branding for states on the periphery of Europe with ambitions to reconfigure how they are perceived in the West, and/or with aggressive promotional strategies already in place to influence international opinion. A paradigmatic example of the first was Estonia's victory in Eurovision 2001 and hosting of Eurovision 2002, which gave an unexpected boost to the Estonian government and the branding agency it had already hired to relaunch Estonia as a Nordic, not post-Soviet, nation (Jordan 2014, 290). A canonical example of the second was Azerbaijan's hosting of Eurovision 2012, integrated into an existing nation-branding campaign under the slogan 'Land of Fire', which entailed the controversial compulsory purchase and demolition of a residential neighbourhood to construct an opulent arena so that Baku could bid to host future international sports mega-events (Militz 2016). Even in years where hosting Eurovision does not play into such immediate and concrete promotional strategies, Eurovision is still positioned as a competition between *nations* through practices such as labelling the recipients of votes by national instead of personal names. This makes Eurovision a site where viewers are invited to see national identity represented in every performance, and also to see explicit and implicit claims about what it might mean to be European, including appeals to a common European past (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013).

A key theoretical insight from Eurovision research has thus been to regard Eurovision entries as quite literally ‘performing’ national and European identity (Fricker and Gluhovic 2013), employing a mode of thinking about identity and embodiment that implicitly or explicitly points back to Judith Butler’s notion of the ‘performativity’ of gender (Butler 1993, 2). These performances of collective identity are gendered, ethnicised and racialised, playing on and sometimes with viewers’ expectations of who is imagined to belong to a given nation and what the national specificities of their pop and/or folk music traditions are (Sieg 2013a, 250–1; Jordan 2015, 130–1). Eurovision’s structure as a spectacle of competition between nations inscribes every embodied performance on a Eurovision stage with communicative significance, displaying it to viewers as a representation of that nation’s identity and how close it is to the centre or periphery of ‘Europe’. Songs and music contribute sonic and kinaesthetic dimensions to how these meanings are made. On the spectrum between modernity and tradition that fuels the contested discursive fields of so many national identities (Todorova 2005), a nation (or rather the performer(s) charged with embodying it) might seek to perform virtuosity in an internationally popular and therefore cosmopolitan style of music, not to mention competence in an international language. It might alternatively perform national specificity by presenting folk or popular cultural tradition specific to that nation, or rather something that has been imagined and reinvented as tradition.

Indeed, even the ways that Eurovision entries package folklore can be opportunities to display competence in recognising and adapting to the imagined ‘European gaze’ (Heller 2007, 201) that structures Eurovision, and thus to claim a position at the centre rather than the periphery of Eurovision’s geopolitical imagination. Ruslana and the production team behind her entry ‘Wild Dances’, which became Ukraine’s first Eurovision winner in 2004, famously designed its performance by repackaging rhythms, instruments and visual decorations associated with Hutsul folk customs (Pavlyshyn 2006, 477).¹ The Hutsuls, a group from western, Transcarpathian Ukraine, were already somewhat romanticised within Ukraine as timeless and mystical bearers of tradition, not least through the ‘ethnographic spectacle’ of Sergei Parajanov’s 1965 film *Тіні забутих предків* (*Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*) (First 2015, 95); Ruslana had already begun adapting Hutsul instruments, singing and visual symbols into a performance aesthetic before she was selected for Eurovision (Wickström 2008, 75). Outside Ukraine, in the context of Eurovision, these traditions largely became read as traditions of *the Ukrainian nation*, as if the customs of Ukraine’s ‘extreme west’ in the Carpathians were in fact a wellspring for the entire country. That national whole included the much more populous central and eastern regions with which, as Serhy Yekelchuk argues, the song ‘had nothing to do either musically or visually’ (2010, 223).

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10XR67NQcAc> (accessed 26 August 2019).

Adopting the persona of an entrepreneur of exoticism who was capable both of researching supposedly authentic traditions and blending them with modern elements to match the contemporary musical marketplace's demands, Ruslana talked in interviews about her own cosmopolitan cultural tastes, including listening to Deep Purple. The dark brown leather armour she and her dancers wore on stage meanwhile very readily evoked comparisons to *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). This series had itself drawn on the tropes of exoticism that the 1990s world music market had constructed around east European traditional music by using the music of Bulgarian polyphonic women's choirs for its theme tune (see Buchanan 2007, 255–7). Ruslana's Hutsul project was a creative adaptation of Hutsul heritage which broke with the fixity of the Soviet era's ethnological approach which displayed folk customs as unchanging museum pieces (Pavlysyhn 2006, 480). Yet it still cast Ruslana in a position not unlike the role of 'recorder/viewer' and traveller that Parajanov had adopted vis-à-vis his own 'reconstructed and ahistorical Carpathian ethnoscape' to stamp his film with authenticity (First 2015, 95). This was the gaze of 'ethnographic authority' (Clifford 1983) towards the exotic which has structured the imaginative politics of travel writing, anthropology and world music alike, and with which postmodern and/or postcolonial historical fiction often plays.

Ruslana, alongside the previous year's Eurovision winner Sertab Erener from Turkey, is widely credited with inspiring a mode of translating essentialised folklore into 'ethnopop' along with many other Eurovision entrants from peripheralised regions of Europe in the 2000s (Baker 2008b).² Both this specific genre of Eurovision entry, and the very nature of how audiences are invited to make meaning out of Eurovision performances in general, rests on the convention that vocalists on a Eurovision stage are seen as enacting performances of national and European identity which are gendered, ethnicised and also racialised. Their performances are inherently embodied in the sense that audiences interpret them through what they perceive about the bodies of the performers, how they are clothed, how they are moved and how they sing. In practice the whiteness of Eurovision performers almost always goes unmarked unless perhaps they are rappers (performing music racialised as black), while black or biracial performers representing nations which are conventionally racialised as white, including Romani musicians (Szeman 2013) and singers from the African diaspora (Mutsaers 2007), are much more marked and visible in the Eurovision space. The ideological framework of celebrating diversity that the EBU and successive host broadcasters have inscribed around Eurovision has led Katrin Sieg (2013b, 22) to argue critically that:

² Erener's entry entry blended R&B with Turkish 'arabesk' pop and appeared to be set in a harem (Gumpert 2007): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3i4S4E7h3I> (accessed 26 August 2019).

[t]he contest has become a central venue for staging neo-liberal regimes of race, where not only do performers of colour warrant their respective nations' pluralism and tolerance, but also racial difference begins to animate and energize the European self (Sieg 2013b, 22).

This 'fiction' (Lentin 2016, 43) of a supposedly post-racial Europe is increasingly appealed to at Eurovision today.

The notion of an 'international gaze' or 'European gaze' that orders what audiences expect of different nations and their place in Europe's symbolic hierarchies does not, however, just explain how audiences make sense of performances. Such gazes also influence how performances are *created*, since participants and delegations are very likely to be aware of them. The dynamics of representing national identity at Eurovision are, I have argued elsewhere (Baker 2008b, 181), similar to the process John Urry (2002) termed 'the tourist gaze' to explain how nations represent themselves at international expos and World's Fairs; indeed, they are part of the same process, since all stem from the same Eurocentric structures of thought and feeling that have shaped collective self-representations even in nations which did not exercise and were not subject to overseas European colonial power. Since delegations are aware they must appeal to voters across Europe in order to win, they craft performances in response to their perceptions both of what the European gaze might want to see in general and also what it wants to see from their nation in particular. This dynamic produces the same structural pressures towards self-exoticism that shape longer-form creative media such as cross-cultural fiction and transnational cinema (see Iordanova 2001; Huggan 2002).

The stakes of these politics of representation are revealed when contentions occur over whether an entry is appropriate to represent a certain nation at Eurovision. For instance, throughout south-east Europe, the symbolic boundary between 'Europe' and the 'Balkans' has been constructed as also symbolising the difference between modernity and backwardness, and this makes aspirations to be recognised as (culturally, economically and politically) European translate into unease about seeming or sounding 'too Balkan'. During the Erenner- and Ruslana-inspired 'ethnopop turn' at Eurovision in the mid-2000s, this unease conflicted with awareness that an essentialised 'Balkan' character was exactly what the European gaze demanded in cultural production from the region. The paradox was even more sensitive in Croatia, where the form of nationalism that became hegemonic before and during the 1991–5 war of independence rejected the notion that Croatia as a western and European country could share any cultural heritage with 'the East', 'the Balkans' or Serbian culture. Croatia's selection of the well-known pop-folk singer Severina (whose music already 'sounded Balkan' to Croatian critics) with a song repackaging song and dance from the Dinaric region (Croatia's 'internal other') for Eurovision 2006 became almost the most serious Croatian television scandal of the decade, not least when

the ex-Yugoslav world music entrepreneur Goran Bregović was revealed as part of the team (Baker 2008a).³ Though few entries become quite so contentious in their home countries, all are created for Eurovision's distinctive mixture of representational, competitive and creative ends. How then might the subject matter of historical fiction, or indeed the devices of historical fiction, serve the purposes of crafting Eurovision performances?

Historical fiction on the Eurovision stage

The most easily apparent combination of Eurovision and historical fiction manifests when entries and their presentation either directly reference an existing artefact of historical fiction intertextually, or create space for the viewer to make that association and project what they know and enjoy about the existing text on to the new performance in front of them. The same semiotic move occurs in artistic sports like international figure skating when a competitor's performance and costume references a historical character, inviting the spectator to incorporate that personage's meanings into how they interpret the performance of national femininity or masculinity before their eyes (Kestnbaum 1993, 120). A very small number of entries have been named after historical figures,⁴ or used their names as metaphors to communicate at least some lyrical meaning to listeners who did not speak the language of the song.⁵ These were predominantly from the late 1970s and almost all from the period when Eurovision enforced a 'national language rule' requiring all but six lines of each song to be in an official language of the country it represented. Dana International's victorious 'Diva', required by Eurovision rules to be in Hebrew, similarly hailed 'Viktoria', 'Afrodita' and 'Kleopatra' as transnationally-intelligible ancient predecessors of the stage diva that her song both lauded and declared herself to be.⁶ (The fan responsible for translating 'Diva' on the website that has become Eurovision fandom's established point of reference for translations glosses 'Viktoria' as the Roman goddess of victory (Leuchtman 2010); I may not have been alone in the British audience when the 1998 contest aired from Birmingham in hearing it as meaning Queen Victoria instead).

Other Eurovision performances have situated themselves in the past through costume, lyrics or musical archaism. Yugoslavia's 1968 representatives

³ Bregović came from Sarajevo but had chosen to live in Belgrade as well as Paris during the Bosnian conflict and from the perspective of much of the Croatian media therefore appeared to have sided with Slobodan Milošević against Bosnian independence.

⁴ Anne Karine Strom's 'Mata Hari', Norway 1976; Forbes's 'Beatles', Sweden 1977; Tania Tsanaklidou's 'Charlie Chaplin', Greece 1978; Dschinghis Khan's 'Dschinghis Khan' ('Genghis Khan'), Germany 1979; Doris Dragović's 'Marija Magdalena', Croatia 1999.

⁵ ABBA, 'Waterloo', Sweden 1974; Anita Skorgan's 'Casanova', Norway 1977; Cadillac's 'Valentino', Spain 1986; Wilfried's 'Lisa Mona Lisa', Austria 1988; Tony Wegas's 'Maria Magdalena', Austria 1993; Alexandra and Konstantin's 'My Galileo', Belarus 2004.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv83u7-mNWQ> (accessed 26 August 2019).

Dubrovački trubaduri ('The Troubadours of Dubrovnik') evoked the high collars and puffed sleeves of European Renaissance menswear – the golden age of Dubrovnik as independent Ragusa – when they performed the mandolin-backed 'Jedan dan' ('One day'). Anita Buhin (2015, 16) credits this entry with affirming the 'romantic Southern myth' of Yugoslavia's Mediterranean geopolitical identity on the Eurovision stage. The song was set in the then-contemporary 1960s and described the mandolins and guitars of Dubrovnik's vibrant street music scene playing just as they had in long-ago times, except 'now our hair is longer and we only dance to beat music' ('sad smo s dužom kosom i plešemo samo "beat"'). The large majority of viewers who did not speak what was then called Serbo-Croatian would primarily have gained an impression of medievalism instead.⁷

Korni Grupa, the well-known rock band selected to represent Yugoslavia in 1974, began their song 'Moja generacija' ('My Generation') in the midst of the Second World War in 1942, where the narrator's mother 'bore him to dream of freedom' ('mene majka moja rodi da sanjam o slobodi'). This was one of many Yugoslav pop and rock songs from the mid-1970s that attempted to rearticulate Josip Broz Tito's legitimising myth (of the Partisans liberating Yugoslavia) through the voices of contemporaneous youth, though most of this context too would have been lost on viewers outside Yugoslavia.⁸ The Portuguese band Da Vinci offered what Apostolos Lampropoulos (2013, 143) calls 'a song openly praising colonialism' in 1989 when their entry 'Conquistador' ('Conqueror') set its action in 'a new world, a poets' dream' ('um mundo novo, um sonho de poetas'). Here, the conquistadors 'brought the light of culture [and] sowed bonds of tenderness' ('levaram a luz da cultura, semearam laços de ternura'), with destinations including Brazil, Praia (the capital of Cape Verde), Bissau, Angola, Mozambique, Goa, Macau and Timor.⁹ ABBA's 'Waterloo', the crossover between Eurovision and historical representation that might well first come to mind, stood as historical metaphor more than historical fiction (the song's lovers have reached a relationship crisis as decisive as the Battle of Waterloo), though their conductor Sven-Olof Walldoff famously wore a Napoleon outfit on the podium. Through ABBA's lyrics, Brendan Simms writes in his history of the battle, 'a generation of teenagers knew – even if it was all they knew – that at "Waterloo Napoleon did surrender"' (2015, xv).¹⁰

A further interplay between Eurovision and historical fiction involves entries that seem to reference popular historical or pseudohistorical audiovisual fictions by echoing their aesthetics of primordialism or medievalism. This has become possible since the mid-2000s as Eurovision staging and televised

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjBLXBBuGcg> (accessed 26 August 2019).

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2x5vawmtvE> (accessed 26 August 2019).

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rv9KZy1tjIA> (accessed 26 August 2019).

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FsVeMz1F5c> (accessed 26 August 2019).

(pseudo)historical fiction have both grown in scale and budget. Ruslana's appropriation of the Bronze Age via *Xena* in 'Wild Dances' is still probably the most elaborate example, and stands by no means alone in employing that representational shortcut for transmedial performances that are intended to connote 'strong, Amazonian' women in the ancient past (Carlà and Freitag 2015, 247). 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 (Zeiber 2018).¹¹ Rasmussen's own Facebook page for communicating with Eurovision fans used the same term (Rasmussen 2018), and before the contest he told BBC Scotland that his song was inspired by the story of St Magnus (1080–1115) being 'a pacifist Viking refusing to fight for his king' off Anglesey in 1098 (Delday 2018). The Viking heritage that furnishes Denmark and other Nordic nations with iconic pasts, where 'notions of authenticity and commodification' have long been at commercialised odds (Halewood and Hannam 2001, 565), has been televisually remediated since 2013 by the History Channel's *Vikings*. This drama, based on the sagas of Ragnar Lothbrok, has, through its production and costume design, epitomised medievalism in the sense of reinterpreting and restyling the medieval past through 'modern investments in and desires for history' (Taylor 2019, 60). It bears many similarities to the style of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), a fantasy narrative which nevertheless rests its worldbuilding on a claim to represent medieval worldviews authentically in the course of enchanting them with magic and the supernatural (Carroll 2018).

Both Ruslana's mediation of *Xena* and Rasmussen's mediation of *Vikings*, which itself remediates both prior fictionalisations of the Viking past and the aesthetics of *Game of Thrones*, therefore, demonstrate Eurovision taking up artefacts of historical and pseudohistorical popular culture as meaning-making ingredients. The historical and the pseudohistorical are, for these purposes, impossible to separate. These performances' intriguing elements from a historical fiction perspective involve their aesthetics of 'pastness' (Ricoeur 2004, 102) much more than any drawing of firm lines between what is historical fiction and what is fantasy fiction that builds worlds by harnessing popular imaginings of the past. Metal bands and world music performers (plus their stylists) often remediate aesthetics of 'pastness' too (Ćolović 2006; Bennett 2015). The aesthetic of *Game of Thrones* and the aesthetic of *Vikings* are already interdependent, and indeed part of the *Vikings* sales-pitch is effectively as a real-world *Game of Thrones* (Raymer 2015) – where the fantastic has fuelled the popularity of the historical, rather than the historical driving attention to the

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0kP074Mw0k> (accessed 26 August 2019).

fantastic as it is often thought to do. The two series' aesthetics were already intertwined by the time they reached Eurovision.

Beyond these intertextual stylistic harnessings of historical fiction and telefantasy, however, a more complex relationship between historical fiction and Eurovision also manifests in Eurovision entries that could be said to be framed as historical fiction themselves. Eurovision has lent itself, especially during significant historical anniversaries, to songs that commemorate an aspect of a national past which is being shown off to a European audience, or an aspect of the European past that the song invites the audience to remember collectively. A memorial function on its own does not necessarily make a song fictional. Where Eurovision entries could come closest to historical fiction, however, is the style of entry in the form of a first-person narrative where the performer embodies and voices a character representative of collective 'mythscape' (Bell 2003) in the national and/or European past. At Eurovision, this device has lent itself particularly well to communicating and re-creating historical memory of conflict, trauma and war once we examine where it has tended to appear.

Ireland's Eurovision winner in 1996, Eimear Quinn's 'The Voice', contains the line which gave this paper its title and appeared at the height of Western popular culture's fascination with 'Celtic' themes, designs and sounds in the 1990s. This cultural moment had itself been spurred on by *Riverdance*, the extravagant Irish dance stage show narrating a history of Ireland from pagan ritual to diasporic reunion which made its debut as the interval act when Dublin hosted Eurovision in 1994. *Riverdance* was frequently seen in the 1990s as symbolising Ireland's economic resurgence as the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' (Farrell-Wortman 2010, 312–13). 'The Voice' was created at a significant moment in the Northern Ireland peace process, while the ground-breaking Provisional IRA and Loyalist ceasefires of August and October 1994 still held; the IRA's breach of the ceasefire with the London Docklands bombing on 9 February 1996 would likely not have happened before 'The Voice' was written, if the song was ready for selection on 3 March.

If the lyrical world of songs is in any case a 'fictive setting' (Strand 2013, 137), the sonic and embodied first impression of Brendan Graham's song and Quinn's performance would have coded it as Irish, Celtic and folkloric to mid-1990s viewers even without Ireland's name appearing on screen. Employing the ethereal voice which had captured Graham's attention when he saw her perform as a member of the Irish traditional choral group Anúna, the fair-haired and white-gowned Quinn stands spotlighted at centre stage to narrate the story of an encounter between a young woman and a spirit whose voice is carried on the wind. The spirit quickly takes over the narration, making her self-declaration the song's 'I'.¹² This apparently female presence introduces herself as 'the voice

¹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ozacB4_SwtY (accessed 26 August 2019).

of your history', one that will 'set you free' if the listener 'answer[s] my call'. Hidden in the wind, the rain, and natural landscapes of summertime, autumn, winter and springtime rebirth, the voice repeatedly declares itself with significant nouns. The second line of the chorus, 'I am the voice of your hunger and pain', would in an Irish context above all echo the Great Famine, while listeners elsewhere in Europe might fill the line with memories of hunger and suffering in their own collective pasts. The declarations continue: 'I am the voice that always is calling you' – at a time when the Irish president Mary Robinson had famously been reimagining Ireland's identity as a diasporic nation through a series of political speeches, with the Famine as the collective trauma of their exodus (Gray 2000); 'I am the voice of the past that will always be, filled with my sorrows and blood in my fields'. Lest the narrative dwell on the kinds of atavistic violence that were (wrongly) being widely ascribed as causes of violence such as the Yugoslav wars, it concludes on a note of hope and reconciliation, 'I am the voice of the future... bring me your peace and my wounds, they will heal.'

At this point in the mid-1990s, Eurovision makes an unexpected bridge with the remarks of the historical fiction scholar Amy Elias on writers' yearnings in the late twentieth century to put themselves into a dialogic relationship with history:

[W]e strive to have a dialogue with history, perhaps because we perceive it to be not a *thing* or a sterile collection of written texts but rather a cacophony of voices of living beings who preceded us in time. If we hear and perceive history as human voice, then there is an odd logic to why we pursue a dialogue with the past (Elias 2005, 168).

Elias's imagined idea of being able to have a dialogue with history is here made literal. This song was broadcast to viewers and expert juries across Europe at a hopeful yet uncertain moment in the Northern Ireland peace process, a full year (give or take ten days) after European commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day (see Ashplant, Dawson and Roper 2000, 81). It was also part of the first Eurovision since the end of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which when they broke out in 1991–2 had so unsettled European fantasies of post-Cold-War peace. Though only containing three verses and a chorus, it has a narrative, it has a central character, and it invites its listeners to identify with that character's emotions so that giving it meaning as a listener involves calling to mind which hunger, pain or bloodshed might be being remembered or healed: these are devices through which fiction works.

Quinn's song was a sombre winner, and if not for the popularity of Celtic aesthetics and symbols of Irish culture in mid-1990s Eurovision (Singleton 2013, 149) would seem an unexpected one. The same could be said for another Eurovision entry crafted as a first-person historical narrative, Jamala's '1944', which won for Ukraine in 2016 and became one of Eurovision's most

geopolitically significant songs to date. This was the first Ukrainian entry to have been devised since Russia had annexed Crimea in February 2014 and war had broken out between the Ukrainian military and Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. (National Television Ukraine (NTU) had not been able to afford participation in Eurovision 2015, and its 2014 entry had been chosen in December 2013, before the Euromaidan Revolution had even taken place). Just as the public broadcasters of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina had both used their countries' first Eurovision appearances as independent states, in 1993, to narrate the impact of their ongoing wars of independence to a European audience (Andjelić 2015), Jamala's song drew similar attention to what was occurring in Crimea – but in her case did so by constructing a narrative ostensibly about 1944, not 2014.

Historical fiction and memory politics at Eurovision: telling stories about 1944

The year of 1944, when Stalin deported the Crimean Tatars to Central Asia, represented not just a parallel but a continuum in the narrative of Ukrainian/Tatar victimhood and Ukrainian/Russian relations that Jamala's song invited the listener to co-create. Not only was Jamala's own family background Tatar, but her parents and grandparents were still in Crimea and had been living under occupation since 2014, unable to reunite with her. In pre-contest interviews, Jamala drew direct links between the two historical moments, telling *The Guardian*:

Of course it's about 2014 as well. These two years have added so much sadness to my life. Imagine you're a creative person, a singer, but you can't go home for two years. You see your grandfather on Skype who is 90 years old and ill, but you can't visit him. What am I supposed to do: just sing nice songs and forget about it? Of course I can't do that (Walker 2016).

The song's opening lines, accusing 'strangers [who] are coming / They come to your house / They kill you all and say "We're not guilty"', not only frame its emotive stakes from the beginning but intertextually invite the listener to recognise Russian government disavowals of responsibility for persecution in Crimea and for the separatist offensives in Eastern Ukraine as disinformation (see Pomerantsev 2015). The chorus's switch into Tatar, the language of Jamala's family heritage, employs a common Eurovision linguistic strategy of singing verses in English and the chorus in a national language: this balances the transnational communicative opportunities of English as a *lingua franca* and the cultural objectives of performing a national language and/or an ethnic minority's language on the Eurovision stage (see Motsenbacher 2016, 143).¹³

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-rnM-MwRHY> (accessed 26 August 2019).

The strategy also facilitated allusions to traditional and neo-traditional Crimean Tatar folk songs. Two lines from *Ey, güzel Qırım* (*Oh, beautiful Crimea*), which commemorates the Tatars' exile under Stalin, were incorporated into the chorus, and the eight-second 'melismatic wail' *Jamala* so viscerally performs in the middle eight 'recalls the snaking modal melody of the traditional Crimean Tatar song *Arafat Dağı*' (Sonevytsky 2019). This wail, Maria Sonevytsky observes, performs an anguish which both communicates grief at a personal and national tragedy and draws viewers into a 'shared emotional state' of grieving with *Jamala*:

Through sonic entanglement with the *duduk* [a traditional wind instrument from Crimea, Turkey and the Caucasus], *Jamala* here communicates anguish on another register, without translation into words... Furthermore, the power of this meta-affect is almost certainly heightened through normative gendered associations with performative anguish (Sonevytsky 2019).

The historical fiction of *Jamala's* '1944', established through words yet sealing its aesthetic effect on the listener without them, was potentially a fiction intended to have a direct impact in international politics by contributing to public sympathy for the Ukrainian cause versus Putin's Russia. Within Eurovision's distinctive geopolitics of sexuality and nationhood, the association with state homophobia many Western fans projected on to Russian entries since the passage of the so-called 'gay propaganda' laws in 2013 may temporarily have given such sympathies weight.¹⁴

The most audiovisually complex example of a Eurovision performance framed as historical fiction, however, is another song commemorating war's toll on civilians, Lisa Angell's 'N'oubliez pas' which represented France in 2015. This contest took place in VE Day's 70th anniversary month and amid the 'centenary moment' (Pennell 2017, 256) of commemorations of the First World War. The song's video was filmed at battlefield sites in Normandy (which provided the song's audiovisual text in the weeks before Eurovision, when fans encounter songs' preview videos online),¹⁵ and its stage performance depended heavily on LED technology to create the backdrop of a devastated village. Here, Angell sings in first person as the survivor of a massacre in a village which has been 'erased from maps and memories' ('effacée des cartes et des mémoires'), leaving only tears, ashes and 'the melody of our prayers' ('le chant de nos prières'), after thousands of soldiers speaking foreign words of hatred came ('avec des mots de haine que l'on ne connaissent pas').

¹⁴ The law's proponents also wanted Russia to leave Eurovision so that Russian TV would not have to broadcast performances embodying non-normative sexualities and gender relations – hence Russian Eurovision entries themselves were caught up by the atmosphere that fans decried.

¹⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kG_WJU2s5ho (accessed 26 August 2019).

To the extent that the song's audiovisual and embodied narrative invites viewers to ask what happened there in order to complete the story, the transnational centenary commemorations surrounding viewers in 2015 might have brought the Great War to mind particularly soon. It would have taken more reflection and knowledge to hear, for instance, any echo of the memorialisation of another destroyed village which is well known in France, Oradour-sur-Glane, where the Waffen SS massacred 642 villagers in June 1944 and which Charles de Gaulle ordered should stand in its devastated state as a memorial to the Nazi occupation (see Farmer 1999). The song is not identifiably about Oradour, yet does echo the kind of 'chronotope' or archetypal location that Oradour has become in French public memory, as well as comparable sites of memory in other countries where the trauma of foreign occupation is part of national narratives of the past.

Interestingly, the video and staging of 'N'oubliez pas' differ somewhat in which wars they seem to reference, with the video's shots of villages and military graveyards in Normandy, including the American Cemetery, being charged with French Second World War memory in particular.¹⁶ The live performance, with the backdrop of the ruined village reconstructing itself as the song builds, particularly seems to evoke tropes of First World War memory in a centenary year like 1915. This occurs most of all at the song's middle eight when four ghostly military drummers (white men in cream-coloured uniforms) appear in the foreground of the reconstructed street and start marching forward while dozens more of them march digitally in step behind them.¹⁷ While Eurovision rules only permit six performers to be on stage (preventing entries from containing massed crowds, bands or choirs), digital technology here nevertheless allowed the designers of the performance to fill the stage. Whether intentional or not, the image recalled the ghostly returns of military dead that marked the climaxes of several classics of post-First World War cinema, including the 1930 adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and, much more grotesquely, Abel Gance's 1919 and 1938 *J'accuse!* (Winter 1995, 140–1). Here, however, the return of the dead appears to be as a sacrifice bringing about reconciliation and reconstruction, rather than a rupture that seeks to jar its audience away from investments in war.

Fans and the media interestingly received 'N'oubliez pas' as much less political than two other entries with which it had much in common: the Armenian entry of the same year (first titled 'Don't Deny', then 'Face the Shadow'), which united musicians from the worldwide Armenian diaspora together to commemorate the Armenian Genocide at its own centenary and speak out against its denial, and Jamala's '1944'. '1944', indeed, depicts essentially the same situation as 'N'oubliez pas', a massacre in a village (not to

¹⁶ Thanks to Laura O'Brien.

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJful-Jtc9o> (accessed 26 August 2019).

mention the same year, to the extent that the Allied liberation of Normandy is part of any viewer's context for the song). Yet 'N'oubliez pas', unlike 'Don't Deny'/'Face the Shadow' or '1944', was never called into question as potentially 'too political' for Eurovision, which prohibits political 'lyrics, speeches [and] gestures' during the contest (Eurovision.tv 2019). The Armenian Genocide and the occupation of Crimea in this discursive framework appear to be the outcomes of contested ethnopolitical conflicts where supporting one narrative over another is a political choice. The French experience of the World Wars, meanwhile, is allowed to stand as an expression of a transnational European culture of memory mediated through European institutions which is itself the product of a politically negotiated consensus. The difference between which histories become framed as potentially in breach of Eurovision's rules against political messages, and which histories do not, hint at a historical metafiction in which the shaping of European remembrance is the responsibility of Europe's North and West. The implication is that the symbolic centre of Eurovision's Europe might shift from city to city and periphery to periphery but its structural centre is still in the quadrant understood as Europe's core.

Conclusion

The conventions of Eurovision performance, which offers entries to viewers as embodied performances of national identity, lend themselves to elements of historical fictional narrative strategies including intertextuality and the mediation of collective pasts. At a deeper level, however, 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. This has in fact been the interpretation of Eurovision that informs what is to date the contest's most extensive impression on (another genre of) fiction, Catherynne M Valente's comic SF novel *Space Opera*.¹⁸ The interplanetary song contest imagined in *Space Opera*, where two washed-up glam rock stars from a near-future United Kingdom must save Earth from annihilation by performing and not coming last, is the aftermath of a devastating galactic war that the inhabitants of the surviving planets vowed never to repeat:

When it was all done and said and shot and ignited and vaporized and swept up and put away and both sincerely and insincerely apologized for, everyone left standing knew that the galaxy could not bear a second go at this sort of thing. Something had to be done. Something mad and real and bright. Something that would bring all the shattered worlds together as one civilization. Something

¹⁸ This passage draws on my earlier discussion of the novel in Baker 2018.

significant. Something elevating. Something grand. Something beautiful and stupid. Something terribly, gloriously, brilliantly, undeniably *people*.

Now, follow the bouncing disco ball. It's time for the chorus (Valente 2018, 8–9).

The answer, affirming the authorial voice's fantasy that '[w]hen the world is fucked, you go to the theater, you go to the shine, and when the bad men come, all there is left to do is sing them down' (Valente 2018, 144), is an annual song contest between all the remaining sentient species of the galaxy, filled with allusions to Eurovision songs and the languages they have been heard in. Every alien species takes its name from a word in a different European language; every chapter is named after the English translation of a Eurovision song title. *Space Opera* offers a guiding vision of Eurovision as a continent-wide (extrapolated to galaxy-wide) performance of reconciliation, where old enemies have looked back on their devastating history and promised to put war aside. This echoes the transnational consensus over the memory of the World Wars that European institutions first attempted to build through political and economic projects of Western European integration in the 1950s and then reaffirmed through 50th anniversary commemorations of VE Day in 1995.

Eurovision, indeed, has retrospectively dated itself back to the earlier of these moments: while the EBU was separate from the Council of Europe (founded in 1949) and the early 1950s institutions that became the European Economic Community in 1958, it nevertheless articulated and sometimes even anticipated the symbolic expressions of European 'unity in diversity' that these institutions' political and cultural policy imagined (Vuletić 2018). The EBU and its most prominent annual live event are thus among the organisations that cooperate in 'affirm[ing] the existence of "European culture" as part of a language of belonging, recognition and partnership' (Sieg 2013b, 22). While the interne-cine destruction of *Space Opera*'s Sentience Wars is more reminiscent of European public memory of the First World War than the Allied struggle against the Axis powers in the Second, both European institutions, and Eurovision itself, have subtly joined in the myth-making of 1914–45 as one long war when they perform reconciliation through commemoration and song.

Space Opera is not the only trace Eurovision has left in speculative fiction. Another future Eurovision is glimpsed in Dave Hutchinson's near-future *Fractured Europe* sequence, set on a continent which has broken up into hundreds of waxing and waning mini-states. This Europe has reverted geopolitically to something approaching a medieval system of international sovereignty filtered through the transnational 'mediascapes' and 'financescapes' (Appadurai 1996, 33) of late capitalist globalisation. Its Eurovision has more than five hundred entries with the grand final performances lasting two whole days and voting taking up another three (Hutchinson 2015, 219). (Both Valente and Hutchinson take digs at the notorious mismatch between the power of the UK pop industry

and the country's record at Eurovision: it has been 'some decades since any part of Britain had managed better than thirtieth place' in Hutchinson's Eurovision (Hutchinson 2015, 219), while among *Space Opera's* contestants are a species whose 'early... winning streak, combined with their overwhelming cultural and military hegemony, proved so irritating to the rest of the galaxy that it has become something of a beloved tradition to vote them down into the lower ranks every single year until they cry' (Valente 2018, 168)). However, even if it is not the only Eurovision in SFF, *Space Opera's* Eurovision is the one most driven by what has retrospectively become Eurovision's own founding myth.

As an event, Eurovision itself is not structured as historical fiction in the sense of creating aesthetic effects out of probing 'the gaps between known factual history and that which is lived', to adopt Jerome de Groot's description of historical fiction as craft (de Groot 2009, 3). Its direct representations of the past are too sparse to say that it exists to 'enforce... a sense of historicised "difference"' on its viewers or to engage them 'with... tropes, settings and ideas that are particular, alien and strange' (de Groot 2009, 4) by virtue of *temporal* distance. The distances that structure it are cultural and spatial, though informed by Eurocentric temporalities of modernity and backwardness that loom whenever ideas of 'Western' and 'Eastern' Europe are at hand (Sieg 2013a). Its imagination can sometimes be historical but is not, on the face of it, historiographical. Rather, it is a setting where fictional and narrative techniques that mediate representations of the past can be used to enhance spectatorial identification with performers' embodiments of national cultural identities, bringing to the fore a certain narrative of that nation's history that may provoke resonances with other national pasts. The extent to which these will appear to be 'political' or 'non-political' in the contest's own terms is likely to depend on how central or peripheral those nations have been in transnational European memory politics writ large.

Nevertheless, Eurovision rests on historical fictions of its own. One is the myth of 'unity in diversity' with which the EBU and European Union have both sought to emphasise 'plurality and resistance to homogenization' as a cultural value around which nations can co-operate (Carniel 2017, 15). Another is the fiction that today's Europe exists in cosmopolitan and multiracial harmony, detached from the coloniality with which imaginations of and identifications with 'Europe' have been invested in the past and present (Sieg 2013b). The assemblage of individuals and organisations that constitutes 'Eurovision' is by no means alone in separating the heritage of maritime exploration (the theme of Lisbon 2018's visual identity) from the history of colonial expansion and enslavement that funded and impelled those voyages, or supposing that the politics of co-operating with the current Israeli government can be separated from the occupation of Palestine; but the Eurovision contest is still noteworthy as another site which reproduces these silences in viewers' everyday worlds. The most significant result of considering Eurovision as historical fiction may therefore not

even be to observe how intertextual allusions to certain artefacts of popular historical fiction can be remediated in Eurovision, or to show how mechanisms of fictional narrative can be adapted into popular cultural forms not generally thought of as fiction. It may be to draw attention to the constitutive role that historical fictions play in the shaping of national and European identities, that is, the ways in which Eurovision and many other contexts invite viewers, listeners, readers, users and participants to identify with pasts that never existed and yet can comfortingly be desired to be true.

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