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"In the end, Germany will always resort to hot pants": watching Europe singing, constructing the stereotype

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'IN THE END, GERMANY WILL ALWAYS RESORT IN HOT-PANTS':

WATCHING EUROPE SINGING, CONSTRUCTING THE STEREOTYPE

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Abstract

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is an annual popular music event that attracts millions of people who consume it with enthusiasm, irony, humour, but also sometimes with anger. The contest has been increasingly dressed with numerous stereotypes about the nation, Europe and cultural difference. This paper looks at two different groups of ESC audiences in the UK and analyses their engagement with the event and the stereotypes around it. The first audience group consists of participants in the BBC Online Forum debates and the second group consists of committed Eurovision audience members participating in focus group discussions. Findings show that the stereotype becomes a powerful, political, yet ambivalent, tool in making sense of cultural difference.

Most people who have ever sat through the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) or who have heard of it will be somehow familiar with the contest's stereotypes: Cyprus votes for Greece and vice versa, Scandinavians are loyal to their neighbours and no western European country will ever win again, as eastern European countries only vote for each other. While stereotypes have been around for as long as the contest itself, in recent years they have been growing in firmness and intensity. They have been growing in parallel to the numbers of participants (that now include more than 40 countries), audiences (estimated up to 300 million worldwide), and platforms where the event is consumed (especially on live satellite television and on hundreds of dedicated websites). The shape of ESC stereotypes, as well as the qualities of audiences' engagement with the event, reflect some of the key dimensions of an emergent cultural space which, though ephemeral – or maybe because of its ephemerality – is revealing about the processes of imagining Europe, the nation and otherness in a popular culture context. The paper discusses these imaginings, as recorded and analysed in British audiences' engagement with the ESC in focus group discussions and debates on the vibrant BBC News online forum.

The study shows that musical performance and voting behaviours during the contest are used by audiences as platforms for constructing, or for reinforcing, stereotypes that continue their life long after the event is over. Stereotypes originating in the consumption of this particular – and rather peculiar – event are often unreflectively applied to wider interpretations of cultural and political difference. At the same time, findings show that stereotypes are appropriated in two rather different ways. For many members of the audience, stereotypes boost dominant ideologies of nation-centric

hierarchies in Europe and become versatile tools for the construction of everyday racism[1]. For a smaller number of people, especially for those regularly engaging with the event, stereotypes become navigating tools in their attempt to make sense of distant and otherwise inapproachable difference. As a result, watching and talking about the contest become activities where discourses of competing and, for some, incompatible, nationhoods, popular culture and Europeanism emerge in intensity not often observed in other domains of political debate.

The Eurovision Song Contest is an interesting case study as it is a rare kind of media event in the context of late western (global) modernity, primarily because it so closely ties together popular music and transnationally reaffirmed nationalisms. The contest came to life as a top-down institutional initiative, aiming to bring together what is seen as national musical cultures of Europe into a common platform of celebrating cultural commonalities (or, to put it differently, of celebrating nationally defined non-threatening differences). ESC is promoted as the ultimate European event that plays a key role in the construction of a European popular (public) sphere – through cultural exchange and sharing[2]. Importantly, this European popular (public) sphere is clearly defined by its initiators as a sphere consisting of nation-states, while cultures are defined on the basis of state boundaries. Very few western popular music events are presently based on such direct alliance between culture, nation and imagining of a (trans-)national political/geographical entity, such as Europe. While a lot has been written about popular

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[1] A definition of everyday racism is provided later in this article. Nationalism and everyday racism are not synonyms but in some popular culture domains, like the ESC consumption, the two ideologies often seem to come together.

[2] The European Song Contest was established in 1956 by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) as a political and cultural initiative aiming at enhancing the European cultural space and establishing European transnational media production. At the time of its introduction, the event was a major technological experiment, as it aimed to produce a live and parallel broadcasting event watched across many countries (www.eurovision.tv).

music and the construction of national, ethnic and diasporic identities (Gilroy, 1993; Gillespie, 1995; Rose, [1994] 2006; Simonett, [2001] 2006), ESC is a unique case, for it so intensely brings together nation-centrism, transnational politics and the construction of identity and otherness.

The Ambivalence of the Stereotype

This paper focuses on British audiences' appreciation, rejection and troubled engagement with an annual European media event. It analyses audiences' approaches to it by looking at two locations of public debate: the first part of the paper discusses Eurovision related debates on the vibrant BBC online forum and the second part provides an analysis of focus group discussions with Eurovision enthusiasts (i.e. members of the audiences regularly engaging with the event). Audiences in Britain have developed a peculiar relation with the Eurovision Song Contest in time. Britain, which frequently won the contest until the end of the 1980s, has gradually lost its leading role, especially as a result of the increase in participants' numbers. The change of the national position in the event through time largely frames audiences' evaluation of it at present. As such, the cultural and political particular location of the audiences studied here is important. Additionally, and as will be discussed later in this paper, in Britain, there is tension and controversy around the discussion of most issues European. Taking that Britain has not been doing well in this European Song Contest for years, the debate around the value and relevance of it for British audiences has also intensified. The unease about the British contestants' performances, the (lack of) appreciation by European audiences, and the politics that take

place around regionally defined and, the so-called, tactical voting, are themes discussed repeatedly by audiences.

Stereotypes about the contest, peoples, countries and regions become frameworks for interpreting the results and convenient tools for communicating arguments in the very little time and space available. Stereotypes often serve as entry points that ease participation and allow condensed, punchy and brief contributions to the debate. Though much of the debates and arguments discussed here have a distinct British flavour (as culturally and politically located), the tactics of engaging with such a cultural, yet politically coloured event, reveal themes with wider relevance for understanding the relation between popular culture, the nation, *Otherness* and Europe. In the analysis of the material on study, the stereotype becomes both an operational tool and a central category of analysis, as it is a persistent method used by audiences in trying to make sense of the contest.

The Eurovision Song Contest has gained its popularity because of its availablity to millions of people on live television and because its dominant musical themes reproduce familiar western/global and commercial pop music recipes. Domination of such themes makes ESC a successful transnational event. At the same time, ESC's transnationalism is conditional and filtered through the nation. The top-down imaginings of Europe, which are controlled by a European institution (EBU) and the media, are clear: Europe is constructed by clearly defined nation-states that compose the European cultural sphere. In ESC, each contesting singer/group represents a specific country, while viewing and voting are nationally framed with dedicated national phone lines ; votes go to a country, not to a contestant. The event takes place in the country that won the previous

year's contest, while it is usually mediated by popular local presenters for each country's national audience. Also, as a rule, the ESC is broadcasted live on a national public television channel. The fact that most contestants sing in their native language makes this event even more of an affair of cultural exchange based on a bounded and formally recognised nationhood. As such, this international event has more in common with international sporting events, such as the Olympics (as Christiansen and Christiansen argue in this volume), than with other forms of national and transnational musical events. As Alabarces, Tomlinson and Young (2001) discuss in relation to sports media coverage, media can reproduce myths of national superiority and national identity. Similarly, such myths are observed in the construction of this specific media event. A nationalist superiority projected, especially in the online debates, frames an image of Europe as a composition of competing and hierarchical national interests.

Like in the case of international sports events, the stereotype becomes an important category for interpreting the ESC (adopted by audiences and explored by researchers). Yet the stereotypes' ambivalence requires a complex analysis that looks at the mechanisms and the consequences of their appropriation. As Pickering (1995, 2001) argues, in media studies, the stereotype has been primarily analysed as a singularly negative category of damaging misrepresentations of people's 'real' identities (1995). However, this is a limiting approach that assumes that 'real' identities exist against the misrepresented ones. Such assumption reproduces another set of stereotypes about groups who are seen as holding firm social positions. If instead, we turn to Lippman's analysis of the stereotype ([1922]2007), we can make more sense of the relevance and consequences of Eurovision audiences' insistence to turn to them. Lippmann's ([1922]2007) influential

dual analysis suggests that the stereotype has a dual function. On the one hand, it is used to justify irrational bias and resistance to social change, and on the other, it becomes a method of processing information, especially necessary in diverse societies where attitudes and cultures might be unfamiliar to many of its members.

According to Lippmann's analysis (2007), the stereotype is not singularly and a priori negative in its function and effect, but rather it needs to be evaluated in context and, particularly, in relation to control and power relations. Control of stereotypes can be used as a tool for sustaining power. Media play a key role in projecting certain stereotypes that reconfirm relations of power and social and political hierarchies. This analysis becomes relevant in relation to the ESC, as audiences' engagement with the event is largely filtered through (media) stereotypes. Yet, we can here observe the two different appropriations of the stereotype recognised by Lippmann. On the one hand, audiences turn to stereotypes in an attempt to resist what they see as threatening difference and when retreating towards a *secure* and taken for granted national and western imaginary. On the other hand, they turn to the stereotype in trying to make sense of unfamiliar diversity in an increasingly cosmopolitan Europe.

What the present study shows is that the stereotype of a hierarchical Europe, where British and western cultures and interests are perceived as *naturally* superior, predominate in public debates around the ESC. The predominance of the xenophobic, irrational bias against others indicates that it is not enough to tackle the stereotype, but rather we need to explore the kind of stereotype and its hegemonic or inferior position in public debates and political ideologies. The findings show that the ESC primarily becomes an occasion where xenophobic stereotypes are reinforced through banal

everyday media consumption practices, which are then appropriated as banal forms of everyday racism. Xenophobic and degrading stereotypes about other nations and peoples in Europe predominate in audiences' opinions, unsurprisingly, next to similar stereotypes observed in media representations of the event and of Europe (see Coleman's discussion on the British televisual presentation of the event, also in this volume). Media function as a key element of the apparatus that reproduces a hegemonic message of hierarchical western-centric and nation-centric Europe (and which also includes the nation-states and the European institutions). This hegemonic ideology tends to be reproduced among audiences and especially through the reproduction of specific stereotypes.

The interesting diversion away from the dominant stereotype is observed among a minority of audience members. In this case, the stereotype becomes a playful mechanism for interpreting distant difference. Like all stereotypes, these diverting stereotypes as well tend to be single-dimensional, biased and sometimes degrading interpretations of difference, behaviours and attitudes. What is important about these minority cases is that they show how stereotypes can support audiences' attempt to make sense of difference when information is not available in the public domain or when the predominant stereotype is extremely inflexible. Most of these cases are recorded among audiences who have an expressed interest in the contest as a musical and cultural event and thus show more resistance towards simplistic political stereotypes about Europe and European others, compared to audiences who have no regular or emotional attachment to the contest. In this case however, as well as in the case of the hegemonic reconfirmation of a nation-centric hierarchical Europe, we observe a tight connection of a musical media event with a European ideological struggle.

Nation-centric Europeanism

Though the Eurovision Song Contest has never been clearly defined as an event exclusive to a bounded Europe[3], it has increasingly become an affair attached to the political and cultural imaginary of Europe, and more specifically, the EU. This is confirmed not only by the institutional ideology, which is not on the focus of the present article, but also by audiences' interpretation of the event. For example, the regular participation of Israel in the (European) contest is discussed by many as one of those entertaining (or not so entertaining for some) particularities of the ESC. Even more importantly, many of the heated debates about the relevance and worthiness of the event on the BBC Forum evolve around the participation of eastern European countries, considered by some members of the audience as being outside what Europe *should be*. In discussing international sports events, O'Donnell argues that powerful western countries 'can and must act out their preferred myths' ([1994]2004, p. 128). In similar manner, British audiences – especially as observed on the BBC Forum – largely construct their discourse of cultural and musical appreciation through the lens of power relations in the European context. As a participant in the online debates puts it:

> Admittedly, Eurovision is not serious, but this highlights why the UK needs to
> leave the EU now, because as it continues to expand [the EU], so will the Eastern
> European influence. Yes, the UK, France, Germany do have more power, but

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[3] Israel is regularly participating in the event. Also, Morocco participated in the event in 1980 and though it refused to participate again as long as Israel is a participant, it still has the right to do so, as member of the European Broadcasting Union.

soon they are going to be outnumbered 3 or 4 by former communist countries'

(BBC Forum posting, 12 May 2007).

Many of the members of the audience – as the one above – reveal in their words a western-centric discourse of internal hierarchies and interests.

Give the Eastern European countries back to Russia (BBC Forum posting, 11 May 2007).

A discourse of an oppositional binary between the east and the west clearly emerges as a theme among a significant number of audience opinions. This discourse tends to reproduce an Orientalism of fundamental *Otherness* (and inferiority) of the east (Said, 1978) and reinforces ideologies of natural and essential difference between the east and the west. As Hall, following Derrida, argues: 'There is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition' (1997, p. 235). The words of a Forum participant reflect this opposition, not only between cultures but also between political poles:

The whole lot stinks! The eastern block corrupts everything it is part of. I say we should have a new competition with just EEC countries in it (BBC Forum posting, 13 May 2007).

According to this discourse, the western nation – the UK in this case – is *naturally* allied to the other western European countries. Long-standing ideological themes of Orientalism and otherness in relation to popular culture emerge in many of the Eurovision debates; their intensity increases further when they are used as interpretative frameworks in the crossroad of cultural everyday analysis and contemporary politics. For some, the song contest becomes almost synonymous to European Union politics.

> A horrid example of micro-engineered pre-arranged European claptrap. "Oh, isn't Europe cool" – No it's not. Now, can I please have my country back? (BBC Forum posting, 13 May 2007).

This posting might lack the irony and humour that characterises much of the debate around the contest, but it reflects a distinct attitude of political projections among a section of the British audience. Thus, in a rather serious tone, another participant in the BBC Forum engages in a political reflection about the relation of Europe with the UK, as expressed in the contest's results:

> The second from last finishing position of the British song is indicative of how Britain is regarded in Europe. Obviously the European Song Contest is a safe forum to voice this hostility towards Britain. But unlike Americans, us Brits are accustomed to everyone hating us. Just as well and pariah nation status beckons (BBC Forum positing, 13 May 2007).

The intensity of emotional opinions those comments reveal, reflect the close association between popular culture and (inter-)national political affairs. On the one hand, for many members of the audience, the boundaries between politics and popular culture are very fluid, especially as 'serious' news about Europe tends to be very limited (EU gets little coverage in the press; cf. Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005); or it is often very biased (e.g. observed in the Euroscepticism of a significant section of the British media; cf. Kevin, 2003; d'Haenens, 2005). In this case, 'Europe' becomes a category associated with specific qualities and stereotypes, often parallel to media representations of Europe/the EU. As such stereotypes tend to predominate media coverage of Europe in the UK (next to no or little coverage of European-related news), audiences seem to regularly retreat to them (Gleissner and de Vreese, 2005; Kevin, 2003). For some participants, the association of 'anything European' with stereotypes about a problematic and costly union with countries the UK does not share a lot with, becomes almost the only way to engage with the single-dimensional category called 'Europe'. On the other hand, the intensity of hostile and derogatory comments about Europe and other European countries – a small fraction of which is reproduced here – reflects not only irony, but also a sense of amorality in engaging with close or distant others.

The extremity of many of these comments shows how popular culture is lived and imagined as a less restrictive domain for the expression of everyday racism, compared to other more political public spaces. Everyday racism is a relevant concept here, as it refers to everyday practices that become normalised and banal and thus considered by the majority population as trivial, non-problematic or discriminatory. However, attitudes

attached to everyday racism – often expressed lightly in verbal exchanges – can have serious consequences, especially for minorities, foreigners and others. According to analyses of everyday racism, jokes, irony and public derogatory statements are not individual acts, but social acts (Essed, 1991). Everyday racism can take different forms, contradictory and specific to context. Yet, its consequences for the life of minorities and the negative effects for intercultural dialogue can persist outside the specific events, especially when racism becomes more complex and more difficult to pinpoint.

> What is evident then is that racism is an ideology that is continually changing, being challenged, interrupted and reconstructed, and which often appears in contradictory forms. As such, its reproduction in schools, and elsewhere can be expected to be complex, multi-faceted and historically specific… specific forms of racism can be expected to change, and inherited racist discourse are likely to be reconstituted. New circumstances are likely to lead to new formulations of racism (Troyna, 1993, p.15, cited in Gopalkrishnan and Babacan, p. 2).

Examples of attitudes that could be associated with everyday racism are observed in numerous exchanges on the BBC Forum:

> I'd like to know how much of my licence fee pays for this political rubbish. Get rid of it and let all the Baltics, Scandinavian and eastern block mates vote for themselves! Have a UK-vision with all the countries, might have some decent songs then! (BBC Forum posting, 13 May 2007).

Eurovision – and we are supposed to be happy to join this lot in a Common

Constitution? For God's sake, let us get out of Europe before they vote us out of

existence (BBC Forum posting, 12 May 2007).

It doesn't matter whether we have the best/worst song in the world, we get

kyboshed by the French every time. They haven't forgiven us for not surrendering

in 1940! The Eurovision Song Contest is nothing to do with music, it's all to do

with politics. At the moment the rest of Europe doesn't like us (whilst taking

millions of pounds from us in subsidies each year) so they won't vote for us – the

whole programme is a pathetic sham! (BBC Forum posting, 11 May 2007; signed

as 'loyallittleenglander').

The political overtone of the debate is not only expressed in the dissatisfaction of

numerous participants with Europe and its politics, but also in the voices that reject this

kind of hostile engagement with the contest and with Europe. In this alternative opinion

front, the boundaries between politics and culture again become indistinguishable.

Eurovision has been political for as long as I can remember, and probably will

always be. Why are people suddenly yelling about an 'eastern Europe' block is

quite beyond me, blocks of varying sizes have existed as long as the competition

has. Last year was the only exception I can remember when a truly unique and

decent song won it on its merits. British people just seem to be becoming

xenophobic to eastern Europeans (BBC Forum posting, 13 May 2007).

…I am shocked at the xenophobic and racist comments that have been posted!

You put us to shame (BBC Forum posting, 13 May 2007).

What is more often observed in this side of the debate is an ironic appropriation of

the stereotype as a tool for dismissing everyday racism.

So I know why the European liberals are so bitter about America crushing the

USSR: it destabilizes the Eurovision voting process (BBC Forum posting, 13 May

2007).

WoW! Does the above mean that I am welcome here as long as I do not criticize

British ESC entries? (Danish participant; BBC Forum posting, 12 May 2007).

What can I say except I'm very sorry that my country was broken into pieces and

how we have 5X12 votes on the Eurovision. I can only publicly offer my service

in shattering the United Kingdom into Wales, Northern Ireland, Caledonia,

Scottish Isles, Yorkshire, Midlands, London and Cornwall, respectively. Just to

make Eurovision more 'fair' naturally (BBC Forum posting, 13 May 2007,

Serbian participant).

In evaluating these comments as examples of intense intercultural exchanges among people of different backgrounds, we can argue that oppositions reveal the contradictory expectations in cosmopolitan communication, which is framed as both national and transnational. In this cosmopolitan context, political anxieties often find expression outside the formal political arena, and more particularly, in popular culture domains. This is especially the case, as increasing numbers of citizens and members of the audience get relatively more opportunities for intercultural exchange around popular culture than around political deliberation. These are also cases when popular culture stereotypes become powerful tools in boosting the power of nationalist ideologies. Often, irony and stereotyping reflect the two sides of the same phenomenon: the inability to catch up with the cosmopolitan intensification of close encounters of difference. Particularly, in the ESC context, politicised anxieties also reflect the confusion caused within the institutional European ideology. Like many other initiatives by European institutions (Schlesinger, 2007), EBU's message about the contest is contradictory. On the one hand, the contest is a celebration of a cosmopolitan world, where different cultural production comes together, and on the other hand, it is an affair of (inter-)national competition where cultures are nationally defined and framed. Audiences' expressed frustration with the ESC reflects a difficulty in engaging with a culturally diverse world, which is presented as both welcomed and as threatening within official ideological schemes. European institutions' and European states' own contradictory ideology celebrates diversity (but as long as it is bounded with the nation-state), while, at the same time, it becomes uncomfortable when difference is more complex and outside institutionally control (Hall, 2002).

The Contest Enthusiasts: Making Sense of Europe through Sterotypes

The focus group discussions with the Eurovision enthusiasts have had a rather different

tone compared to the intense political overtone of the debates on the BBC Forum[4]. This

was an interesting finding in itself, as it revealed the different layers of engagement with

popular culture among those committed to it. For the enthusiasts, the experience of this

media event is multi-layered; their consumption, talk and evaluation of the contest

involve different levels of appreciation and critique. Needless to day, enthusiasts'

engagement with the ESC neither takes place outside the political and ironic evaluation

of the event, nor does it exist outside the hegemonic framework of imaginings of the

nation and of Europe as a hierarchical, western-centric and nation-centric transnational

entity. However, for the committed viewers, both the politics and the aesthetics of the

ESC are never just about cultural clear-cut binaries, and even more so, they are never just

reflections of geo-political divides. In the case of this more committed audience, we can

observe the negotiation of dominant meanings of the nation, Europe and otherness, as

well as the ambivalence of stereotypes that popular music consumption allows.

The groups of Eurovision enthusiasts who participated in the three focus groups

are university students in Britain and they all engage with the contest, including watching

it live and following and contributing to public online or broadcasting debates before and

after its realisation. Though they would be defined as fans in the broader sense, none of

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[4] Three focus groups were organized in Leeds in summers 2006 and 2007. The participants were British
students between the ages 18-24. The focus groups, taking place in real time and consisting of face to face
group encounters, form a rather different method compared to the online textual analysis of the BBC Forum
debates. It is possible that the methodological differences played a role in the production of different kinds
of results (e.g. signs of everyday racism were not obvious in the focus group discussions, though very
visible on the online debates). Apart from any methodological bias, the difference of the sample seems to
play the main part in the different kinds of engagement with the event. The BBC Forum participants, in
their vast majority, were not ESC fans and enthusiasts, while the participants in the focus groups were.

them is fully committed to it as a cultural project beyond criticism. Only one of the participants has ever been to the contest; for the vast majority, ESC is a primarily televisual experience attached to particular rituals and expressions of sociality (e.g. Eurovision parties). It is also far from being a serious affair, either culturally or politically.

> It's not supposed to be a serious exercise of music (female, 22).

> My friends were disgusted when they found out I like Eurovision! (male, 23).

> I love music, music in general, but also pop music and cheesy music especially. Eurovision is pretty much the cheesiest music around (female, 22).

Eurovision is a popular music media event and all focus group participants understand it as such. As Dayan and Katz (1992) argue, a media event is live and it is positioned outside the ordinary schedule and rhythms of television production and consumption. For almost all participants in the study, the contest is a peculiarity not characterising their usual popular culture preferences. As a media event, it is unique and not comparable to other popular music contests. Focus group participants place the ESC in a specific time frame – end of spring – and thus they associate it with specific experiences that relate to the event itself (e.g. the Eurovision parties; getting together with friends and family to watch the contest live) and also to their individual yearly

calendar (e.g. it fits as a break between exams or functions as a celebration of the end of the academic year).

The media event is attached to certain experiences of sociality that filter its meanings and relevance. Eurovision parties are a big tradition in many European countries, including the UK. The parties become a terrain where the distant becomes familiar, or appropriated as an exotic non-threatening other. One of the participants explains:

> My family holds Eurovision parties every year, and last year, when I couldn't make their 'Ukranian' themed party, I was on live video phone link to the party, so I could still enjoy the experience! It's a really fun thing to be involved in. We basically have stereotypical food of the host country and we produce our own marking sheets and system to give our own personal result. This makes the whole process more fun because we have to judge entries on various criteria, which means we pay more attention to the songs! (female, 22).

Parties provide one kind of platform for consuming the event live and communally. Though enthusiasts tend to be, at least to some extent, cynical about the voting process and the selection of the winner, they are aware of the importance of the live coverage as a key element of meaningful engagement with the media event:

> As a general rule I watch the contest live, but in 2004 I was in France and my prior engagements prevented me from seeing it, but my parents recorded it for me

for my return. Whilst on my year abroad in Spain (2005), the contest took place

when I was visiting a different city, so I made sure I was in a hotel with television

in order to watch it (female, 24).

For the focus group participants, like for the online debates' participants, the

contest is something uniquely *European*. Thus, in their interpretation, ESC's cultural

value has nothing to do with any other music contest, especially none of the well known

national ones, such as the popular products of the likes of *Pop Idol* and *Fame Academy*.

For this audience, unlike for many BBC Forum participants who tend to interpret the

transnational Eurovision contest through comparisons with the national *Pop Idol* and

Fame Academy, this is irrelevant. When they dismiss any attempt for comparison

between the Eurovision Song Contest and national music contests, they reveal two

interesting elements of an emergent cosmopolitan imagination. I would argue that the

first element of this imagination signifies a sense of clear separation between the national

and the transnational; these two spheres are understood as being distinctly different and

not competing, but co-existing with each other. The second element is about the

adaptation of imaginings of Europe (possibly informed by the top-down institutional

ideology of Europeanism), which however, dismisses the ideological frame of

antagonistic culturally divided European regions; this imagining is more interested in

Europe as a meeting point rather than as a conflict point.

Some of the qualities of the event that grab the attention of this group, include the

diversity of contestants, languages, and the fact that Eurovision is a media event at the

end of May – not an ongoing television programme incorporated in ordinary popular

culture production and consumption patterns. Thus, their interest in the Eurovision Song

Contest is in itself a cosmopolitan exploration and not a reproduction of habitual popular

musical choices. In this cosmopolitan exploration, language diversity, which they all

acknowledge as a rarity in the global popular culture production, becomes an attractive

and unique element of interest and excitement. Some said that contestants who sing in

their own language (instead of English) get their points and approval. Others enjoy the

tongue and cheek lyrics and pronunciation variations. Some even admit enjoying what

they see as bad English used by various non-native English speaking contestants.

> I'm also a language enthusiast and I love the mix of languages in the songs, and
> when they are sang in English, I love to hear the pronunciation variations. Then,
> the unification of all the countries involved over a musical contest is something
> that I think is very important for me. I also particularly enjoy hearing the subject
> matter of the songs, and watch them with subtitles so we can see the translation.
> For example, the Austrian entrant of 2003's song about animals, and Germany's
> Guildo Horn's 'Guildo Hat euch liebe' in about 2000. With Terry Wogan's
> commenting, it's also generally a fun evening! I am also a massive fan of ABBA
> and seeing as Eurovision was what catapulted them to fame, it's something I like
> to watch (female, 24).

> The fact that most countries now use English lyrics is both a bad thing and a good
> thing. As a linguist, I dislike the dominance of English in anything, but

particularly in a contest which has people representing many countries and therefore is a stage for their languages. One of the highlights of Eurovision for me is the translation via subtitles of the songs. However, as a Eurovision fan I like the fact that it's easier to sing along with the songs and understand them...it also makes it easier for the results because you can judge on lyrical content more easily, but generally speaking I'd prefer them to sing in their own languages (female, 22).

As Sandvoss (2005) writes about fandom, it can become a form of self-reflection in which fans seek out texts reflecting their own beliefs, attitudes and background. Associating with the familiar and desired cultural product has been repeatedly recorded among the contest's enthusiasts. The cultural diversity hosted in ESC is another element of the contest that focus group participants enjoy. ESC is one of the very few mainstream pop culture locations where countries of the periphery have a visible presence. A student of Slavonic languages says:

I liked the Bosnian entry singing in Serbo-Croat. It's much more interesting than *Pop Idol* where everybody is exactly the same. In Eurovision you get a sense of all different European cultures. Where else would I see Bulgaria and Belarus on stage?! (female, 22)

A sense that the contest is a rare kind of platform for celebrating European cosmopolitanism is confirmed by different people who feel that the ESC offers them a

unique opportunity to develop their personal, educational and cultural connections with other parts of Europe.

> I think because my mother is Greek Cypriot I feel a connection to the Greek and Cypriot entries and Eurovision is pretty much the only outlet for Greek music for us in the UK (female, 21).

While the focus group enthusiasts embrace the contest with much less resistance than the BBC Forum casual consumers, stereotyping and political ideologies around Europe remain the predominant frameworks for making sense of it. Some focus group participants – but definitely a minority compared to the dominant group on the BBC Forum – express their dissatisfaction with the so-called tactical, politicized voting. More or less serious comments about what they ironically call 'eastern European conspiracy' are familiar to all and they are adopted by some. Conspiracy theories go as far as to suggest that the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has to approve the results of the Russian vote before they are formally announced, as one participant argued.

What was observed in the case of the focus group discussions is not a rejection of the stereotype and the conspiracy theories, but rather a more ironic and humorous engagement with them. There is a similarity between this tactic and the tactic of the online forum participants who object to xenophobic and racist comments; in both cases of those online participants and the focus group participants, we observe a playful rejection of banal racism. Thus, what most focus group participants said is that there are indeed voting patterns that have nothing to do with the quality of the songs, but this is part of the

uniqueness of the contest. In a more serious tone, some of the participants give articulated explanations why tactical voting and neighbourly exchange of votes exist. They consider it as an expected outcome of cultural proximity and familiarity with regional musical cultures among voters in different European regions. Among the enthusiasts, the mixture of politics and culture can be entertaining and even an educational opportunity to engage with Europe and international affairs.

It is good to see new entrants. When Armenia joint last year, I knew nothing about the country. So I googled it, and read about the country's history and culture. Now I can say that I know a few things about Armenia (male, 19).

Definitely regional politics play a role. You only have to watch Cyprus send their 12 points in the direction of Athens, and the UK's (pathetic attempt in all honesty, but not worthy of nil points!) 'Cry Baby' received nothing for our participation in the war against Iraq. I think this makes it more fun, and adds to the element of it not being too serious an occasion. Terry Wogan always pre-empts which Scandinavian countries would give their 12 points to each other, and now the same happens in the eastern European countries. Until a couple of years ago, it was always a sure bet that neither Cyprus nor Greece would give a point to Turkey and this would be reciprocated (female, 20).

I think it's a good thing that the contest is open to more countries as it means that there is more competition and therefore, hopefully an increase in the

quality of the material. But I also think that there is more tactical

voting amongst the newer countries, mostly related to the former

USSR and former Yugoslavia (male, 22).

In the above comments and in the ones below, it is obvious that the stereotype is a

key mechanism for interpreting the event and its musical and political value. However,

the stereotype here is primarily a mechanism for making sense – not always lacking the

bias and misrepresentation qualities of every stereotype – but still a mechanism less rigid

and xenophobic than the examples of passionate rejection of the event in the online

forum. The statements below illustrate the power of the stereotype, especially when much

other information is absent, in the attempt of audience members to understand Europe

and its relevance.

There is something particularly 'European' about it. I think with the countries

who send their most stereotypical entrant to represent them, there is definitely an

element of European-ness, but also for example, the fun involved, the ability to

laugh at themselves and genuine desire of every entrant to win (except, obviously,

Ireland), it is something I think is very European (female, 21).

I think because of the politics that is increasingly involved, it [the contest] is more

representative. There is also the aspect of the increase in participating countries

and the increase in member states of Europe. The songs seem to be aiming more

and more at uniting the countries and finding world peace, which I think is quite

representative of Europe currently as well. Also, the fact that Sweden almost always (this year is an exception) sends out at least one blonde haired, blue eyed singer helps keep the true European sentiment! (male, 23)

And in an enthusiastic exchange among focus group members, the stereotype as a common language for engaging with Europe and popular culture, is revealed in all its glory.

- We always say Cyprus will send a dark guy in a white suit. Greece and Cyprus will give each other 12 points. France always has a ballet.
- Malta always will have a large lady in a long dress!
- Germany will always resort in hot-pants, in the end!
- And Sweden will always do an Abba thing….

To Conclude…

Is Eurovision the ultimate domain for the reproduction of cross-European stereotyping, of single-dimensional and biased representations of others in a transnational, yet nation-centric context? The focus group participants very quickly dismiss the idea.

I think people can make the distinction. They know it's a big difference between real life and Eurovision (male, 21).

This is not the real world. This is Eurovision! (female, 25).

Like all audience experience, Eurovision viewing should be dealt with caution when it comes to any kind of effects on people's perceptions of the world – and of Europe and the nation in this case. However, the hegemonic ideologies of Europe as a political entity constituted by hierarchical relations and nation-states of different ranking, are particularly powerful in media representations and largely reproduced among audiences. The top-down ideologies of the European institutions and of the state are driving the dominant stereotypes recorded among audiences. These ideologies reveal the internal uncomfortable contradiction in engaging with difference. The hierarchical and competing appreciation of difference has three consequences in the way audiences appropriate and imagine the contest's meanings, and to some extent, Europe as well. Firstly, the close association between culture and *the* nation is largely outdated and thus it leads to further misunderstandings about what cultural difference actually consists of. Secondly, the institutional ideology of framing cultural difference within the nation, reproduces oppositions between *us* and *them*, based on hegemonic, nationalist and Orientalist stereotypical characteristics. And thirdly, the stereotypical nation-centric oppositions of culture confirmed by mediated representations of European popular culture reproduce hierarchies and reconfirm geo-political zones around single-dimensional characteristics of countries, cultures and regions and result in reproducing imaginings of a Europe of distinct zones and of conflicting otherness-es.

In a context where a popular culture event primarily becomes a domain for the reproduction of political hierarchies and ideologies of incompatible cultural differences, one can also observed the dynamic potential of the popular. While the aesthetic and

musical qualities of the Eurovision Song Contest can be critiqued and dismissed, as a popular culture event, it also leaves some space for constructing oppositional meanings of the transnational and intercultural. Thus, what is observed, especially among committed audiences, is that it is less likely to unreflectively adopt the ideology of oppositional and antagonistic cultures. Audiences who regularly engage with media events like the ESC, which have a clear-cut structure and cultural and political role, are more reflexive of the various qualities and the particular cultures of Eurovision. Thus, they are reflexive to the nuances and deal with the event primarily as a song contest and much less so as a political arena – at least a serious one. People asked are quite sophisticated and playfully aware of the national stereotypes around Eurovision. So, what can be seen is that the stereotypes do not necessarily reflect their opinions for other countries. 'This is just Eurovision after all. You don't expect all French and all Germans to look like France's and Germany's contestants, do you?!' (female, 22).

Among dedicated audiences, national stereotyping is still present but playfully negotiated. At the same time, what was observed is that, unlike the caution of committed audiences with reproducing rigid national stereotypes, stereotyping in other levels is easily adopted. The reflexivity around national stereotypes does not apply in the same way when it comes to regions. For most participants – in the focus groups as well as on the online forum – Europe consists of distinct regions with specific cultural and political characteristics. This division of Europe builds on and reconfirms the predomination of a pre-existing western cynicism and an exoticisation of the east, observed in British media and political discourses around Europe.

Lack of reflexivity is also observed when other stereotypes, especially about gender, sexuality and ethnicity are easily reproduced. For example, perceptions about femininity and sexuality in eastern Europe, or about ethnic and race relations in parts of Europe, draw from simplified stereotypes. The uncritical adoption of stereotypes in these domains goes back to the limited information available about Europe and European life. As audiences depend on very little information available in the public domain about life in various parts of Europe, what is available is more likely to reproduce misunderstandings than cosmopolitan awareness of European diversity. As long as the media treat Europe as a zone of power relations, and less as a cultural sphere of complexity and diversity, the stereotype as a mechanism of making sense of it – either in the form of reproduced everyday racism or in the form or limited and desperate attempts to make sense of difference – will remain dominant. Events like the European Song Contest will equally remain an interesting case study for exploring political and cultural ideologies in Europe, but less so it will be a domain for exploring popular musical cultures outside hegemonic and highly ideological political frameworks.

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