Nation branding, cultural relations, and cultural diplomacy at Eurovision: between Australia and Europe

Jess Carniel

Introduction

Scholars of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) have long focused on the significant political and economic roles the Contest plays for participating nations. They have shown it to be an important stage for performing the nation as new states emerged after the dismantling of the USSR (Jordan 2014; Meerzon and Priven 2013; Sieg 2013; Vuletic 2007), as both a drain and a boon to national and regional economies, and an important platform for a growing discourse of liberal gender politics as a European value (Halliwell 2018; Baker 2017; Carniel 2015; Lemish 2004). Like sporting events such as the Olympics, the Song Contest is perceived as a safe arena for national competitiveness to play out and for international relationships to be fostered, developed, or even be performed in more negative terms. It is thus a space in which the soft power politics of nation branding, cultural relations, and cultural diplomacy can be exercised. Notably, the Contest uses the language of diplomacy, as countries send 'delegations' and the competing artists are often characterised as 'ambassadors'. Australia's entrance into the Contest in 2015 thrust it into this particular realm of soft power politics, thus necessitating an investigation of what the Contest could also mean for Australian relations with Europe as well as its current and future relations within its own Indo-Pacific geographical region.

Using examples of postcards (the short clips that appear between each song), performances, fan interactions, and delegation activities, this chapter examines Australian representation and participation in the Eurovision Song Contest through the concepts of nation branding, cultural relations, and cultural diplomacy. Doing so facilitates an assessment of how both nation branding and cultural relations can form an important part of policies and strategies in cultural diplomacy. The image presented by national delegations at Eurovision is a form of nation branding

constructed by non-state actors, specifically media and corporate entities, and their activities at the Song Contest perform important work in developing cultural relations. These also occur at a more vernacular level amongst the fans who are complicit in the nation branding process but also powerful agents in cultural relations. The outcomes of these activities can and should form part of the cultural diplomacy strategies performed by state actors. Importantly, at the Eurovision Song Contest, nation branding, cultural relations, and cultural diplomacy can all occur concurrently without consultation or collaboration, with varying results.

From its outset, the Song Contest was imagined as a means of bringing Europe together through a shared cultural event – alongside the far more prosaic goal of promoting the European Broadcasting Union's new Eurovision distribution network (O'Connor 2015). Such a goal underlines the event's usefulness as a form of cultural relations, certainly, but with significant potential to be utilised in cultural diplomacy and nation branding. The inclusion of Australia within the Song Contest raises the question of what diplomatic role it can play in Australia's relations with European nations, as does the prospect of the Eurovision Asia Song Contest for Australian foreign relations in the Indo-Pacific region. Before these elements can be identified and unpacked in the context of the Contest, it is important to understand how they are defined and how they operate, particularly as these fields frequently intersect and overlap.

Culture in international relations: branding, relations, and diplomacy

With acknowledgement of the significant doubts of its veracity and origin, a quote often attributed to Jean Monnet, one of the founding figures of the European Union, is, 'If I had to do it again, I would begin with culture' (quoted in Mokre 2007). Monika Mokre (2007) suggests that perhaps culture is not a sound basis for a political project but that it is nevertheless important to political and economic systems. As Glen Fisher (1997, 42) observes, 'people view international issues and events through a *cultural* lens,' yet culture is frequently one of the last considerations in international

relations, if it is not left out entirely. Fisher's 'mindsets' theory illustrates effectively how culture is an integral aspect of international relations as it determines the very nature and tone of those relations, but in focusing on a more 'psychocultural dimension' of international relations, Fisher is somewhat dismissive of culture as it relates to the arts and similar products. By contrast, Ien Ang, Yudhishtar Raj Isar and Phillip Mar (2015) present an understanding of culture and cultural policy in international relations derived from contemporary cultural theory. This approach acknowledges the role that cultural exchange and collaboration can play in public diplomacy because of the relational dimensions that can be embedded into those sorts of projects, which can be as diverse as artist residencies or student exchange programs. Important to this is the role that people, specifically non-state actors, play in forms of cultural exchange, which Lowe (2015, 449) frames in terms of a 'vernacular internationalism'. This cultural relations work performed by non-state actors, such as everyday citizens but also, as is the case in Eurovision, media outlets and entities, can in turn further the work of cultural diplomacy but may not have the same measurable impacts of other diplomatic programs (Ang et al 2015).

By its very definition, cultural diplomacy sees culture as a diplomatic tool to further national interest. In its strictest sense, cultural diplomacy refers to the utilisation of culture by state actors and their agents (Ang et al 2015). It is adjacent to public diplomacy, which is primarily concerned with how public attitudes affect foreign policy (Szondi 2008), thus frequently uses the tools of media and communication that can also be important in contemporary cultural diplomacy. Scholars generally concur that Milton Cummings' definition of cultural diplomacy is the most comprehensive: 'the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding' (cited in Ang et al 2015, 367), acknowledging also that this is as often as not a one-sided transmission rather than a mutual exchange.

This one-sidedness is partly explained by cultural and public diplomacy's connection to nation branding as these concepts share the goal of improving the

international image of the nation in order to better serve its political and economic interests. Gyorgy Szondi (2008) urges for a distinction between concepts of diplomacy and branding, arguing that nation branding is invested in ideas of foreign consumption of the nation (for example, via tourism or buying that country's products), whereas public diplomacy is aimed at the public's hearts and minds rather than their hip pockets. Cultural and public diplomacy differ in that the latter is concerned with public perceptions of foreign policy (particularly as it affects execution) and the former centres upon cultural exchange as a means of fostering mutual understanding, which may in turn improve perceptions of the state and its policies. Zrinka Borić and Ana Radović Kapor (2017, 225) identify cultural policy as the 'third pillar of foreign policy' alongside the foci of traditional diplomacy, politics and economics. Using the ESC as their primary example, they argue that culture, in the form of cultural diplomacy, can and should take a greater role in international relations practice and theory in the era of globalisation. Although it would be naive to suggest that the spheres of political, economic and cultural influence have ever been entirely distinct from each other, the increased global flows of people, ideas, money, and products in the twenty-first century have disrupted older systems and understandings of these spheres.

Scholars acknowledge that globalisation has led to greater permeability between various concepts centred upon culture and international relations and their practices. For Ang et al (2015, 371), the processes of globalisation have complicated any clear differentiation between the cultural diplomacy and cultural relations because the power structures maintaining those differences are collapsing, reflecting a 'diminishing authority' of national governments in a world of cultural and economic flux. Szondi (2008) locates this within the collapsing of the public and private sectors and the infiltration of business and marketing language in public policy and practice. While Szondi is primarily concerned with the false convergence of nation branding with cultural and public diplomacy, Ang et al (2015, 365) warn against conflation of cultural diplomacy with cultural relations. Cultural relations, they argue, are largely

practiced by non-state actors, but these may receive state support or sponsorship, which contributes to a blurring of these lines. These can have outcomes for state goals, such as positive image and receptiveness to foreign policy, but these are not its core objectives. Ang et al argue for a greater consideration of cultural policy within a foreign policy approach that supports and encourages the vernacular work of cultural relations alongside state-led cultural diplomacy.

Working within a domestic rather than regional framework, Australian cultural policy has, understandably, been more nationally-focused, but has nevertheless generally given room to the role cultural programs can play in international relations. No cohesive federal cultural policy framework is currently in place, which is an important context for understanding Ang et al's views of cultural policy and diplomacy discussed above. The last policy implemented was *Creative Australia*, established by the Labor government under Prime Minister Julia Gillard in 2013. This was the successor to the only other cultural policy framework, *Creative Nation*, also delivered by a Labor government under Prime Minister Paul Keating. Despite the current lack of cohesive framework, there exists a ministerial portfolio in Communication and the Arts to determine domestic policy. The international dimension of cultural policy, particularly the role of cultural diplomacy, is located within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Most tellingly, the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper identified 'soft power' as an area requiring further consideration within foreign policy strategising, prompting a 'Soft Power Review' (underway at the time of writing; DFAT 2018b). Since 2015, DFAT has offered an Australian Cultural Diplomacy Grants Program (ACGDP) that supports initiatives that 'promote our economic, artistic, and cultural assets to an international audience' (DFAT 2018a). Although it would be difficult to argue that the Australian government sees a prominent role for culture, the white paper and the ACDGP nevertheless position soft power as 'vital to our foreign policy' (DFAT 2017, 109). The white paper's overview emphasises the role that non-state actors play in this process and also highlights the importance of developing a 'stronger national brand' (DFAT 2017, 110).

In the European context, such policies must be considered within the context of both the national and the regional, but due to the sheer number and diversity of nations involved, I focus here on the prospect of a 'European' cultural policy. As Dean Vuletic (2018, 18) observes, the Eurovision Song Contest provided Western Europe with a set of shared cultural references and the makings of a unified European identity decades before the various governing bodies of the European community developed clear cultural policies. The various institutions that underpin modern Europe and its primary instrument, the European Union, were focused primarily upon economic cooperation but, given the climate of the Cold War in which they emerged, the capitalist economics of the West were implicitly politicised (Mokre 2007). Cultural policy in the Maastricht Treaty centres upon the maintenance of national identity and diversity while also developing a common European identity and shared heritage, mirroring the objectives set out earlier by the European Community's 'Declaration on European Identity' at Copenhagen in 1973. Shared identity and heritage, as Mokre (2007) highlights, are two conflicting objectives. While these still underpin contemporary cultural policy in the European Union, there is now greater recognition of the role culture plays in internal and external international relations for the EU as evidenced in a 2016 joint communication to the European Parliament and Council outlining the cultural policy strategy that is now currently in place. With a greater emphasis on inter-culturalism and cooperation, this document identifies international cultural relations as a means to 'promote international peace and stability, safeguard diversity, and stimulate jobs and growth' (European Commission 2016).

The Eurovision Song Contest is not identified as a particular example in either the Australian or European Union discussions of culture, cultural relations, and cultural diplomacy, but must nevertheless be understood within these contexts. Culture at the Eurovision Song Contest is instrumentalised economically and politically by a variety of state, non-state, and industry actors, including embassies, the media, fans, and the artist delegations themselves. The fact that it is a non-governmental event fails to obscure the fact that it is nevertheless political, and that individual citizens can be the

unwitting agents of national politics and identity in an international arena.

Understanding Australia's place at Eurovision (and in the world)

While many accepted Jessica Mauboy's 2014 interval act and Guy Sebastian's 2015 'wild card' entry as gimmicks to mark the 60th anniversary of the Song Contest, Australia's ongoing participation in the Contest is met with ambivalence primarily because Australia is not located within Europe or its region. As the BBC's Eurovision commentator Graham Norton pointed out, Australia is 'on the other side of the world' (quoted in Wooton 2016). Australia is located within the Indo-Pacific region, but historically it has expressed discomfort or anxiety about its geographical location. Historian Geoffrey Blainey (1991) famously argued that Australia's history and identity has been shaped by what he terms the 'tyranny of distance'; that is, Australian history has been shaped by its relative remoteness from other parts of the world.

In order to bridge this distance between Australia and Europe, a discourse of historical connection and contemporary shared values has emerged as an important strategy in legitimising the Australian presence at an ostensibly European song contest, just as shared values and heritage were important concepts in forging a united European identity. This discourse in turn has implications for contemporary cultural, political, and economic relations between Australia and Europe. As EBU Reference Group Chair Dr Frank-Dieter Freiling stated in regard to Australia's continuing participation in the Song Contest, Eurovision is 'a way for many Australians to re-connect with their European roots, and celebrate our shared cultural values and understanding through music' (quoted in Jordan 2015). Michael Ebeid, the former Managing Director of the multicultural broadcaster that televises Eurovision in Australia, Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), further specifies these shared values as 'cultural diversity and social inclusion' (quoted in Jordan 2015). In 2018, a formal motion in the Australian Senate wishing Jessica Mauboy success in Lisbon similarly drew upon ideas of international community, cultural diversity and,

importantly, the role the Contest plays in 'providing a connection to countries from which many Australians have emigrated' (Australian Senate 2018). This is what I have termed elsewhere as the 'European connection narrative' (Carniel 2018). Such a narrative uses the history of European migrations to Australia to emphasise affective attachment and cultural proximity to legitimise Australian interest in the Song Contest. It positions Australia alongside (western) Europe in a tradition of liberal, democratic progress, emphasising these as values exemplified by the Song Contest, and underscoring these similarities and alignments as important enough to override geographical logic.

Both concepts of the tyranny of distance and the European connection narrative are intrinsically Eurocentric. They define 'the world' as Europe broadly, and the United Kingdom more specifically, and overlook Australia's immediate neighbours in the Indo-Pacific, perhaps with the exception of the cognate nation of New Zealand. Consequently, Australia's historical imagining of itself as Europe-in-exile has exacerbated ideas of cultural difference between it and its geographical region. Although relations are generally amiable and productive, Australia would never, in the words of the former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew, be considered 'family' (quoted in Dalrymple 2003, 211). Thus, even in a place of geographical closeness, Australia is held at a distance.

Although desire for the European 'homeland' has shaped Australian national psychology, Philomena Murray (2007, 263) points out that, conversely, 'Australia has not always been at the forefront of British or European thoughts.' Murray (2018) characterises this as a mutual disregard as both Australia and Europe (specifically, in this context, the European Union) have had other priorities for much of the late twentieth century; Australian foreign policy in this period was particularly focused upon the United States while the EU was frequently preoccupied with its internal relations. Although the US remains an important strategic alliance, Australia's foreign policy has shifted to maximise the potential of its geopolitical position as an ostensibly western nation in the Indo-Pacific rather than to lament its distance from

imagined cultural and political homelands. Interestingly, this shift towards the Indo-Pacific has worked to increase the strategic potential of Australia-EU relations; both Murray (2018) and Andrea Benvenuti (2018) see Australia and the EU's mutual interests in the Asian region as an opportunity for deeper engagement and commitment with one another rather than competition or disconnection.

The proposed Eurovision Asia Song Contest thus provides an opportunity for both Australia and the European Broadcasting Union (as an agent of European communications industry and culture) to engage culturally and economically within the Indo-Pacific region. Some commentators suggest that Australian involvement in Eurovision has been less about European-Australian relations than it has been about leveraging a known brand for the development of more localised regional interests. Following Jessica Mauboy's lacklustre results in Lisbon 2018, it was suggested by some that this was a sign of souring relations with the European public and that Australia would be better served by concentrating upon its Indo-Pacific chapter instead (Lo 2018; Holden 2018). The prospect of being on the ground-level of an event of this scale and with the kind of diplomatic and economic opportunities offered by the Eurovision tradition is undoubtedly appealing to Australian policy-makers and creative industries. It will come with its challenges, not least of which is the potential for the event – and Australia's role within it – to be interpreted as a form of European neo-colonialism or cultural imperialism in the age of globalisation. Examining Australia's experiences of branding and diplomacy at the original Eurovision contest may thus be useful for strategising around the potential of Eurovision Asia as a soft diplomatic tool within the Indo-Pacific region.

Nation branding at Eurovision: postcards and performances
Nation branding has emerged as an accepted part of the Eurovision scholarship both in terms of scholarship and participating countries' attitudes towards the Song Contest. Each country's performance can be understood as a covert form of nation branding. It is both an important role for the Contest and, as Sweden's 2013 interval

act, 'Swedish Smörgåsbord' (and, to a lesser extent, 'Love Love Peace Peace' at Stockholm 2016) demonstrated, an element that can easily become laughable. This performance takes a deliberate poke at the nation branding elements of the Contest as host Petra Mede leads a song and dance routine featuring a range of Swedish stereotypes, including an obsessive devotion to recycling and, famously, both dancing meatballs and the first of many same-sex kisses on the Eurovision stage (Carniel 2015). The Song Contest is characterised rather aptly as a 'chance to host a show you can't afford' but also an opportunity to 'sell your country through song and dance', which Sweden proceeded to do in the act with a knowing smile and with great effect; Sweden reportedly recouped almost 95 per cent of its 19 million euro Eurovision expenditure through tourism after Malmö 2013 (Dean 2016).

Keith Dinnie (2015, 5) defines the nation brand as 'the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with cultural grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences.' This definition, Dinnie argues, acknowledges the nation brand as a multifaceted thing while also recognising the role of perception and the plurality of audiences. The purpose of nation branding is typically to promote foreign consumption of the nation through tourism, foreign investments, and export industries. Accordingly, the target audiences for nation branding activities are foreign to that nation and potentially quite diverse. Nevertheless, nation branding has implications for the internal politics and identity of a nation. As Paul Jordan (2014, 24) asserts, 'it is a practice which has the capacity to illuminate the more salient narratives of national identity and, in some cases, reflects the nationalist rhetoric of politicians.'

As nation branding is in effect a commercial practice performed largely by consultancy agencies (Jordan 2014, 22-24), it intersects public and private stakeholder interests. Yet, as Dinnie (2015, 5) emphasises, 'nations do not belong to brand managers or corporations...if they 'belong' to anyone, it is to the nation's entire citizenry.' While nation branding can result in economic growth that in turn will benefit this citizenry, nation brands often promote an image of the nation that is

incongruous with the realities of living in that nation. For example, a campaign that presented India as a rising superpower necessarily overlooked the abject poverty experienced by a large portion of its populace (Jordan 2014, 25). The ethics of representation and misrepresentation are important to the nation branding project, even in as much to mitigate negative domestic responses, but, as Per Ståhlberg and Göran Bolin (2016, 280) remind us, the citizen is not the target audience in most branding exercises. As a result, they often emerge as the Other for consumption by the foreign audience rather than as authentic self-representation.

By the parameters presented above, nation branding at the Eurovision Song Contest is primarily the domain and concern of the host nation. Although the Contest is an opportunity for national display and promotion on an international stage for all participants, the average Eurovision delegation is not waging the same branding campaign as the host nation – or at least, not at the same level nor with the same resources. Nevertheless, they are acutely aware that, for all intents and purposes, they are the image of their own nation at the Contest and its various promotional activities. This is amplified by the level of media scrutiny involved as well as the interactions that the delegations can and do have with official instruments of their nation-state, such as embassies and governmental endorsements. Nation branding in a context like Eurovision is also complicated by the fact that each nation's domestic audiences are also consuming the projected image. This means that those constructing the image must also incorporate an inward-looking aspect in its idea of the nation.

One of the industries that most engages with and benefits from nation branding is tourism. The event itself is a major tourist attraction that can bring millions of euro into the host country. In addition to the influx of tourism that occurs with hosting the Contest, the televised nature of the event means that production elements can be leveraged to attract viewers as tourists at a later date. The postcards – the short video sequences that precede each song – are a valuable platform for this. According to Philip V. Bohlman (2013, 35-6), 'the Eurovision postcard connects the local to the

global,' providing a bridge between the audience and the host. Importantly, 'each postcard welcomes visitors as foreigners about to be embraced by the host country, its people, and, above all, its music' (Bohlman 2013, 35). Each host broadcaster approaches the postcards differently. A traditional approach centres upon creative presentations of the performing country's flag, while more recent postcards feature the artist themselves, and sometimes their own culture or country, in various ways. Another common approach is to use these clips as a means of promoting the host country and its culture, often with a focus on its appeal as a tourist destination. The emphasis deployed in each year's postcards are useful for indicating what role the host country (or at least their public broadcaster) sees the Song Contest as playing. A focus on the self is a clear branding exercise, whether it is directed at tourism, as seen in Baku 2012, or on a particular national image, such at Düsseldorf 2011, while a focus on others or guests emphasises an ethos of cultural relations that can be equally self-serving.

Those centred on promoting national culture in a broad sense will still feature scenes of picturesque locales or interesting cultural events, even if tourism promotion is not their overt goal, often seeking to deepen or even challenge viewers' understandings of the host country's culture and language. Moscow 2009 is an example of a hybrid approach. These used urban animated sequences to introduce each upcoming country, albeit rather cryptically at times, but punctuated each postcard with Russian words for their viewers to learn, many of which would be useful for travellers. Düsseldorf 2011 was also an interesting variation. While the postcards collectively provided a 'tour' of German locales, it did so through the eyes of locals who were also migrants from each upcoming country. Vuletic (2018, 183) suggests that the approach sought to mitigate increasing concerns about German dominance in the EU, particularly during the financial crisis, by demonstrating that 'Germany was an accepting and generous place for all Europeans.' These postcards still utilised ideas of leisure and mobility, but did so through the lens of everyday life in Germany (Bohlman 2013, 35); its primary focus was upon promoting an image of

multicultural Germany not as a tourist destination but as a place to live and work.

By contrast, the following year in Baku exemplifies the postcard-as-tourism-promotion approach; the lushly filmed clips showcased the sites and scenes of modern Azerbaijan to both promote a national self-image and an attractive tourist destination. Levels of tourism during the Eurovision week itself were lower than projected (Ismayilov 2012, 836), perhaps inhibited by the international spotlight being shone on Azeri human rights and LGBT issues (Gluhovic 2013). As Murad Ismayilov (2012, 835) points out, Azerbaijan had hosted large-scale international sports and cultural events previously, but the Eurovision Song Contest was identified as an opportunity to attract a more diverse audience than previously, and was actively leveraged as a nation branding opportunity with the specific goal of constructing Azerbaijan as a modern, *European* state (Carniel 2015). In recent years, postcards seeking to promote tourism often position the performing artist as enthusiastic tourist, as can be seen in Vienna 2015 and Lisbon 2018.

On rare occasions, postcards may place greater emphasis on the artist or their country rather than the host nation. Revitalising the postcard tradition that focuses on presenting flags creatively, Oslo 2014 featured the performers photographing their flags in creative ways, often in locations external to the host. Malmö 2013 centred upon the artist as a performer in their own country and their preparations for Eurovision, while Stockholm 2016 featured artists enjoying their favourite leisure activities in their own countries, with a similar approach being taken in Kyiv 2017. (Not incidentally, these Contests were both produced by Swedish television producer Christer Björkman who has taken a dominant role in the Contest's production and design in recent years.) In these approaches, the host country involves themselves in the branding of their guests, but not without reciprocal benefits. In the absence of overt nation branding, such postcards work covertly to create an image of the nation as a generous host unconcerned with their own image.

Postcards can also be used to emphasise cultural relations between the host country and that of the performing artist. In another Swedish example that arguably

foreshadows the Düsseldorf postcards discussed above, Stockholm 2000 featured clips illustrating how elements of guests' cultures and industries played an important part in contemporary Swedish life, such as Dutch researchers working in a prominent Swedish lab, an Israeli author popular with Swedish readers, and the importance of Norwegian oil in Swedish transport and industry amongst other, occasionally tenuous, connections.

Those postcards focusing on the artist or the guest country are also useful for revealing host perceptions of the guest. With the exception of Lisbon 2018, which took the approach of artist as enthusiastic cultural tourist, Australian postcards have gestured towards an image of Australianness defined by beach culture and distance. Isaiah Firebrace's postcard from Kyiv 2017, for example, depicts him waking early to drive a long distance between his rural hometown and the nearby metropolis to perform, and later shows him in a plane, travelling once more. Dami Im's Stockholm 2016 postcard features her both at an aquarium and at a beach. Guy Sebastian's Vienna 2015 postcard is in many ways the most interesting. In this series, each artist receives a package in the mail that transports them to Austria, where they are met by hosts who take them to an attraction or activity: Sebastian is taken surfing.

Australia itself has played with these kinds of images of beach culture in its Copenhagen 2014 interval act at the second semi-final. Jessica Mauboy's performance of 'Sea of Flags' is preceded by a comic dance skit featuring stereotypes of Australian culture, from surfers to Australian football players, from singlet-wearing beer-drinkers to drag queens (in a nod to both the global success of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and the queer appeal of the Song Contest itself), and, of course, koalas, kangaroos, and sharks. Like 'Swedish Smörgåsbord', it pokes fun at nation branding and the shorthand approach to national representation that nations must take in the three minutes they have on the Eurovision stage. Since this first non-competitive appearance at Copenhagen 2014, and with recognition of the sincerity of Mauboy's performance there in comparison to the skits that preceded her, Australian acts generally embrace the revitalised trend in the earnest pursuit of high quality music

over novelty. Australian performances at the Eurovision Song Contest have contributed to the construction of a national brand that is young, creative, and, most importantly, ethnically diverse – albeit with a strong Asian and Indigenous focus. Indeed, in the context of Eurovision, an image of postcolonial, queer-friendly multiculturalism is a crowd-pleasing and positive modern identity to project. While this self-branding and the imposed nation branding of the hosts' postcards do not contradict each other in any significant way, they nevertheless illustrate how Australia *wishes* to be perceived globally (postcolonial, multicultural, and inclusive) and how it *is* perceived (a distant beach culture).

Cultural relations at Eurovision: fans as agents of vernacular internationalism

Eurovision fans embody and perform the nation in a variety of ways, both intentionally and inadvertently, and their interactions with one another work to inform micro-perceptions of different nationalities. Ismayilov (2012) identifies the embodied cultural encounter of tourists and locals as one of the most significant opportunities offered to Azerbaijan and its populace by the Eurovision Song Contest. Baku 2012, he argues, was an opportunity for Azeri to engage in a 'self-assessment exercise' of the national Self and the Western Other, and for Western visitors to challenge views of Azerbaijan shaped by legacies of Orientalism (Ismayilov 2012, 835, 837). As Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2004, 1) observe in relation to mobility and tourism, 'Tourism also concerns the relational mobilisations of memories and performances, gendered and racialised bodies, emotions and atmospheres.' Read together with Fricker and Gluhovic's (2013, 3) characterisation of Eurovision as a 'symbolic contact zone' and Ismayilov's projections for the outcomes of Baku 2012, it is evident that fans, their behaviour, and their interactions with one another and the host culture play an important part in the cultural relations of Eurovision.

Cultural relations occur largely amongst non-state actors and, importantly, can occur readily at a vernacular or popular level, such as in the interactions of tourists and audiences. I draw here on David Lowe's idea of 'vernacular internationalism', a

concept he developed to describe 'community-minded Australians involved in assisting with the welcomes, accommodation, excursions and general welfare of international students' (Lowe 2015, 449), but I adjust this to allow for the messiness of human-to-human interactions, and to consider also interactions between guests, in addition to the host-guest relation implicit in his definition. My vernacular internationalism is thus informed by ideas of vernacular cosmopolitanism (Bhabha 1996; Werbner 2006), pop cosmopolitanism (Jenkins 2006), and everyday multiculturalism (Wise and Velayutham 2009), as these account for both the imperfections of social relations and the role that popular culture can play in facilitating these. Nevertheless, the phrasing of Lowe's concept is arguably more useful for conceptualising these interactions within an international relations framework.

Even as fandom offers a collective and transnational subcultural identification (Chin and Morimoto 2013), Eurovision is, above all, a contest of nations, even though it espouses an ethos of unity. Fans are thus placed into a nationalistic space. They are, of course, not restricted to supporting their home country. Indeed, many within the international community of 'Eurofans' often espouse a preference for transnational fluidity over parochialism, valuing the Contest as a site of cultural exchange rather than the national competition that it ostensibly is. Despite their personal motivations, fans are nevertheless marked as national representatives through appearance, accent, and, more overtly, presence of flags or costumes to indicate national origin. Even if fans do not belong to the nation whose insignia they are wearing, their behaviour while doing so will nevertheless influence perceptions of that nation.

At the 2017 Contest in Kyiv, a man with an Australian flag tied around his neck jumped on to the stage while the previous year's winner Jamala was performing, lowered his pants, and waggled his bared backside to the audiences and cameras. Although the stage invader was later revealed to be Ukrainian journalist and serial prankster Vitalii Sediuk (notorious elsewhere for 'pranks' on celebrities Kim Kardashian-West, America Ferrara, Gigi Hadid, Leonardo DiCaprio and Will Smith that

were all disturbingly akin to sexual assault and harassment), the presence of the Australian flag immediately suggested that he was an Australian and viewers reacted accordingly. Prior to this revelation, many European viewers regarded the stage invasion as another example of how Australia's presence ruins the Contest, citing it as reason to exclude Australia from participation once and for all. Australian responses were varied. Some were amused by Sediuk's antics, even claiming such an act as typical of Australian larrikinism, but others were apologetic, seeking to mitigate the damage to Australia's national reputation. Alistair Birch, an Australian journalist and prominent fan attending the event as part of the press corps, issued an apology to Jamala on behalf of all Australian fans during the subsequent press conference. Sediuk later confirmed that there was no nefarious intention toward Australians intended by using the flag. He had simply been chatting to some Australians in the audience and borrowed their flag without disclosing his true intentions. Ironically, Sediuk's account of the events works in favour of the international image of Australians as affable, friendly, and accommodating, but the fact that Australians and Europeans alike were previously equally ready to believe that such an act was typically Australian indicates a far more ambiguous image of Australians abroad.

Diplomacy at Eurovision: artist-ambassadors

The great myth of the Song Contest is that it unites Europe; political opponents set aside their difference to enjoy a night of song. After all, one might say, artists are not politicians. The EBU prohibits political statements in the Contest's songs and performances, yet the very act of regulating this acknowledges the political nature of the Contest. The reality is that politics have never been far from the Contest. It has been boycotted and tied to revolutions and internal politics. Artists have been barred from entering a country and songs have courted controversy for the fine line they tread to the politics rule. Unable to be played out overtly on the stage, political messages ooze out the sides of the Contest, manifesting at press conferences and subsidiary events. Furthermore, the Song Contest's purported values of unity,

diversity, and tolerance are in themselves political, for all that the EBU seek to depoliticise them by positioning them within a universalist discourse. Those values have, somewhat ironically, been a divisive factor in the recent politics of the Eurovision Song Contest.

Cultural diplomacy in it strictest sense is the utilisation of culture by state actors and their agents. Cummings' definition, however, does create room for non-state actors, such as performing artists, to play an important role in cultural exchange. Importantly, it must be acknowledged that a position viewing artists as entirely depoliticised is naive. Eurovision artists are acutely aware of the diplomatic role they have been given and will variously embrace and reject the political platform provided by the Song Contest but, as suggested above, even if they adhere to the universalist principles of the Contest, they are effectively taking a political stance. While the artists themselves develop close relationships with one another by being in close quarters for several weeks of tours, rehearsals, and performances, they also engage in a range interactions for the media that are almost invariably framed in terms of a meeting between cultures rather than a meeting between two artists. In the context of Eurovision, all acts are political and all interactions must be framed in terms of diplomatic relations.

Early in May 2018, Australian online media outlet *New Matilda* published an open letter from various writers, academics, and activists of Indigenous, Jewish, and Palestinian backgrounds. Titled 'Don't paint over oppression with hearts and rainbows,' the letter expresses disappointment at Jessica Mauboy's Instagram announcement that she would be performing in Israel during the pre-Contest tour of Europe she was participating in alongside several other artists in that year's competition (Brull et al 2018). They identify a shared history of settler colonialism in Australia and Palestine, decrying the tour as a 'propaganda festival' and Mauboy's appearance within this as a particular 'coup'. The letter then outlines Israeli atrocities in the conflict, concluding: 'The world is increasingly turning on Israel, because of its apartheid and brutality. And this, Jessica Mauboy, is when you show up. This is the

regime you are performing on behalf of, that you are uncritically supporting. That is the truth behind your hashtag, #iheartyou #israel.' These criticisms were relatively mild, tempered by praise for Mauboy's importance to Indigenous Australian representation, in comparison to other public responses. For example, in one response on her social media pages, Mauboy was called a 'fucking terrorist supporter'. By contrast, the Anti-Defamation Commission, a Jewish Australian civil rights organisation, spoke up in Mauboy's defence, praising her for 'standing up to pure hatred and for using her talents to promote peace and tolerance in the Middle East' (quoted in Johnson and Levy 2018). Both perspectives highlight the public perception and role of the Eurovision artist as ambassador. What they disagree upon is what that ambassador ought to stand for and represent in the international sphere due to divergent positions on the foreign context.

With the victory of Netta Barzilai for Israel in 2018, the question of a Eurovision boycott is again on the table. In another open letter, various international artists wrote in support of a plea by Palestinian artists that the 2019 Contest be boycotted and exhorting the EBU to shift hosting duties to 'another country with a better human rights record' (*Guardian* 2018). When questioned at a Senate Estimates hearing about whether SBS would be broadcasting the Contest, former Managing Director Ebeid responded, 'The whole point of Eurovision is to forget politics, forget all of that and unite communities and countries together in the spirit of song, in the spirit of celebration, in the spirit of culture. It transcends things you're talking about...I can't imagine that we would not televise Eurovision next year' (quoted in Knox 2018). The Eurovision Song Contest is a strange beast in this regard as public broadcasters, such as SBS, may be tied to the governmental system via funding. SBS and many other publicly funded broadcasters have hybridised to adapt to new the neo-liberal broadcasting climate; although it still receives government funding, since the 1990s it has also been required to obtain the balance of its funding from advertising and corporate sponsorship. Furthermore, although publicly funded and constituted via Australian legislation, both SBS and the ABC have resisted being seen

exclusively as mouthpieces for government policy. Nevertheless, because they are government funded bodies, their actions may be viewed in a distinctly political light, particularly at a fraught event like the Eurovision Song Contest. Although Australia's Eurovision entries to date have been supported financially by an industry partner, Sony BMG, the artist appears as a representative of their country, not their record label, so their presence will be tied to their nation's politics, whether they will it or not. Ebeid's response at the Senate hearing was thus diplomatic, but oddly naive.

Israel 2019 represents one of the more significant political and diplomatic challenges for all participating countries in Eurovision. While Israel is not the first nation to have its human rights record used to criticise its suitability to host Eurovision, the Israel-Palestine conflict is arguably one of the most fraught contexts for the Contest, tied as it is to European colonisation, diaspora, and global politics. As the objections to Jessica Mauboy's pre-Contest tour illustrate, Israel 2019 requires not just a consideration of international relations, but domestic relations within Australia's postcolonial and multicultural society.

Conclusion

The short video that aired as an introduction to Mauboy's 2014 interval performance played out a fantasy of closing the distance between Australia and Europe by airlifting the entire Australian continent to the North Sea, not incidentally dislodging the UK (see Carniel 2017). While this fantasy of closure is perhaps troubling, it is important to remember that the artist that first steps on to the Eurovision stage as a representative of Australia (albeit not a competitor) is both Indigenous and Asian. This representation of Australia as multicultural and postcolonial has been a continuing strategy in the delegation's Eurovision nation branding from 2014 to 2018. It works to disrupt the problematic of the European connection narrative and to develop a highly visible, global image of Australia as culturally and racially diverse, divergent from stereotypical ideas of bronzed, blonde Australianness. Yet, as the example of Jessica Mauboy's visit to Israel in 2018 illustrates, this image of

postcolonial multiculturalism comes with its own political intricacies. Within this, the European connection narrative is never overtly dismissed because of its strategic value in legitimising Australia's presence, but the nation brand is leveraged to forge an identity that can also connect strategically to Australia's geopolitical reality.

For Australia, participation in the Eurovision Song Contest has been an opportunity to re-brand itself in European eyes (and for an even broader international television audience) as diverse and creative. Despite this, European perceptions of Australia as a distant beach culture do persist in host-driven representation, such as postcards. Although the European connection narrative draws upon ideas of historical connection, the Song Contest is deployed as an opportunity to present a contemporary image of multicultural postcolonialism and to foster new international relations on shared values of twenty-first century liberal democracy. The political dimensions of the Eurovision Song Contest cannot be escaped, even when transplanted into the new geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific; it simply comes with new tensions, friendships, and rivalries. It is therefore more fruitful to embrace and even maximise its political potential within the intersecting fields of cultural relations and cultural diplomacy with both realism and optimism.

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