



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* by Dean  
Vuletic (review)

Philip V. Bohlman

German Studies Review, Volume 42, Number 1, February 2019, pp. 178-180  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2019.0027>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/717219>

left to wonder whether the project might be strengthened by the addition of at least a cursory analysis of postwar German-language works that are more overt in their deployment of comedy. Bird might further shore up her argument by including, for example, an analysis of Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Tynset* (1965). A literary example of post-Holocaust German Jewish engagement with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* characterized by its unresolved tension between comical absurdity and melancholy, *Tynset* seems emblematic of the specific kind of relationship between comedy and tragedy that Bird discusses throughout her study. In addition, Bird's final chapter on Hilsenrath's and Littell's works could benefit from a more thorough incorporation of existing scholarship that treats not only both novels together but also specifically explores the ethical concerns in representing the perspective of perpetrators, an issue that she addresses in conjunction with the question of comedic elements that call into question the memorial culture surrounding Holocaust piety.

These weaker points aside, Bird's study offers a fresh perspective on comedy and the complex roles comedic devices have played in postwar German-language literature and film and in discussions of trauma.

Corey L. Twitchell, *Southern Utah University*

*Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest*. By Dean Vuletic. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. xiv + 272. Cloth £85.00. ISBN 978-1474276269.

**Return again, color of the sky, The fragrance I knew in my twenties.**

—Lys Assia, "Refrain," winning song, 1956 Eurovision Song Contest

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC)—its symbols, its competitive practices, its media networks, and, above all, its songs—has long worn history on its sleeve. With the very first winning song in 1956, Lys Assia's entry for Switzerland, the narrative impossibility of beginning with a refrain gave the ESC its historical significance that it retains to this day. Over the sixty-three years of televised musical entertainment, Eurovision historiography grows from the contributions of multiple constituencies, from fan clubs to popular music scholars to academics identifying with Eurovision studies. From Cold War beginnings through conflicts between east and west, north and south, the struggles for European unification and most recently European disintegration, Eurovision history has formed a counterpoint between two registers: first, the larger forces of European political history; second, the ESC as a chorus that responds to, even shapes, the history of postwar Europe. Just how these two registers fitted in consonant or dissonant counterpoint has proved difficult to sort out; that is, until Dean Vuletic's fascinating new history of a missing middle register: the many institutions that constitute the enduring framework of the ESC.

**The history book on the shelf is always repeating itself.**

—ABBA, “Waterloo,” winning song for Sweden, 1974 ESC

Histories of the ESC are not in themselves new, but even the substantial body of existing documentation has not stopped Vuletic from attempting a new approach to history, and doing so very successfully. Vuletic is himself a historian, for a number of years the leader of a project on the ESC at the historical institute of the University of Vienna, and he amasses evidence in the book in order to fill the space between the prevailing two registers of Eurovision historiography. The book unfolds as a series of chapters that together represent the expansion of the ESC from the early years of the Cold War through nationalist struggles in the European Union to the present. His focus falls on critical moments, and then he illustrates the responses from exemplary singers, national committees, telecommunication networks, and continent-wide cultural organizations. In Vuletic’s narrative those responses are overwhelmingly positive, with agency afforded especially to singers and national endeavors that seek ways to promote the positive role of a Europe cohering around common values, whether about oppressed peoples, the tolerance of cultural and sexual difference, or the conflicts between diversity and sovereignty. It would be difficult not to conclude upon reading this book that the Eurovision Song Contest has been a positive force in shaping postwar Europe.

**Where is your mind? Humanity cries. You think you are gods. But everyone dies.**

—Jamala, “1944,” winning song for Ukraine, 2016 ESC

One of the most important contributions of Vuletic’s history is the way he takes the first part of its title seriously. The political and musical counterpoint of “Postwar Europe” also contains contributions from Eastern Europe, which are here the subject of chapter 3, “A Contest for Communism” (89–122). Just as the ESC emerged in 1956 as a Western European response to the Cold War, especially after Soviet military repression in Czechoslovakia and Hungary later in the same year, so too would the telecommunications network of the Soviet Bloc establish its popular song competition, the Intervision Song Contest. Their similarities and differences notwithstanding, the Intervision Song Contest and the Eurovision Song Contest mirrored each other in certain ways, at least according to Vuletic’s account. He argues for what amounted to a popular music détente, in which “communist governments in Eastern Europe were not as hostile toward the ESC as simplistic assessments of an antagonistic, binary Cold War would assume” (122). Be that as it may, such mutual accommodation has not carried over to the ESC in the New Cold War, which, at least since the Ukrainian ESC victories in 2004 and 2016, has increasingly included responses to Russian destabilization of European national alliances, including those in the ESC.

**Look at me, I'm a beautiful creature. I don't care about your wooden  
time preachers.**

—Netta Barzilai, “Toy,” winning song for Israel, 2018 ESC

I have quite deliberately introduced another set of underlying historical voices to this review by punctuating it with epigraphs drawn from Eurovision song texts, including the first song to win, the most famous winning song (“Waterloo”), the most political (“1944”), and the most recent (“Toy”). I also use song fragments here because Vuletic does not include them in a book otherwise overflowing with different forms of historical evidence. As even these briefest of lyrical fragments make clear, song itself provides a rich and powerful narrative for the history of postwar Europe, whether in celebration of its selfness or in embrace of its otherness. The values that underlie Vuletic’s history (see, especially, chapter 5) also inhabit melody and accrue meaning through shared understanding of genre and the communal semiotics of dance. These are the values that have generated the historiography of Europe through song from its first appearance in the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder—indeed, powerfully so with the final sentence he ever wrote on song at the end of “On Music” (1800): “It is music that we experience within ourselves that lifts us up from the earth at the very moment of death” (Philip V. Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism* [2017], 259). It is the recognition of such value in song—no less in Eurovision song—that makes Dean Vuletic’s rich history of the Eurovision Song Contest very important reading indeed.

Philip V. Bohlman, *University of Chicago*

*The Communicative Event in the Works of Günter Grass: Stages of Speech, 1959–2015.* By Nicole A. Thesz. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018. Pp. 306. Cloth \$90.00. ISBN 978-1571139566.

This study examines communication and its absence as represented in fifteen prose works by Günter Grass (1927–2015). Though some of the voluminous scholarship on this author has inevitably touched on this theme, *The Communicative Event in the Works of Günter Grass* is the first sustained exploration of the representation of dialogue and communication across his career. Nicole Thesz posits that his oeuvre generally treats communication as an antidote to violence, which silences its victims. Though essential to Grass, words are ultimately not ends unto themselves but rather a pragmatic vehicle for human coexistence. His work also reflects his growing preoccupation with how his words would remain after him. Thesz discerns four periods in Grass’s representation of communication: in the Danzig trilogy (1959–1963) the power to manipulate others and elide truths is at stake in Nazi-era characters’ highly perfor-