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Performing Slavicness on the Global Stage

My Słowianie as a Case of Self- Exoticization and Self-Colonization

Abstract

This article examines the Polish Eurovision Song Contest entry *My Słowianie—We Are Slavic* (2014) as a cultural performance through which Slavic identity is constructed, negotiated, and transformed within contemporary global popular culture. Drawing on the concepts of cultural identity (Stuart Hall), stereotype and ambivalence (Homi K. Bhabha), cultural hybridity (Marwan Kraidy), and self-colonization (Alexander Kiossev), the article analyses the complex relationships between folklore, popular culture, and cultural stereotypes. The performance combines selected elements of Polish folk tradition with the aesthetic codes of global pop culture, creating an ambivalent representation that simultaneously celebrates and reproduces stereotypical images of Slavicness. The article argues that *My Słowianie* operates between the mechanisms of self-exoticization and self-colonization, revealing broader tensions characteristic of semi-peripheral cultures seeking international recognition while articulating their own cultural distinctiveness.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, Slavic identity, self-exotization, self-colonization, cultural performance, cultural hybridity

Abstrakt

Performans słowiańskości na scenie globalnej: *My Słowianie* jako przypadek autoegzotyzacji i autokolonizacji

W artykule analizie poddana została polska propozycja na Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji *My Słowianie – We Are Slavic* (2014) jako performans kulturowy, w ramach którego słowiańska tożsamość jest konstruowana, negocjowana i przekształcana we współczesnej globalnej kulturze popularnej. Podstawę teoretyczną rozważań stanowią koncepcje tożsamości kulturowej Stuarta Halla, stereotypu i ambiwalencji Homiego K. Bhabhy, hybrydyczności kulturowej Marwana Kraidy'ego oraz autokolonizacji Alexandra Kiosseva, pozwalające uchwycić złożone relacje między folklorem, kulturą popularną i stereotypami kulturowymi. Performans łączy wybrane elementy polskiej tradycji ludowej z kodami estetycznymi globalnej popkultury, tworząc ambiwalentną reprezentację, która jednocześnie celebruje i reprodukuje stereotypowe wyobrażenia słowiańskości. W artykule przyjęto tezę, że *My Słowianie* funkcjonuje pomiędzy mechanizmami autoegzotyzacji i autokolonizacji, ujawniając szersze napięcia charakterystyczne dla kultur półperyferyjnych, które poszukują międzynarodowego uznania, jednocześnie wyrażając własną odrębność kulturową.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, tożsamość słowiańska, autoegzotyzacja, autokolonizacja, performans kulturowy, hybrydyczność kulturowa

Introduction

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) constitutes a large-scale musical event and at the same time, a symbolic arena for the presentation and negotiation of national identities. Participating countries use the Eurovision stage to communicate particular narratives about themselves, their cultures, and their places within Europe. Over the course of a single evening, the stage becomes a site where cultural meanings are produced and contested. The ESC plays a significant role in the process of European integration, as its televised format reaches vast audiences and attracts millions of viewers worldwide.¹ Its enduring popularity stems from its unique ability to combine mass entertainment with the symbolic articulation of national and cultural identities.

As noted in the literature, “the ESC has three general traits of significance here: its base on music, on popular music, and on televised popular music.”² Beyond its musical dimension, the ESC may be understood as a recurring European ritual that creates a shared space of participation and cultural exchange among audiences across the continent.

Eurovision offers a highly visible stage on which tensions between cultural distinctiveness and participation in global cultural circulation are played out in concentrated form, revealing how participating countries simultaneously seek recognition within dominant Western cultural frameworks while negotiating anxieties about preserving their own identities. Particularly interesting are the entries from Central and Eastern European countries, which often operate between the desire to emphasize their own cultural distinctiveness and the aspiration to participate in the global circulation of popular culture. Poland’s Eurovision entry for 2014 provides a particularly compelling example of such a strategy.³ The song *My Słowianie—We Are Slavic* combines references to Polish folklore with the aesthetics of global popular culture, creating a performance based on distinctive representations of Slavic identity, femininity, and rurality. *My Słowianie* can thus be interpreted not only as musical entertainment, but as a complex performance of identity in a semi-peripheral context.

¹ Johan Fornäs, “Euro-Visions: East European Narratives in Televised Popular Music,” in *Europe Faces Europe: Narratives from Its Eastern Half*, ed. Johan Fornäs (Bristol: Intellect, 2017), 181, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvghj72r.10>.

² Fornäs, “Euro-Visions,” 181.

³ Music video: Donatan and Cleo, “My Słowianie,” YouTube, November 4, 2013, video, 4:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r110sgjHRqE>. ESC Entry: Donatan & Cleo, “My Słowianie—We Are Slavic (LIVE) | Poland PL | Grand Final | Eurovision 2014,” YouTube, May 10, 2014, video, 3:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJg2ocN2HmA>.

Since its release, Cleo and Donatan's song has generated highly polarized responses. *My Słowianie* has been interpreted both as an affirmative expression—even a celebration—of Slavic cultural distinctiveness and as a performance that reproduces Eastern European stereotypes and contributes to the sexualization of femininity. This controversy raises questions about how the song constructs and performs Slavic identity, as well as the function of combining references to folklore, stereotypes, and the aesthetics of global popular culture.

The aim of this article is to examine how *My Słowianie* constructs and performs Slavic identity through the ambivalent interplay of Eastern European stereotypes, folkloric references, and the aesthetics of global popular culture. It investigates how the tension between affirming and parodying Slaviness reveals a cultural strategy situated between self-exoticization and self-colonization.

The Eurovision Song Contest can be understood as a space in which national identities are performed and negotiated before a transnational audience. Particularly in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, this process often reveals tensions between the desire for international recognition and the need to preserve cultural distinctiveness. As Agata Araszkiewicz points out,

the relationship with the so-called West is experienced both antagonistically and ambivalently—we seek to adopt what is desirable from it, yet we fear “Western” freedom. Developing our own dual complex of inferiority and superiority, we aspire to the “Western” lifestyle, but we experience this aspiration as a constant source of threat to our identity.⁴

Although Araszkiewicz's observation does not refer directly to the Eurovision Song Contest, this diagnosis of this ambivalent East-West relationship provides an important context for understanding cultural negotiations visible in performances such as *My Słowianie*.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of the ways in which Slavic identity is constructed requires a particular understanding of cultural identity. This article draws on Stuart Hall's conception of identity, according to which identity should be understood as a process emerging within representation rather than as a fixed and unchanging

⁴ Agata Araszkiewicz, “Samokolonizacja u hegemonu – nowoczesność a kwestia kobieca,” *Czas Kultury*, no. 4 (2016): 218. Unless otherwise noted, translation—I. A.

essence. In other words, identity is not something that individuals or communities simply possess, but something that is continuously produced and negotiated.

Hall emphasizes that identity should no longer be understood as a stable and homogeneous category. This does not mean, however, that the concept of identity should be abandoned; on the contrary, it requires a new way of understanding: "The concept of identity developed here is therefore not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one."⁵ Such a perspective allows us to analyze the ways in which individuals and groups define themselves within specific social and cultural contexts.

Following Hall's line of reasoning, identity does not provide an answer to the question of who we are. Instead, it invites us to ask who we are becoming, how we are represented, and ultimately how we represent ourselves. As Hall writes: "actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being."⁶

Within this perspective, individuals and social groups draw upon these resources to construct particular narratives about themselves. Such an approach is particularly valuable in the analysis of national and cultural representations, as it shifts attention away from the question of what a given community essentially is and toward the ways in which it presents and constructs itself.

Hall also emphasizes that identity does not exist outside representation, as it is produced through it. Consequently, the analysis of images, narratives, and cultural practices becomes an analysis of the very processes through which identity is constructed. This perspective shifts attention away from the question of the authenticity of identity and towards the representational practices through which it is produced. According to Hall, the construction of identity also requires the establishment of boundaries in relation to what is perceived as different. Identity therefore does not emerge in isolation, but is always formed in relation to a particular "other." In the case of national representations, it becomes particularly important to ask against which cultural imaginaries a given community defines itself.

This perspective also corresponds with Ewa Klekot's reflections on the category of folklore, which emphasize that what is recognized as "folk" is not a self-evident or fixed cultural essence, but a category shaped through historical and social processes. Klekot observes that

⁵ Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003), 3.

⁶ Hall, "Introduction," 4.

folkness in art, canonized throughout the twentieth century in the form of the folk style and employed by successive forms of the Polish nation-state in the construction of visual national identity, has also become an element of postmodern identity politics.⁷

Hall's perspective allows identity to be understood as the product of representational processes. The next step is to examine the ways in which cultural difference is constructed and maintained. In this context, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the stereotype becomes particularly useful.

An important element of Bhabha's reflection on cultural representation is the concept of the stereotype, which he interprets differently from traditional definitions that understand stereotypes as erroneous or simplified representations of reality. As he argues: "it is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference. ... constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations."⁸ According to Bhabha, the stereotype constitutes a particular mode of representing cultural difference that reinforces specific representations of social groups and cultures.

Bhabha argues that the stereotype operates through ambivalence: "it is the process of ambivalence, central to the stereotype,"⁹ through which certain characteristics are simultaneously presented as obvious, natural, and unchanging while requiring their constant repetition and reaffirmation. It is precisely this contradiction that makes the stereotype a persistent mechanism of cultural representation.

Bhabha's perspective makes it possible to approach the stereotype as a mechanism through which cultural difference is constructed, rather than as a simple distortion of reality. In this context, the question of ambivalence becomes particularly significant, as it makes it possible to identify situations in which a given representation simultaneously reproduces and challenges the stereotype.

Contemporary cultural representations rarely function within isolated and self-contained cultural systems. Under conditions of globalization, processes of cultural exchange and the circulation of meanings between cultures become increasingly significant. One of the theoretical approaches developed to describe these processes is Marwan Kraidy's concept of hybridity. According to Kraidy,

⁷ Ewa Klekot, *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową: Gust, ideologie, nowoczesność* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz, terytoria, 2021), 315.

⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 75.

⁹ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 66.

hybridity should not be understood as evidence of the disappearance of cultural inequalities; rather, it represents one of the ways in which globalization operates within the cultural sphere.

Kraidy also emphasizes the processual character of hybridity. This rather problematic term encompasses various forms of mixing, including cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and media-related dimensions. According to the author, hybridity emerges from the contact between cultural forms, styles, or identities that were previously relatively distinct.¹⁰ From this perspective, hybridity can be understood as a natural consequence of intercultural communication processes. At the same time, Kraidy points out that “the boundaries between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ cultural influences are not always clearly demarcated.”¹¹ This suggests that contemporary cultural representations are difficult to interpret in terms of pure and separate cultural traditions, as they emerge through the interaction of multiple influences, borrowings, and processes of negotiating meaning.

The perspective of hybridity therefore makes it possible to understand contemporary cultural representations as the result of encounters and negotiations between different cultural codes. However, it does not fully explain the question of inequalities accompanying such processes.

In this context, Alexander Kiossev’s concept of self-colonization proves particularly useful, as it focuses on the relationships between cultures perceived as peripheral and those occupying dominant positions within global cultural hierarchies. Alexander Kiossev developed the concept of self-colonization to describe societies that, despite not having been formally colonized, internalize dominant cultural models and perceive them as universal standards of modernity. As we can read about his concept in scientific literature,

the author treated it as a starting metaphor for further reflections on the genealogy of disputes concerning Bulgaria’s literary heritage. . . . The concept of self-colonization emerged from the Bulgarian experience of modernization. . . . Kiossev hypothesized that the experience of absence—a perceived lack of cultural forms recognized as universal by a given community at a critical moment of modernizing transformation—lay at the foundation of many emerging national identities.¹²

¹⁰ Marwan Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 5.

¹¹ Kraidy, *Hybridity*, 6.

¹² Grażyna Szwał-Gybyłowa, “Aleksandra Kiosewa koncepcja samokolonizacji i efekt symmorfozy,” *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne*, no. 13 (2017): 35, <https://doi.org/10.14746/pss.2017.13.2>.

Particularly important in this context is this notion of absence, in which peripheral cultures perceive themselves as lacking cultural forms considered universal or modern. As a result, they begin to define themselves in relation to external models perceived as more prestigious. Although the concept emerged from the Bulgarian experience of modernization, Kiossev did not treat it as limited exclusively to that context. For this reason, the notion of self-colonization may also be useful for analyzing other societies negotiating their position between local cultural traditions and dominant modernity models.

The perspective of self-colonization makes it possible to analyze situations in which local symbols and traditions are represented through references to cultural models perceived as dominant or more attractive. In this context, a particularly important question concerns how peripheral cultures negotiate their own distinctiveness in their search for recognition within broader global cultural circulation.

Another important concept employed in this article is self-exoticization. This term refers to situations in which individuals or groups present their own culture as exotic, different, and distinctive in relation to other cultures. Exoticization is a process in which cultural distance is deliberately constructed and intercultural differences are further emphasized.¹³ One definition of this concept refers directly to individuals from Eastern Europe who consciously perform stereotypical representations of their own “Easternness” or “Slavicness” through “the ironic, sarcastic, subversive stylisation of people from the East as barbarian, uncivilised, and wild.”¹⁴ Within this perspective, self-exoticization involves more than emphasizing cultural difference; it also includes the conscious use of existing stereotypes and representations associated with one’s own culture.

Self-exoticization may be understood as a strategy of emphasizing one’s own distinctiveness and uniqueness in relation to another culture that is often perceived as dominant. Similarly to self-colonization, this process involves reference to an external point of comparison. The difference lies in the fact that, instead of adopting dominant cultural models, self-exoticization involves the selection and accentuation of those elements of one’s own tradition that may be perceived as exotic, distinctive, or attractive to an external audience. As a result, self-exoticization reinforces the perceived differences between cultures.

¹³ See Waldemar Kuligowski, “Egzotyzacja: Nie czyń drugiemu, co tobie niemiłe,” *Czas Kultury*, no. 1 (2017): 138, https://czaskultury.pl/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2021/03/138-142_egzotyzacja-umovhf.pdf.

¹⁴ Dirk Uffelman, “‘Self-Orientalisation’ in Narratives by Polish Migrants,” in *Contemporary Polish Migrant Culture and Literature in Germany, Ireland, and the UK*, ed. Joanna Rostek and Dirk Uffelman (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 107.

Self-colonization and self-exoticization should not be understood as mutually exclusive processes. On the contrary, they may coexist within the same cultural representation. While self-colonization involves the adaptation of local content to dominant cultural models, self-exoticization operates through the emphasis of one's own cultural distinctiveness. The tension between these two processes constitutes one of the main points of reference for the analysis of *My Słowianie*.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, combining elements of discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. It focuses on the ways in which Slavic identity is represented and on the meanings produced through particular elements of the performance. The starting point of the analysis is to approach *My Słowianie* not merely as a song or a music video, but as a cultural performance. In this sense, Richard Schechner's perspective provides a useful analytical framework, as he proposes examining various social and cultural phenomena while emphasizing that performance encompasses a broad range of activities—from theatre and concerts, through popular entertainment, to play and ritual. Performance studies are therefore concerned with the examination of actions, situations, behaviors, and relationships rather than treating a work solely as a finished cultural product. Schechner encourages us to understand culture as something that is performed, enacted, repeated, displayed, and received: “a performance takes place as action, interaction, and relation. In this regard, a painting or a novel can be performative or can be analyzed ‘as performance.’”¹⁵

The approach of analyzing various social and cultural phenomena “as performance” makes it possible to treat the Eurovision performance, the music video, and the lyrical layer of the song as elements of a single performative event through which specific cultural meanings are constructed and communicated. The shift of emphasis from the question “What does it mean?” to “What does it do?” leads to a reflection on the ways in which Slavic identity is performed, represented, and made accessible to audiences.

The research corpus consists of the official *My Słowianie* music video released in 2013, Cleo's performance at the Eurovision Song Contest in 2014, and the song lyrics. The analysis focuses on selected visual, textual, and performative

¹⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013), 30.

elements, including costumes, choreography, gestures, props, stage design, and the and the lyricism.

The interpretation of the research material draws on the concepts developed by Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, Marwan Kraidy, and Alexander Kiossev. These theoretical perspectives make it possible to analyze the construction of cultural identity, the functioning of stereotypes, the processes of cultural hybridity, and the tension between self-colonization and self-exoticization.

Analysis

My Słowianie was selected as Poland's entry for the 59th Eurovision Song Contest in 2014, marking the country's return to the competition after a two-year absence. The decision made by Polish Television (TVP) generated polarized reactions among audiences, ranging from enthusiastic support to strong criticism and indignation.

Both the Eurovision performance and the official music video circulated extensively online, contributing to a broader public debate surrounding the song. In this sense, *My Słowianie* functioned beyond the framework of a Eurovision entry, becoming a media spectacle through which selected elements of Polish folk culture were recontextualized and presented to a global audience.

Constructing Slavic Identity as Representation

The lyrics of the song refer to the beauty of Polish women, particularly those associated with rural areas. Their attractiveness is linked to natural products, such as cream from countryside, and to a culturally constructed image of health and vitality symbolized by rosy cheeks and the color of baked bread. The song further suggests that Poland is associated with naturally beautiful women as well as high-quality alcohol, particularly vodka. In this way, the song constructs a particular image of Polish and, more broadly, Slavic identity based on selected markers of rurality, nature, femininity, and traditional products.

The visual layer of the performance expands this representation through a set of recognizable cultural signs, such as crowns of flowers, folk costumes, and references to traditional rural activities, including butter churning and scrubbing laundry on a washboard. The visual aesthetics of Cleo's Eurovision performance closely correspond with the lyrical narrative, reinforcing a specific image of Slavic identity constructed through selected elements of folk culture.

The construction of Slavic identity in the performance also relies on references to existing folk practices and costumes. The women from the Folk Song and Dance Ensemble of the University of Warsaw “Warszawianka” featured in the music video wore costumes that they regularly present during their performances. Similarly, during the Eurovision Grand Final, three performers from the Mazowsze National Song and Dance Ensemble appeared on stage wearing original elements of the Cracow suite from the ensemble’s wardrobe, including vests, skirts, shoes, coral jewelry, and floral wreaths.

Following Hall’s perspective, the significance of these elements lies not in their ability to represent an objective or fixed image of Slavic identity, but in the ways they are selected and arranged to produce a particular cultural representation.

Ambivalence and Stereotype

The references of Polish culture are presented through a highly stylized and sexualized aesthetic that oscillates between irony, parody, and celebration. This ambiguity makes it difficult to determine whether the performance challenges stereotypical representations of Slavic culture or rather reproduces them.

The music video, released in 2013, opens with a parody resembling pharmaceutical advertisements. This introductory scene signals that the performance is intended as ironic and should be interpreted as a playful exaggeration rather than a literal portrayal of Polish culture. This interpretation is further reinforced by statements made by Cleo and Donatan in interviews, where they repeatedly emphasized the tongue-in-cheek character of the project. However, the ironic framing does not eliminate the stereotypical mechanisms embedded within the performance.

The representation of women in *My Słowianie* is built around strongly sexualized imagery. Scenes such as churning butter or a model with milk dripping from her face onto her breasts introduce an erotic context. The sexualized representation of Slavic femininity draws on visual codes characteristic of contemporary global popular culture. A similar mechanism can be observed in the representation of Slavic femininity through stylized folk-inspired costumes, which expose the body and emphasize sexual attractiveness. The transformation of traditional garments into shortened skirts, revealing bodices, and high-heeled footwear contributes to a stereotypical image of the Slavic woman as simultaneously traditional, sensual, and available to the viewer.

The opening sequence, in which Donatan wakes up in a bed surrounded by four women, displays the provocative character of this strategy. At first glance, they do not resemble the colorful, rosy-cheeked village girls described in the lyrics.

Only after a stylized transformation into “real Slavic women” do they begin to promote the virtues of natural rural life. Although Cleo sings “there are no innuendos in the video,” the visual narrative clearly introduces erotic references and frames women’s bodies as objects of visual attraction. The provocative nature of the performance was also noticed by international media, including commentary presented by BBC Trending.¹⁶

An additional layer of ambiguity is introduced by the slogan “Don’t forget where you come from.” While it may be interpreted as an affirmation of local identity, its placement within a highly stylized and ironic performance complicates a straightforward patriotic reading.

The ambivalent character of the performance is also reflected in its reception. *My Słowianie* generated both admiration and criticism. Filip Lech, music editor at the Culture.pl portal, critically addressed the sexualization of femininity and the representation of rural motifs in the music video:

The constant association of women with dairy products (churning cream, a model with milk dripping down her face) creates completely unjustified pornographic contexts; and the persistent exposure of semi-naked breasts comes from American culture. . . . In Slavic culture, women are associated with numerous elements: mystery, knowledge that men do not possess, a nurturing spirit, independence, as Slavic men often died in battles. But for heaven’s sake (for Świętowit’s sake!), they were not associated with dairy products!¹⁷

This type of critical interpretation indicates that, for some viewers, the ironic character of the project did not eliminate the controversial meanings associated with the sexualization of Slavic identity. At the same time, the fact that other audiences interpreted the same performance as a playful engagement with stereotypes reveals its ambivalent nature—simultaneously challenging and reproducing established representations of Slavic culture.

Hybrid Slavic Identity

The representation of Slavic identity in *My Słowianie* is created through the combination of elements associated with Polish folklore and the visual, musical,

¹⁶ See BBC article: “‘Us Slavs’ music video mocks stereotypes,” #BBCtrending, November 21, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-25038936>.

¹⁷ Filip Lech, “My (?) Słowianie,” *Culture.pl*, December 20, 2013, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/my-slowianie>.

and performative codes of contemporary global pop culture. Rather than existing as separate cultural systems, these elements become intertwined, creating a hybrid form that combines local references with globally recognizable aesthetics.

The visual and performative language of the song incorporates elements characteristic of commercial popular culture. The simplified choreography, emphasis on visual attractiveness, fashion-oriented styling, and sexualized imagery correspond to conventions commonly found in contemporary pop performances. At the same time, these elements are combined with references to Polish folk culture, including traditional costumes, rural motifs, and symbols associated with Slavic identity.

This hybrid aesthetic is particularly visible in the transformation of folk costume, where traditional garments are combined with visual conventions characteristic of contemporary commercial pop culture. The resulting costumes retain recognizable references to Polish folk attire while simultaneously adopting elements associated with global popular aesthetics, such as modified silhouettes, revealing cuts, and fashion-oriented styling. This strategy simultaneously presents Polish costumes and Polish femininity as distinctive cultural markers while adapting them to the visual conventions of global entertainment.

The process of cultural hybridity can also be observed in the representation of femininity. The deliberate sexualization of female characters draws both on forms of playful eroticism historically present in Polish folk and popular culture and on visual tropes popularized by contemporary mainstream music videos, reflecting what Rosalind Gill describes as the “sexualisation of culture.”¹⁸ In this way, local cultural references are not simply reproduced but reconfigured through globally circulating visual codes.

Interestingly, this transformation extends beyond the Eurovision performance itself. Costumes resembling Cleo’s stylized folk mini-skirts later appeared in commercial circulation, often marketed as “folk skirts” or “highlander skirts like Cleo’s.” This suggests that the performance did not merely borrow from existing cultural forms but also contributed to the production of new hybrid representations of Polish folk aesthetics within contemporary popular culture.

From Kraidy’s perspective, such a strategy should not be understood as a simple opposition between local tradition and global influence. Rather, *My Słowianie* demonstrates how contemporary cultural identities are negotiated through the continuous interaction of different aesthetic systems, media forms, and cultural references.

¹⁸ See Rosalind Gill, “The Sexualisation of Culture?” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 6, no. 7 (2012): 483–498, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00433.x>.

Between Self-Exoticization and Self-Colonization

The strategy adopted in *My Słowianie* can be interpreted simultaneously through the concepts of self-exoticization and self-colonization. The performance emphasizes selected markers of Slavic identity—such as folk costumes, rural imagery, traditional practices, and natural product references—presenting them as distinctive and easily recognizable signs of cultural difference. Both the visual and lyrical layers of the performance rely on selected elements of Polish folk culture, which are often exaggerated and stylized in order to intensify their visibility and uniqueness.

Such a strategy corresponds to mechanisms of self-exoticization, in which selected aspects of one's own culture are deliberately emphasized and transformed into signs of otherness that can attract the attention of an external audience. In the case of *My Słowianie*, selected elements of Slavic identity draw upon long-standing representations of Eastern Europe as a space imagined as colorful and sensual, yet simultaneously rural, backward, and primitive. However, these stereotypical frames are not simply reproduced; rather, they are consciously appropriated and reinterpreted through an ironic pop-cultural aesthetic.¹⁹ What is particularly significant is the self-awareness embedded in this gesture: the exaggeration appears to be deliberate and strategic, creating a parodic effect that could be summarized as: “this is what you expect from us, so here it is—amplified.” This self-referential irony blurs the boundary between the playful reappropriation of stereotypes and their potential reproduction.

At the same time, the same strategy may be interpreted through the lens of self-colonization. The performance adapts local cultural symbols to globally recognizable aesthetic conventions associated with contemporary commercial popular culture. Folk costumes, rural imagery, and symbols of Slavic identity are translated into a visual language shaped by international media circulation and the expectations of a global audience.

This process does not imply a simple replacement of local culture by external influences. Following Kiossev's perspective, it may rather be understood as a strategy characteristic of semi-peripheral cultures negotiating their position in relation to dominant cultural models. In this sense, *My Słowianie* simultaneously expresses cultural pride and an awareness of external expectations, combining

¹⁹ See Michał Buchowski, “Social Thought & Commentary: The Specter of Orientalism in Europe; From Exotic Other to Stigmatized Brother,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (2006): 463–482, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4150874>.

the desire to emphasize local distinctiveness with the need for recognition within global popular culture.

Moreover, the transformation of these cultural symbols should not be understood as a departure from an original or “authentic” form of tradition. As Ewa Klekot suggests, the very category of what is considered “folk” is itself historically and culturally constructed. Therefore, the performance does not simply distort folklore but participates in an ongoing process of selecting, recontextualizing, and reinterpreting cultural symbols.

Ultimately, *My Słowianie* functions as a mirror reflecting Poland’s semi-peripheral position within contemporary cultural circulation. It reveals the tensions between the desire for international recognition and the need to articulate local distinctiveness, between the playful affirmation of cultural stereotypes and their possible reinforcement through the very act of performance.

Conclusions

The analysis of *My Słowianie* demonstrates that the performance does not present a stable or “authentic” image of Slavic identity, but rather reveals the process through which such identity is constructed, selected, and negotiated within contemporary cultural circulation. Following Stuart Hall’s perspective, the significance of the performance lies not in whether it faithfully represents Polish folklore, but in the ways in which particular cultural symbols are arranged and transformed to produce a recognizable representation of Slavicness.

The case of *My Słowianie* also demonstrates the ambivalent nature of contemporary cultural stereotypes. Following Homi K. Bhabha’s understanding of stereotype as a mechanism based on repetition and ambivalence, the performance simultaneously reproduces and questions established representations of Eastern European identity. Its ironic and exaggerated character allows it to function as a playful reappropriation of cultural *clichés*, while at the same time preserving the very images it seeks to parody.

The combination of folk references with the visual and performative codes of global popular culture reveals the hybrid character of contemporary cultural representations. However, this hybridity is not a neutral process of cultural exchange. The performance exposes tensions characteristic of semi-peripheral cultures negotiating their visibility within global cultural circulation. On the one hand, *My Słowianie* emphasizes selected signs of cultural distinctiveness, transforming them into attractive markers of difference. On the other hand, it

adapts these symbols to dominant aesthetic conventions associated with international popular culture.

Therefore, the relationship between self-exoticization and self-colonization should not be understood as a contradiction but rather as two interconnected strategies operating within the same cultural performance. The song reveals how the desire to emphasize local uniqueness may coexist with the need for recognition within broader systems of cultural legitimacy. In this sense, *My Słowianie* becomes a reflection of Poland's semi-peripheral position, situated between cultural pride and adaptation, self-affirmation and self-irony, local specificity and global visibility.

The case of *My Słowianie* also demonstrates that representations of Slavic identity within the Eurovision Song Contest are not fixed but continuously negotiated and reimagined. As more recent analyses have shown, other performances referring to Slavic identity, such as *My Sister's Crown*,²⁰ construct alternative models of Slavic femininity, moving away from eroticized rural imagery toward narratives of solidarity and empowerment. This contrast highlights the diversity of strategies through which Slavic identity can be articulated within contemporary popular culture.



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²⁰José Luis Panea and José Patricio Pérez-Rufi, "From *We are Slavic* to *My Sister's Crown*: Gender, Ethnicity, and Media Events," *Visual Review* 16, no. 1 (2024): 107–123. <https://visualreview.net/revvisual/article/view/5176>.

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