



FROM "WE ARE SLAVIC" TO "MY SISTER'S CROWN" GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND MEDIA EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an audiovisual textual analysis of two Eurovision Song Contest performances: the Polish and Czech entries for the 2014 and 2023 editions, respectively. Within their musical and stage presentations, both artists stimulate a discourse on Slavic female identity from divergent viewpoints. The performances align with two pivotal historical moments in the Slavic region, coinciding with the expansionist and identity policies of the Kremlin. This study examines the representation of gender and ethnicity concepts, exemplified by the Slavic women performers, within the audiovisual framework of media events.

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1. Introduction

This research proposes a comparative analysis of two fragments at the Eurovision Song Contest using an interdisciplinary perspective that includes aesthetics, visual studies, and communication. These fragments correspond to the performances representing the Polish (TVP) and Czech (ČT) broadcasters in the 2014 and 2023 editions respectively. The former was led by producer Donatan and singer Cleo, composers of the song "We Are Slavic", and the latter by the group Vesna with the song "My Sister's Crown" by Adam Albrecht, Michal Jiráň, Patrice Kaňok, Šimon Martínek, Tanita Yankova, and Kateryna Vatchenko.

As some authors linked to studies on the festival (Pajala, 2022, p. 197; Panea, 2022, p. 220) point out, there are few contributions to the scenography, visual identity, or the design of the event as a whole. According to comparative literature and international relations scholar Apostolos Lampropoulos, "Each edition of the festival is an audiovisual text" that transcends the competition (Lampropoulos 2013, p. 140). Indeed, "the choreographies, costumes, or set designs" and the audiovisual pieces broadcast during the gala (Lampropoulos 2013, p. 140) also constitute the spectacle and allow for an "aesthetic channeling" of the "shared sense of community" that underpins it (Raykoff, 2022, p. 66). The image is therefore as important as the music.

Previous research on Eurovision has focused on topics such as its relation to the history of post-war Europe (Johnson, 2014; Fricker, 2015; Vuletic, 2018a; Wellings & Kalman, 2019), delving into geopolitical and identity aspects (Björnberg, 2013; Fürnkranz & Hemetek, 2017; Carniel, 2019; Dubin, 2022). Similarly, statistical studies are proliferating, especially on electoral systems (Yair & Maman, 1996; Haan, Dijkstra & Dijkstra, 2005; Highfield, Harrington & Bruns, 2013) but also, on musical (Baumgartner, 2007; Bohlman, 2013; Vieira Lopes & Soeiro de Carvalho, 2022) or linguistic (Gligorijevic, 2007; Motschenbacher, 2016) issues. Occasionally, contributions such as those by Pajala (2012), Pérez-Ruff and Valverde-Maestre (2020) or Panea (2022) have been submitted as audiovisual productions.

This article aims to promote research linked specifically to the latter perspective. The audiovisual fragments referred to will be analysed in relation to two issues, gender and ethnicity, which are central in our time because they represent two fundamental challenges when it comes to embracing, as the famous writer and activist Bell Hooks [sic] claims, "otherness and difference" in a globalised world (Hooks, 2021, p. 24, p. 174). A world in which a commitment to human rights is crucial to its sustainability (López De La Vieja, 2005, p. 40). In line with authors who outline identity issues from philosophy (Bauman, 2005) and cultural and visual studies (Nelson, Treichler & Grossberg, 1992; Brea, 2005) on the construction of differences (Hall, 2011; Brah, 2011; Butler, 2004; Bhabha, 2011), we understand that gender and ethnicity are also two inseparable concepts (Hilder, 2017, p. 39) that "support and sustain each other" (Hooks, 2021, p. 94). This perspective will forge "the possibility of a cross-racial and cross-cultural debate" that will have an impact on its critical and diverse aspects (Hooks, 2021, p. 176, pp. 185-186).

For this reason, a closer look at the selected entries from two Slavic countries in a competition where aesthetics and politics converge around the idea of Europe becomes relevant (Raykoff, 2022, p. 66). In addition, both deal with the theme of female and ethnic identity, reflected musically and scenically in their performances, achieving a very significant acceptance in the competition.

2. Objectives

Our initial hypothesis is that the representations of Slavic women in the selected musical numbers assume two very different notions of femininity and ethnicity. In "We Are Slavic", the representation is *a priori* explicit, whereas in "My Sister's Crown", it is more implicit. In the first performance, the image of the woman is obviously sexualised and stereotyped in her gestures and dressed in traditional folk costumes. In the second performance, both the attitude and the body of the woman do not appear fetishized, assuming a role of rebelliousness and empowerment along with a more avant-garde characterisation, and only occasionally incorporating some elements recognisable as folkloric and feminine.

Our main objective is the aesthetic analysis of the two musical interpretations, paying attention to the representation of gender and ethnic identity. These two themes are present in both performances and their performers are also Slavic women, from which we can deduce the importance of the

correspondence between the content of the message and the way it is expressed. The aim, therefore, is to highlight the references of these numbers to identify the keys to their message and to interpret the approach of these performances to the questions they raise.

Our specific objectives are, on the one hand, to find the similarities and differences between the two candidates through the messages they elaborate in the songs (lyrics and music), staging, live performance, lighting, characterisation, interpretation, and choreography. On the other hand, we want to find the connection between the two proposals and the current political situation in the Slavic world, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

After the aforementioned comparison, we will be able to contrast these differences and understand them in the context of our epoch, which is marked by these issues. Gender, because war entails a radical differentiation of the roles of the two sexes and their de facto separation, and ethnicity, because it calls into question the survival of the very notion of "people" and thus the possibility of forging a "community".

3. Methodology

We used a qualitative methodology based on comparative analysis and case study, applying an audiovisual textual analysis. The case study can be understood as "a qualitative method of inquiry that allows us to delve into a specific situation in a specific context" (Ríos and Pinto, 2019, p. 38). Therefore, as an exploratory and descriptive method, it would be the most appropriate strategy to achieve the objectives proposed for such a precise object of study and purpose (Martínez Carazo, 2006).

As a methodology, aesthetic exploration based on audiovisual textual analysis breaks down the audiovisual content to reconstruct it by identifying its parts (Casetti & Di Chio, 2007). The analytical process used to analyse different fragments of the Eurovision Song Contest production by Gómez-Pérez and Pérez-Rufí (2022) and Pérez-Rufí and Valverde-Maestre (2020) has been adapted and applied to the selected audiovisual pieces. Its contextualisation requires a documentary review of different formats, and the critical commentary involves an intertextual and interdisciplinary analysis (Sedeño-Valdellós, 2021).

As the two selected cases both deal with issues of identity, it is necessary to define the concept of identity in order to then apply the aforementioned perspective to approach these issues. We will adopt a gender perspective by examining the representation of women, and a cultural perspective by examining the ethnic representation. The first part of this thesis focuses on the historical, political, and social context of both performances. They took place at two different times (2014 and 2023) and are relevant in terms of Russian foreign policy, which has left its mark on countries historically linked to the Federation, such as Poland and the Czech Republic.

The second section looks descriptively at the songs performed in both the performances, examining their lyrics and music. We identify the musical genre of the songs, the inclusion of references to the folklore of these countries or the presence of generic models or musical formulas related to international popular music (pop). Regarding the lyrics, the themes addressed by the songs and their relationship to the historical, political, and social contexts from an ethnic and gender perspective are highlighted.

The third section responds directly to the staging, following the methodological approach proposed by Gómez-Pérez and Pérez-Rufí, "Scenography (artificial or natural), composition of the framing (with only a symmetrical composition or the application of the rule of thirds), lighting, characterisation (costumes and make-up), and interpretation of the artists (direction of the performance)", depending on their dramatic or realistic intention (Gómez-Pérez and Pérez-Rufí, 2022, p. 242).

Based on the results obtained, we discuss the relationship between the context of these performances and their underlying messages. The adoption of the gender perspective and the perspective of cultural analysis, together with the comparison of the performances from the results obtained and from the approaches addressed, allows us to achieve the objectives set out.

4. Results

4.1. Historical, Political, and Social Context

4.1.1. The Eurovision Song Contest

The Eurovision Song Contest was founded in 1956 by seven European national broadcasters belonging to the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) to strengthen ties between Western European countries through a televised music competition (Fornäs, 2017, p. 181; Pajala & Vuletic 2021, p. 163). It is therefore “the result of a long history of international cooperation in the field of telecommunications” (Vuletic, 2015, p. 39), specifically in media events. Media events can be defined as internationally broadcast live shows that are “ceremonial” and “competitive” and break the routine of regular television programming (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 6-7). Thanks to their great convening power and audience ratings (Pajala & Vuletic, 2021, p. 163), they promote “the unification of different social sectors” (Greenwald, 2023, p. 37) and strengthen a type of common identity.

However, the construction of this identity is aporetic because an agreement must be made on the question of “Who are we?” As a discursive practice, identity must be based on commonalities in order to be expressed (Hall, 2011, p. 15). In the same way, every identity begins with an initial division. To constitute ourselves as “us”, we must differentiate ourselves from “them” by searching for an “ideal” that justifies this differentiation (Hall, 2011, p. 15). In this case, the ideal of Europe vis-à-vis the then Soviet Union and its scope of influence. As Bauman suggests, identity is “a critical projection of what is demanded or sought out in relation to what is; or, more precisely, an indirect affirmation of the inadequacy or incompleteness of what is” (Bauman, 2011, p. 42). Although any search for identity will always be inconclusive, it is at the same time inscribed in any process of knowledge insofar as it operates from the differentiation and distinction between concepts.

Although Eurovision is first and foremost “a discourse in and about Europe” (Lampropoulos, 2013, pp. 140-141), the only thing that the countries participating in the early contest really shared was what they were up against, namely the fact that they simply did not belong to the Eastern Bloc. Some, such as Switzerland or Norway, were outside of European treaties, as well as bodies such as the Council of Europe, the European Economic Community, and eventually even the European Union (Vuletic, 2018b, p. 304; 2015, p. 42). Therefore, it is appropriate to reflect on how, in the face of such diverse sensibilities, any possible “European reconstruction” should “start from the differences and contradictions that characterise the continent, without aspiring to the unity of other times” (López De La Vieja, 2005, p. 41). In this case, it is a symbolic (but not harmless) reconstruction, carried out through music and images.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and its scope of influence, as well as the progressive independence of many nations in the 1990s and 2000s, the map of Europe was redrawn (Fricker, 2015, p. 8), which was correlative to the contest (Fornäs, 2017, p. 190). Many “new” countries gradually made their debut in the contest (Vuletic, 2015, p. 43; Baker, 2015, pp. 74-75; Pajala & Vuletic, 2021, p. 167), to the point that the EBU reformulated the structure of the competition in order to double the number of participants (Jordan, 2014, p. 51; Pajala & Vuletic, 2021, p. 167). This allowed different flags to compete each year (Fornäs, 2017, p. 186), many of which were virtually unknown on Western European television, such as Poland or the Czech Republic. If the annual celebration of the competition since the 1950s makes it historically relevant (Vuletic, 2015, p. 45), then it is also relevant in terms of the aforementioned “proceeding from differences”. Making room for diverse sensibilities that are reflected in the languages and styles of music of the songs presented or in the costumes of the performers, which is not continually seen on any other public television program. The fact that the songs also represent the public television channels of the countries from which they originate (Fricker, 2015, p. 8), a discursive circuit is generated that is also perceptible in other media events such as the Olympic games or the World Cup (Baker, 2017, pp. 90-100). Thus, the values of the European Union inspire the creation of the show, especially for the visibility of national, ethnic, and sexual minorities (Pajala, 2022, p. 189).

4.1.2. Ethnic and Gender Identity

The concept of ethnicity primarily defines those populations that identify themselves through the sharing of a common culture, such as traditions or language, and to a lesser extent through the sharing of a space or territory as well as characteristic phenotypic traits (Bhabha, 2011, p. 100). It is an

ambiguous concept that cannot be determined genetically (like the problematic concept of race), which reveals its conventional and historical character (Stolcke, 2011, p. 317; Giménez, 2006, p. 141). Thus, the Slavic people are an "imagined community", following the concept coined by Benedict Anderson, which can be defined historically by a) its location, in this case in Central and Eastern Europe, b) having resisted the conquest of most ancient civilisations, c) speaking several languages belonging to the same linguistic family, and d) mostly practising Orthodox Christianity (Levine, 1914, p. 670).

However, the vast geographical region traditionally occupied by the Slavs and their proximity to other territories have filled their culture with influences, fuelled by continuous migrations, especially in modern times. However, the awareness of these shared factors led to the creation of the concept of pan-Slavism, also known today as "Slavophilia", in the 19th century. While aiming to "transcend" the "more isolated idea of national identity" in search of feelings of "solidarity, cultural unity, spiritual ties or linguistic familiarity" (Đorđević et al., 2022, p. 5), it initially emerged as a retaining wall against the cultural, social, and political influence of the West. The region is strongly linked to Russian imperialism and Russia as the supposed origin of the Slavic race, but the limited feasibility of its programme and the entrenchment of twentieth-century nationalism hinders its subsequent cultural or political settlement (Đorđević et al., 2022, p. 6).

Its recent resurgence in Russia, especially under the rule of President Vladimir Putin, has been strictly political. In other countries, such as the Czech Republic and Serbia, it is noticeable only in isolation, albeit outside the Kremlin's justifications (Đorđević et al., 2022, p. 9). Moreover, various scholars note that the accession of Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Croatia to the European Union has already partially realised the project of pan-Slavic unity, albeit, paradoxically, outside of Russia (Đorđević et al., p. 8). For its part, the current war in Ukraine is understood by Russia as a necessary operation to "liberate" its people from foreign influence in pursuit of "traditional values" (Đorđević et al., p. 10). Thus, in contrast to traditional pan-Slavism with an imperialist bias, legitimised by the Kremlin, we find an alternative pan-Slavism with a cultural rather than political bias that is opposed to Russia (Kazharski, 2022).

We now turn to the issue of gender identity. In this regard, it is necessary to highlight the alliance between the LGBTQBIQ+ struggle and the women's movement, as both groups have been historically oppressed by hetero-patriarchal society (Butler, 2004, p. 200). It is the heterosexual male who has imposed his hegemony on both the personal (the individual body) and the political (the social or working body) (Hooks, 2021, p. 91; Brah, 2011, p. 144). This hegemony is the correlate of instrumental power, historically the domain of men, with sexual violence being the main challenge of the feminist agenda today (Liedo, 2023, p. 3). In the face of this dominance, these groups have asserted their rights and have promoted other worldviews.

One of these worldviews is the sisterhood (Balza, 2020), conceptualised in the context of the second feminist wave. The term is defined as "an affective and political alliance between women [...] born of an awareness of common oppression and aimed at contributing to the end of that oppression" (Liedo, 2023, p. 2). It is based on the Italian concept *affidamento*, which describes "the recovery of the primordial mother-daughter bond" and which, far from opposing the denigration of the feminine by the feminism of equality, sees in it an opportunity to challenge the status quo (Liedo, 2023, p. 3). This "mutual support arising from the recognition of women's shared reality", Liedo continues, "highlights the ethics and politics of care" (Liedo, 2023, p. 13). It should be noted, however, that black feminism and queer theory have warned against the tendency to homogenise, running the risk of essentialising the feminine (Brah, 2011, p. 112).

Having defined the key concepts of the research, we must point out how the case studies analysed encompass both issues. We juxtapose two candidates that allude precisely to ethnic identity, specifically Slavic, gender, and female identity. The two performances coincide chronologically with two political events of great significance in the Slavic context: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the occupation of Ukraine by the Russian Federation since 2022. This is a particularly important issue for the two "brother countries", whose history shows a cultural past closely linked to Russia, which has often been aesthetically problematised in Eurovision (Ulbricht et al., 2015, p. 159).

4.2. Textual Analysis of the Songs

4.2.1. Ethnic References

Ethnic references are present in both the lyrics and the melody of "We Are Slavic" and "My Sister's Crown". Specifically, the theme of Slavic women, which had previously been largely absent from the competition (Motschenbacher, 2016, p. 201). In both presentations, the themes are performed in the official languages of their countries as well as in English in order to convey their message to a wider audience. Similarly, the songs call for transcending the borders of both countries, albeit in two different ways. In the Polish song, the Slavic is explicitly mentioned, with allusions to the "we" (in this case, us) in line with the rest of the neighbouring nations. In the Czech song, a sister culture such as that of the Ukrainian people is supported without actually naming it.

In Polish, these allusions are laudatory, linking stereotypes about the quality of local products to the "good work" of their women, while objectifying them. Thus, after alluding to their genes, the singer Cloe sings, "Pour the vodka straight, no need to mix", "We'll prepare for you delicious" and "Cream and butter taste so good"¹. Meanwhile, one of the extras in the performance (Paula Tumala) simulates churning butter with sensual gestures. The original song is exclusively in Polish and contains greater lyrical complexity and more controversial references, such as the sentence, "In the video, there are no subtitles, if you don't understand us, come to our country" or the reference to "God" and "ideal women". The bilingual version submitted to the contest softens these nuances.

The Czech song is inspired by the Ukrainian people's resistance to Putin's invasion. Indeed, the play on words in the title, "My Sister's Crown", refers to the traditional flower crown worn by Ukrainian women in their regional costumes. The mention of Ukrainian self-determination can be read in the track's introduction in Czech, "My sister won't stand on the corner. Nor will she listen to you. My wild-hearted sister will never let you tie her down". Later the verse continues in English, "My sister's crown. Don't take it down. Nobody has right to do it. She's beautiful and capable. She is her own queen, and she will prove it." As we can see, the song seems to be sung to a second person who is the one who has taken this "crown" from her "sister". The violence of such damage is further noted with a reference to imperialist greed, "You can take your hands back. Nobody wants more boys dead [...] Life's not a moneybag. Blood's on your God's head. You can't steal our souls."

We see a mention of Slavic ethnic identity, but not from the point of view of celebrating stereotypical female beauty, but from the point of view of denouncing the conflict of war. Although the lyrics of "My Sister's Crown" are in English, present in the verses, they also include Czech in the introduction, Ukrainian in the choruses and Bulgarian in the rap section. The number of English words outweighs the rest, but the presence of the last three languages is very significant as they correspond to the three main Slavic groups: Western (Czech), Eastern (Ukrainian), and Southern (Bulgarian) (Eurovision Bulgaria, 2023), hence the pan-Slavic aspect of the presentation. Moreover, Vesna's members come from Bulgaria (Tanita Yankovová), Slovakia (Tereza Čepková), the Czech Republic (Patricie Fuxová, Bára Šustková and Markéta Vedralová), and even Russia (Olesya Ochepovská), which is quite a statement of intent.

In terms of musical references, "We Are Slavic" and "My Sister's Crown" are basically pop songs. They are structured with alternating verses and choruses that repeat themselves. Their melodies are catchy, which is important for Eurovision as it allows them to stand out from many other songs the first time it is heard. In addition, both have a more melodic part, which takes us back to their traditional music and another part that belongs to the hip-hop genre. The music of the Polish entry features several synthesised instruments from their national folklore, such as strings and brass, although the accordion stands out in the bridge of the song. Similarly, synthesised hand-clapping sounds are used throughout the song, and certain *ululeos* characteristic of North Africa and Eastern Europe are sung by the choir at the beginning of the track, motifs that refer to traditions and the idea of the collective. The music of the Czech song is very electronic with a mixture of different tracks in which the percussion of synthesised drums dominates. The most folkloric aspect of "My Sister's Crown" is the six-part chorus, which draws on the tradition of Slavic polyphonic singing. In this case, however, it is combined with a rap, which provides greater contrast and adds to the song's dynamism.

¹ All the lyric translations were done by the authors.

4.2.2. Gender References

The subject of women is presented from very different perspectives in both songs. In the lyrics of "We Are Slavic" we have already seen how local products such as vodka are assimilated to the specialness of Slavic women. "This special thing we have in our genes. Makes us proud of our natural shapes". But always from an erotic perspective, as in the following verse, "We grew up with home-made cream. We are delicate and our skin is like freshly baked bread. There are no women like Slavic women, those who have seen and tasted us know this". In the chorus the point is even clearer, "We are Slavic girls and we know how to use our charming beauty. Shake what your mother gave you (referring to the hind end) and clap your hands to this music. This is our nature, this is our call, this is our hot Slavic blood." Although the music of the song was composed by Donatan (Witold Czamara), the lyrics were written by Cleo (Joanna Klepko), showing the adoption of sexist stereotypes, in this case by a woman.

In the Czech song there are no sexual references, but there are references to women's empowerment from a serious and vengeful point of view, also concerning the war in Ukraine. There are no allusions to a specific description of femininity, but rather a defence of women's strength in the context of war, especially in the English fragment where she repeats, "We are not your dolls". Moreover, in this case, the reference to her beauty escapes the male gaze. It is thus linked to the very vitality of the woman mentioned, "My beautiful sister, you are so strong, unique and brave. The crown is yours". In several places, the word "crown" in Ukrainian, "corona", is replaced by the phonetically similar "khorobra", which means "brave". But "crown" also has another nuance. It metonymically alludes to the virginity of the female body, which in the context of war, both on a general level and in the specific case of the invasion of Ukraine, takes on greater significance about the rapes perpetrated against the women of the occupied cities.

The bridge of "We Are Slavic", translated from English, is a call for unity and peace, which are concepts that lie in the very idea of the contest (Fornäs, 2017, p. 188). "All the sisters of the world. Come together with a prayer. Choose love over power". As we can see, they clearly subscribe to the concept of sisterhood, for if "the patriarchal order profits from division and competition between women", the ties between women weaken the power structures that sustain it (Liedo, 2022, p. 5). Musically, the different voices blend harmoniously, conveying a sense of cooperation and unity, and the high-pitched tones typically associated with the feminine are combined with lower-pitched parts (such as rap), a predominantly masculine musical genre.

4.3. Staging of Performances

4.3.1. Scenography

The Polish presentation makes use of the visual resources available in the local environment (Copenhagen, Denmark). Inspired by abstract geometry, it consists of two large rectangular structures resembling scaffolding, one on the left and the other on the right of the stage, intersecting at right angles in the middle. Their steel construction and net-like aesthetics give the stage an industrial feel, inspired by the machinery used in shipbuilding. Thanks to the cavity, it allows for a very wide play of light, with transparent LED screens inside that light up according to the needs of the stage. Behind it, a large, curved LED screen marks a second backdrop (Lightning & Sound International, 2014, pp. 31-32). In the case of Donatan & Cleo's performance, both screens reproduce ornamental geometric figures, often circular with floral or heart-shaped motifs, as well as rhomboid shapes with predominantly red and white colours. The screens above the cubic structure also project similar video fragments, adding images of women dressed in regional clothing very similar to those of the performers. Although Donatan does not perform live, he appears in one of these videos, which can be seen on closer inspection. Ultimately, the intention is not to recreate a realistic set, but rather to demonstrate the nature of the space as a stage set.

Figure 1. Cleo with the chorus dancers (left) and Paula Tumala (right) at the Eurovision Song Contest, 2014.



Sources: Author based on Wikimedia Commons (2014).

The whole is coherent, as all the visuals reproduce similar patterns based on the use of red and white (the colours of the Polish flag), with floral or geometric motifs based on the costumes of the performers. All these elements are directly inspired by the visual imagery of Polish folklore, synthesised into concrete designs. While Cleo and the backup singers (Alesia Turonak, Anna Łapińska and Sylwia Klan) perform, the extras (Ola Ciupa and Paula Tumala) move to the catwalks at the sides of the stage and perform two actions that seem to illustrate the activities of the Slavic women of whom the song speaks. While one simulates washing several pieces of clothing (for which she has taken water from the water pit that surrounds the stage), the other seems to be churning butter. This reinforces the message of the stereotypical representation of women as keepers of tradition, as well as performing domestic, artisanal, and rural activities.

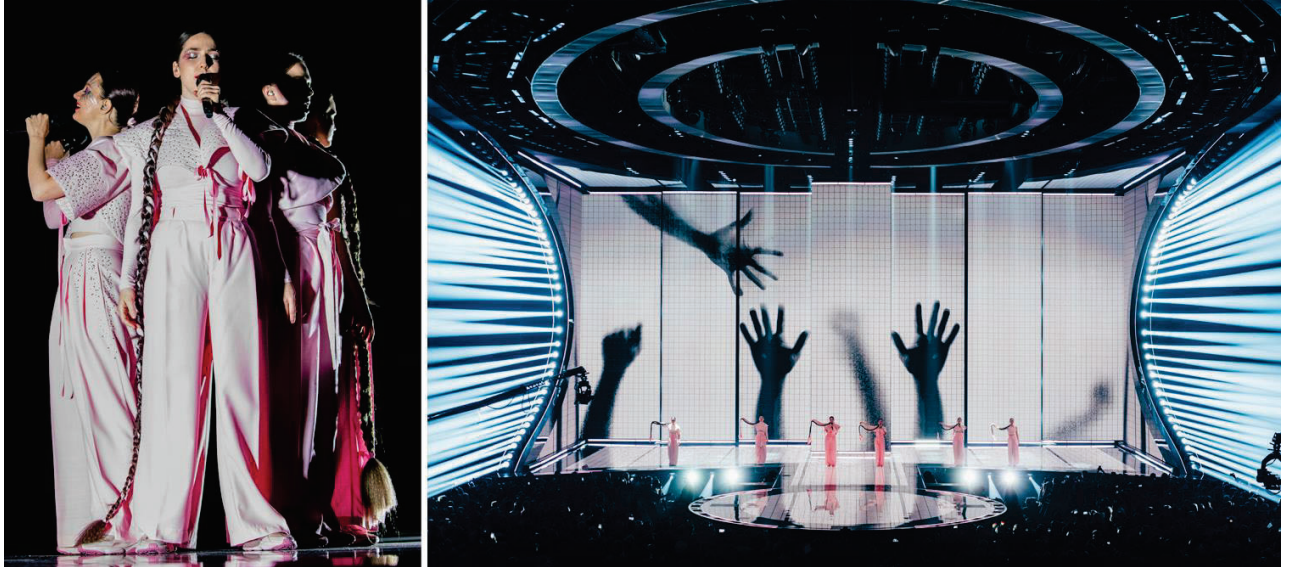
Vesna's performance also made use of the resources of the local stage (Liverpool, UK). The stage is designed as a minimalist and effective rectangular space with a central corridor leading to the stalls and is connected to a smaller oval platform as an auxiliary stage. The aim was to involve the audience in the show. The backdrop of the stage consists of seven rotating screens that can be used together or separately, modulating as required, and the stage floor integrates a large screen that allows the playback of pre-recorded content (Lightning & Sound International, 2023, p. 33). The Czech production does not include additional props, nor does it attempt to recreate a realistic space. The background screens emphasise their verticality, although they are darkened for much of the performance and individually lit at key moments to draw attention to the performers. All the screens sometimes reproduce parts of the lyrics in different languages. The predominance of black and white for more than half of the performance, together with overhead lighting (such as white or blue rays), creates a stark space in which the women dressed in pink stand out.

The visuals on the screens in the background are avant-garde and use a language typical of music videos. The shots are very short and include effects of interference or digital glitches and dirtiness typical of faulty technological devices. During the Bulgarian rap section, the vertical screens appear to be a mobile phone recording the performer pretending to take a selfie, with light and digital graphic effects reinforcing this impression. During the chorus, the screens use a grid to reproduce hands hitting glass. This conveys a sense of oppression, like the oppression of the Ukrainian sisters to whom the song is dedicated. These hands symbolise manipulation and play, "symbolic of the game we sometimes play", as the authors explain (Eurovision Song Contest, 2023, min. 01:04:26). It also means that we have "the power in our hands to do good".

In the last line of the song, the images projected onto the stage are dominated by a pinkish tone. Previously, the central screen showed a red frame in which the hand appeared to be liberated. In the final chorus, the hands in the projections on the background screens hit the glass. The oppression continues, but the pink lighting unifies the space and links the representation of oppression with the performers dressed in pink. This is an evolution in the staging that sends out a message of hope. There

was no need to resort to folk iconography, as the Polish group did, but an avant-garde language was activated with references to technological elements and symbolic use of light.

Figure 2. Vesna during the bridge (left) and the chorus (right) during the Eurovision Song Contest 2023 performance.



Sources: Author based on Eurovision TV (2023a, 2023c).

4.3.2. Composition of the Frame

In Donatan & Cleo's performance, most shots apply a symmetrical composition that has Cleo as its axis and at certain moments frames the two extras. The constant camera movements (zooming in, tracking shots, zooming out, rotating around the singer, and the backup singers) emphasise the centrality of these figures through continuous reframing. At the post-production level, white fades are used to highlight the beginning, the chorus, and the end of the song. The symmetrical composition, the rhythm in the change of shot, and the internal and external movement of each shot replicate a classic television production in a live music broadcast (Aragón-Manchado *et al.*, 2023), without providing novel elements on a technical level or a contextual level with respect to identity issues.

In Vesna's production, the symmetry of the composition is also reminiscent of a traditional television production with certain constant camera movements such as tracking shots. Despite the avant-garde visual staging (especially in the background screens), the television production is also conventional, with the singers as the basic visual reference for the whole number. No live post-production is included. However, some compositions, especially those in which the group of women appear together, are dramatic and convey the notion of spectacularity inherent in the staging of this event (Gómez-Pérez & Pérez-Rufí, 2022; Aragón-Machado *et al.* 2023).

4.3.3. Lighting

The functional use of light sources is highlighted in the TVP performance, without being able to deduce an expressive use. The lighting of the extras could also be judged negatively, with areas of shadow inappropriate to produce a media event such as the Eurovision Song Contest. In short, apart from the spectacular stage lighting of red and white beams, which matches the projections on the screens and the reference to the Polish flag, there is no interesting element other than the chromatic symbolism. As for the ČT representatives, the lighting reinforces the sobriety of the staging during the first two-thirds of the performance and then shifts to warmer pink tones. The transition coincides with the bridge of the song. At this point, the lights go out and the singers from the auxiliary stage gather in a circle to sing in unison. They are only partially lit by lights that revolve around them. Then comes the chorus, which is accompanied by the pink tones with a spectacular intention. Finally, the symbolic use of chromaticism

in the lighting moves from darkness to hope, emphasising the femininity of the performers, their complicity, and their confidence.

4.3.4. Characterisation

Cleo, the dancer-chorus girls, and the extras wear folk costumes. While the latter wear long floral-print skirts, bodices, blouses, and necklaces, Cleo and the extras wear mini-skirts. Cleo wears a short-sleeved T-shirt with a tight-fitting waist. The extras wear open T-shirts, revealing part of their breasts. As for the rest of the characterisation, specifically, the hairstyle, the singer and the chorus girls have braids and the extras wear a simple updo. The functional and non-expressive use of make-up, in keeping with contemporary beauty and fashion models, does not make it particularly significant. In fact, the main focus is on the dresses.

According to the artists, they do not belong to any particular Polish region (TeleProstir Studio, 2014a, min. 12:20). Although this is a simplification of the country's wide variety of typical dress, they are similar to those of regions such as Zamość, Szczawnica, Świętokrzyskie, Czeszów, Biecz, Włodawa, Orawka, Podlasie, Łowicz, Krzczonów, Kraków, and Poznań (Strojeludowe.net, 2023). These are areas in southern and south-eastern Poland, excluding the north-western half of the country, traditionally far removed from the pan-Slavic narrative and politically and culturally closer to the West. Another significant feature of the costumes is the predominance of red and white, the colours of the national flag, which is waved by the performers at one point in the show. Significantly, the patriotic reference coincides with the 10th anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union, which can be interpreted as an ambiguous pro-European commemoration (TeleProstir Studio, 2014b, min. 15:20). We can deduce that this would be at odds with the pan-Slavic narrative represented by Donatan.

In the Czech performance, the costumes are not traditional. The folklore is only implicit in the lyrics of the song, which alludes to the *vinok*, a typical Ukrainian flower used in the headband of the "crown", and to a large part of the Slavic people. It is therefore present in the song in a conceptual rather than a visual way. Moreover, the image of the crown is not shown at any point, it is only mentioned by gesturing with the hands on the head. The costumes, designed by Jan Smejkal, are a pale pink and harmonise with the visuals and lighting. The element most in keeping with folklore is found in some of the details, such as the decorative ribbons on the tops of the blouses and the stitching that replaces the traditional lace, combined with stitched gems from the Czech company CrystalsbyPreciosa (Vesna Music, 2023b).

The braids reinforce the message of the performance, as this is a hairstyle that usually requires the help of other people, often other women. The performers were inspired by a 14th-century Bulgarian legend that alludes to its symbolic significance (Vesna Music, 2023c). As for the makeup, glitter is used to match the jewellery and sequins scattered over Vesna's clothes. It follows a very current trend made fashionable by Euphoria (HBO, 2019-2022), a television series that also focuses on an ensemble of empowered women. Although the members of Vesna may appear to be uniform, each costume is different, with slight variations, so that unity and diversity alternate in the characterisation of the musical number.

4.3.5. Performance and Choreography

The Polish performance emphasises the women's confidence and friendliness, as well as their sensuality, by looking into the camera with smiles on their faces during the performance. They try to create a bond with the viewer, avoiding interaction with the audience. As for the choreography, except for Cleo at certain times, the gestures and dances of the group seem very feminine, especially those of the extras who stage the washing of clothes and the churning of butter. Thus, we have the stereotype of the peasant woman, devoted to her work, but without weariness, appearing complacent and sensual. Cleo and the dancing girls form one group situated on the stage, while the extras form another, positioned on the two catwalks at either end. They barely share shots and, although physically separated, they carry out their respective "chores", fully integrated into the narrative of the subject.

The Czech interpretation is much more serious, referring to a war conflict and its consequences on women as the backbone of Ukrainian society. They share with the Polish number the certainty of their actions, although the aim is not to seduce the spectator. In the last part, where the narrative is more hopeful, the women divide into pairs, hold hands and dance together, while smiling at one another. There is also no interaction with the audience in the auditorium and the gaze is directed towards the

television viewer. The choreography, by Zuzana Zizoe Veselá (Vesna Music, 2023a), is facilitated by the costumes with the use of trousers that allow the performers to move easily around the stage. Delicate gestures are combined with more energetic ones, such as kicks in the air, and more traditionally masculine-inspired garments coexist with more feminine ones. In short, costumes and choreography blend harmoniously.

Figure 3. Full shot of the Polish (left) and Czech (right) performances at the Eurovision Song Contest.



Sources: Author based on Wikimedia Commons (2014) and Eurovision TV (2023b).

4.4. The Reception of "We Are Slavic" and "My Sister's Crown"

The Polish performance was punished by the jury's votes, which relegated it to 23rd place, while the public placed it in 5th place. The sum of the votes placed Donatan & Cleo in the middle of the ranking, at 14th place. Nevertheless, it is the fourth-best result for TVP at Eurovision in twenty years (from 2003 to 2023). As for the Czech Republic, the entry was ranked 10th by the professional judges and 17th by the public. The sum of the points, however, managed to keep the Czech entry in 10th place, making it the second most successful Czech song in the history of the contest, leaving behind the poor results of ČT in its early days (Štětká, 2009, p. 22). Therefore, it is safe to say that both songs will be successful in the Eurovision careers of the two broadcasters.

"We Are Slavic" triumphed massively in the televote, showing the discrepancy between the tastes of the public and those of the experts (Mendoza, 2014). From some countries, such as Sweden, the sexism in the performance was strongly criticised, as seen in journalist Torbjörn Ek's questions (ESCKAZ, 2014, min. 8:37), which Donatan even defied (TeleProstir Studio, 2014a, min. 8:23; 2014b, min. 9:50). Donatan is controversial on the ethnic issue as he has caused controversy in his country by defending the pan-Slavic ideology and Poland's Soviet past (Mucha & Pereira, 2014; Simpson, 2017, p. 77). While the performance in the televote was positively received in most Eastern countries, in other regions he scored even higher (Ireland, Norway, and the UK gave him all 12 points, Iceland and the Netherlands all 10). Moreover, the large Polish diaspora in Europe influenced the result (Ireland's 12 points prove this, as well as 8 points in Germany, France, Italy, and Austria), as these large masses of people tend to vote en bloc from their place of residence for their country of origin, regardless of the song (Charron, 2013, p. 491). Although the meagre 23 points awarded by the jury show a clear rejection of the song because of the values it represents, the popular support anchors the song in the middle of the scoreboard. This is a record for this country, which in ten years (2004-2014) has only qualified for the final two times. The video clip has a record number of views on YouTube and the song has placed highly on the Polish charts (Prieto, 2023). The iconic butter churning performance will be remembered, as evidenced by the parodies that have been performed in other editions of the Eurovision Song Contest, such as 2016 and 2023.

For its part, the Czech entry has been in a strong position with the betting agencies since it was announced, encouraged by the extraordinary success of Ukraine in 2022. In fact, it is the first time that the Czech language is heard in the final of a contest and thus recognised on an international level. Although minority languages are not usually successful at Eurovision (Weigold, 2015), the previous year, against all odds, the entries from Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia performed in their official languages and were the most highly rated by the public. This coincided with a time when Slavic identity

was (and still is) being instrumentalised by Putin to justify his aggression. Symbolically, the success of many Eastern countries in the 2022 edition was also a reaffirmation of their sovereignty, in addition to Russia's exclusion from the contest in February. Although "My Sister's Crown" received 94 points from the jury, it only received 35 votes from the public. As in the Polish case, it is also striking that this pan-Slavic appeal failed to mobilise the public in the countries it was aimed at. The highest scores consisted of 12 points from Switzerland, along with 8 points from Finland and the Netherlands. As for the televote, Finland scored 10 points, the second-best score was Serbia's 4, while Ukraine would only receive 2 points. Paradoxically, we can see that both presentations ended up being better received by the non-Slavic public.

5. Conclusions

"We Are Slavic" and "My Sister's Crown" offer two very different visions of ethnic and gender identity in the Eurovision Song Contest. Without articulating an overt political message, both productions react to the prevailing context wherein the respective countries are predominantly situated with regard to these issues. In this case, through their public broadcasters, who are responsible for selecting the entries for the contest.

In the Polish performance, the pan-Slavic community is defended through stereotypical images of its women, which coincides with the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea. The fact that the composer of the song is nostalgic for the Soviet Union, and was chosen internally by TVP to represent it, implicitly links their television with the Russian side. The strategy used succeeds in conveying the message to the viewer in an entertaining, catchy, and attractive way. As for the Czech performance, amid the invasion of Ukraine, Vesna expresses her solidarity with her "Ukrainian sisters" without directly mentioning the conflict. If the connection in "We Are Slavic" subliminally refers to Russia, "My Sister's Crown" refers to Ukraine. The Czech performers move away from sexist stereotypes of the feminine essence, even questioning gender roles that the Kremlin itself wants to keep firmly anchored in "traditional values".

Our main finding is that it is all staged on a visual and conceptual level. Ethnic references are evident in the costumes, choreography, and visuals of "We Are Slavic", while "My Sister's Crown" has a more avant-garde aesthetic. In the Polish presentation, this message is reinforced by the raising of the national flag. In the Czech presentation, however, the ethnic issue is not so much in the image as in the lyrics of the song and the performance of the ensemble. As for the gender issue, in "We Are Slavic" the female body is sexualised, exposed to the presumably male gaze, especially in the shots of Ola Ciupa and Paula Tumala, suggesting that all Polish women are extremely beautiful, and they silence those who do not fit those standards. In "My Sister's Crown", on the other hand, the woman does not depend on any gaze, nor does the body emphasise its erotic attributes. Moreover, the choreography portrays both combative and playful gestures and, above all, a collective body in which none of the voices seek the limelight.

The concepts of gender and ethnicity have been used to study these candidacies, as well as other more concrete concepts such as sisterhood and pan-Slavism. What they have in common is the search for closer ties between oppressed communities, the creation of alliances, and places that allow for the expression and preservation of their specificities, which are under threat in a world leaning towards cultural homogenisation. Paradoxically, due to this commitment to unity, both movements have the potential to marginalize additional subgroups within the minority communities they represent in the global narrative. For this reason, they should be thought of not so much from a negative affirmation (based on what we are not), but rather from a positive affirmation (affirming without creating conflict or enemies) (Liedo, 2023, p. 16). Due to the reasons mentioned, "We Are Slavic" would fall within the first trend, whereas "My Sister's Crown" would be positioned in the second.

However, despite their great relevance today, we still notice a certain lack of academic studies on both concepts, as Liedo (2022) or Đorđević et al. (2023) point out, which gain great attention and visibility in the audiovisual context of media events. Ultimately, our contribution aims to invite future expansion on the topic that will have an impact on representations of cultural identity in competitive events such as the Eurovision Song Contest

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