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'We Party Like Ladies'

Renia Pączkowska, Verka Serduchka, and the Possibilities of Other Eastern European Identities

Abstract

In 2003, the Polish trio Ich Troje (The Three of Them) performed the composition *Keine Grenzen / Żadnych granic* (No Borders) on the Eurovision Song Contest stage, a trilingual (Polish, German, and Russian) anti-nationalist anthem that took the seventh place in the final. Four years later, Verka Serduchka, a drag queen representing Ukraine with the song *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*, sung in German and English, and popularly perceived as a Ukrainian farewell to Russia, reached the second place in the Eurovision final. In 2005, between the two performances, Michał Wiśniewski, the leader of Ich Troje, then at the height of popularity in Poland, under the female stage name Renia Pączkowska, released a joint album with Serduchka *1, 2, 3... Próba mikrofonu* (1, 2, 3... Mic Test). The record comprises covers of Serduchka's songs with Polish lyrics and significantly differs from the typical Ich Troje pop-rock style. The article examines the gender and national axes of the collaboration between the two Eurovision stars, who jointly created a possibility for alternative Eastern European identities. In conclusion, both Renia and Verka are claimed to be camp champions.

Keywords

Eurovision Song Contest, Ich Troje, Verka Serduchka, Renia Pączkowska, post-Sovietness, national identity, camp

Abstrakt

„Bawimy się jak damy”: Renia Pączkowska, Verka Serduchka i możliwość innych wschodnioeuropejskich tożsamości

W 2003 polska grupa Ich Troje wykonała na scenie Konkursu Piosenki Eurowizji utwór *Keine Grenzen / Żadnych granic*, trójjęzyczny (po polsku, niemiecku i rosyjsku) antynacjonalistyczny hymn, dzięki któremu zajęła w finale siódme miejsce. Cztery lata później Verka Serduchka, reprezentująca Ukrainę drag queen, zaśpiewała po niemiecku i angielsku piosenkę *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*, powszechnie interpretowaną jako ukraińskie pożegnanie z Rosją; artystka dotarła aż do drugiego miejsca w finale Eurowizji. Pomędzy tymi występami, w 2005 roku, lider Ich Troje Michał Wiśniewski, wówczas u szczytu sławy w Polsce, wydał pod kobiecym pseudonimem Renia Pączkowska album 1, 2, 3... *Próba mikrofonu*, nagrany wspólnie z Serduchką. Płyta zawierała polskojęzyczne covery piosenek Serduchki i wyraźnie odbiegała od charakterystycznego dla Ich Troje stylu pop-rocka. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi przeprowadzoną pod kątem płci i narodowości analizę współpracy dwóch gwiazd Eurowizji, które wspólnie nakreśliły perspektywę odmiennych wschodnioeuropejskich tożsamości. W konkluzjach zarówno Renia, jak i Verka przedstawiane są jako ikony campu.

Słowa kluczowe

Konkurs Piosenki Eurowizji, Ich Troje, Verka Serduchka, Renia Pączkowska, post-sowieckość, tożsamość narodowa, camp

Introduction

In 2003, the pop-rock band Ich Troje (The Three of Them), representing Poland at the Eurovision Song Contest, performed the composition *Keine Grenzen / Żadnych granic* (No Borders) and gained 7th place, the second highest for the country. Despite their successful performance, the group was widely criticized in Poland, sometimes even before the ESC took place. Ich Troje returned to the contest in 2006, with an extravagant performance of *Follow My Heart*, but this time failed to qualify for the final. In 2007, Ukrainian cross-dressing star Verka Serduchka participated in the ESC with the song *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*, popularly interpreted as saying goodbye to Russia, and reached second place in the contest. In 2005, between the first Eurovision entry of Ich Troje and the performance of Serduchka, Michał Wiśniewski, the leader of the Polish group, then at the height of its popularity in Poland, released a joint album with Serduchka *1, 2, 3... Próba mikrofonu* (1, 2, 3... Mic Test) under the female name Renia Pączkowska. The record comprises covers of Serduchka's songs with Polish lyrics. It followed in the popular musical tradition of folk disco, with elements of Eurodance and Estrada music, significantly different from Ich Troje's pop-rock style that merges the 1980s pop-rock with tango and waltz. In the album cover and accompanying music video, Wiśniewski showed up as a village woman in traditional clothes. Although Ich Troje and Verka Serduchka performed at Eurovision in different years, Wiśniewski and Andriy Danylko, the actor and singer who created Serduchka, met each other and made friends at the contest. Hence, their respective Eurovision performances provided an essential context for the Renia Pączkowska project.

This article aims to analyze the gender and national axes of the collaboration of the two Eurovision stars—Wiśniewski and Danylko—who jointly created a prospect of alternative Eastern European identities. Concerning Renia Pączkowska and Verka Serduchka's joint album, I will ask what alternatives they offer to the dominant norms of national identities in post-socialist Eastern Europe. To answer that question, I analyze the Eurovision performances of Ich Troje and Verka Serduchka as well as their reception and critique. Then I move to Renia Pączkowska's album, photos, and music video, considering the differences between original Serduchka's tracks and their Polish covers.

Theoretical Framework

In the second edition of his monograph *Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe*, Philip v. Bohlman called Eurovision a “spectacle of music and

nationalism.”¹ “Nations are collectives, and music often musters a collective at the moment of performance,” he explained the phenomenon of the ESC mass audience around the world.² At the ESC stage, national identities, myths, images, and norms are continually reconstructed, vocalized, performed, and manifested in the form of the pop music show, where musicians literally compete with one another in the name of their national imagined communities.³ If imagined communities became imaginable due to the print and subsequent media, as Benedict Anderson argued, then anything transmitted online and on a TV song contest “is obviously one of the media that allow the cohering of anonymous crowds into coherent national bodies,” as Peter Rehberg and Mikko Tuhkanen have noted.⁴ “Song becomes a site for branding Europe and the nation, on and off stage,” agreed Dafni Tragaki.⁵ “Even though the ESC has unified Europeans by creating shared cultural references, it has arguably been more successful in forging national icons and refashioning national identities rather than transnational ones,” admitted Dean Vuletic (however, he acknowledged that these identities are often intricate or hybridized).⁶ Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic emphasized the anxiety among Western European media and participants—fueled by “larger tensions within Europe about westward migration, and perceived differing levels of economic and cultural development between Western and non-Western European nations”—between 2000 and 2008, when all ESC winners represented Eastern or Southern Europe.⁷ Katrin Sieg added that during the period of the “eastward expansion of the ESC,” a stylistic shift took place: “Both oldtimers and newcomers have adopted ‘ethnic’ music styles and genres, from turbo folk and new-age Celtic to oriental hip hop.”⁸

The impact of nationalism on music—art, folk, or pop, resulted in its trivialization, Bohlman remarked. “Once leveled, tradition communicates itself as

¹ Philip V. Bohlman, *Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

² Philip V. Bohlman, *Music, Nationalism*, 4.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁴ Peter Rehberg and Mikko Tuhkanen, “Dancing Time: Dissociative Camp and European Synchrony,” *sqo Journal of Queer Studies in Finland* 2, no. 2 (2007): 46.

⁵ Dafni Tragaki, “Introduction,” in *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Dafni Tragaki (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 3.

⁶ Dean Vuletic, *Postwar Europe and the Eurovision Song Contest* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 4.

⁷ Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic, “Introduction: Eurovision and the ‘New’ Europe,” in *Performing the ‘New’ Europe: Identities, Feelings, and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, ed. Karen Fricker and Milija Gluhovic (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

⁸ Katrin Sieg, “Conundrum of Post-Socialist Belonging at the Eurovision Song Contest,” in Fricker and Gluhovic, *Performing the ‘New’ Europe*, 220.

kitsch, as banal love songs at the Eurovision Song Contest.”⁹ But if it’s all about bad music, why do millions of Europeans watch ESC and vote for their favorite?¹⁰ The same features of kitsch and glamour made ESC attractive for the queer communities, which constitute a large part of the contest’s audience despite ESC’s nationalist appeal. “With Eurovision, we do not transcend nationality; rather, Eurovision provides a rare occasion for simultaneously celebrating *both* queer-ness *and* national identity,” Rehberg claimed.”

According to Vuletic, “the ESC always exhibited ‘camp’ aesthetics that made the contest extremely popular in gay culture in Europe”—even before the decriminalization of homosexuality in Western European countries and the rise of gay rights movements.¹² Vuletic referred to the definition of camp by Susan Sontag, who described it as apolitical.¹³ But as Rehberg demonstrated, camp can destabilize established meanings. “At its best, camp functions as a form of queer deconstruction, undercutting the power of heterosexuality to naturalise itself.”¹⁴ Camp turns upside down cultural hierarchies and discloses the artificiality of cultural endeavors as well as gender and national identities. Indeed, Rehberg contended that “with Eurovision, nationality itself turns into camp. . . . Allowing a brief enjoyment of togetherness, in a carnivalesque transgression it celebrates nationality as a pop-cultural guilty pleasure.”¹⁵ Rehberg and Tuhkanen distinguished at least two kinds of camp. The first, “commodity camp,” makes everything visible at once, going straight from the performer to the archive they cites.¹⁶ The second, “dissociative camp,” opens its narrative into unexpected directions and interrupts expectations with something that was already there.¹⁷ According to the authors, Verka at ESC represented the second kind.

In post-Soviet areas, an aesthetics similar to camp is *stiob*, “a form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor.”¹⁸ *Stiob* was based on the overidentification with the object

⁹ Bohlman, *Music, Nationalism*, 11.

¹⁰ Bohlman, 14.

¹¹ Peter Rehberg, “Winning Failure: Queer Nationality at the Eurovision Song Contest,” *sqo Journal of Queer Studies in Finland* 2, no. 2 (2007): 60.

¹² Vuletic, *Postwar Europe*, 78.

¹³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1964), 277.

¹⁴ Rehberg, “Winning Failure,” 63.

¹⁵ Rehberg, 64–65.

¹⁶ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, “Danzing Time,” 49.

¹⁷ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, 51.

¹⁸ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 250.

of mockery, which turned jokes into self-irony. Its affinity toward authoritative symbols, phrases, and rituals that it travestied and exaggerated differentiated it from pure parody. According to Alexei Yurchak, *stiob* was ambiguous: “it cannot be understood simply as a form of resistance to authoritative symbols because it also involves a feeling of affinity and warmth toward them.”¹⁹ It might be scornful as well as supportive, ironic as well as serious, or both at the same time. *Stiob*’s popularity in the late Soviet Union and other socialist countries stemmed from exactly this ambiguity: it was hard to recognize whether one was making fun of authoritative discourse or cherishing it.

In this article, I am interested in camp readings of Ich Troje, Verka Serduchka, and Renia Pączkowska’s songs, performances, and stage personas in the context of Eastern European identities after the end of state socialism.

Ich Troje at Eurovision: National Myths and Borderless Utopia

Ich Troje’s first performance at the Eurovision Song Contest was preceded by controversies about national selections. Even before the eliminations, the news about Ich Troje’s participation in both the Polish and German selections in the same year ignited disputes among the Polish public. In Poland, for the first time, the country’s representative was to be picked through the public preselection organized by national television. On 25 January, at the end of the televised show, Ich Troje was announced as the winner, even though most of the 300.000 votes cast by viewers had not yet been counted. Finally, Ich Troje gained the most votes (31.8%), but rumors that the selections had been corrupted appeared quickly. Many commentators questioned the musical quality of the band. Critics perceived Ich Troje as a cheap and kitschy derivative of 1980s rock. Main radio broadcasters ignored the band and did not play their songs at all, despite the public’s enthusiasm toward Ich Troje: their 2001 album *Ad. 4* and 2002 album *Po piąte... a niech gadają* both gained the status of a diamond record, the only such case in Poland at that time. The group’s mass popularity caused even more uneasiness among critics who realized that they could not impose their taste on the public.²⁰ Despite the wave of attacks on the band in the cultural and music press, voters chose Ich Troje to represent Poland at the 2003 ESC in Riga.

¹⁹ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 250.

²⁰ Michał Wiśniewski, Jacek Łągwa, and Anna Świątczak, *Ich Troje: Biografia* (Warszawa: Zysk i S-ka, 2022), 146, 165.

Later, in March, the group showed up at German eliminations under a slightly changed name, Troje. German vocalist Elli Mücke took the place of Justyna Majkowska, who did not speak German and had already decided to leave the band. They reached the 5th place with the song *Liebe macht Spass*. The show helped promote the band in Germany before the final concert. Ich Troje had little international experience at this point, though they won the Baltic Song Festival in Karlshamn in 2001.

At the Eurovision final in Riga, Ich Troje collected 90 points and reached 7th place in the competition, the second highest in the history of Polish entries. Their lofty protest song *Keine Grenzen / Żadnych granic* (No Borders) brought the vision of a pacifist, self-governing society without any borders, states, races, or wars. Wiśniewski, the band leader, sang that he wished to be an astronaut and look from space at the Earth, where different people lived peacefully, and no divisions happened. He and the female singer Majkowska (who agreed to perform with the band one more time) sang in three languages: Polish, German, and Russian, practicing linguistic internationalism. According to Sieg, this linguistic choice "cites the historic imperialist constellation that must be transcended."²¹ The ploy proved half-successful as Ich Troje gained 12 points from Germany and 10 from Austria, but 0 from Russia (however, 8 from Latvia and Ukraine, concerning post-Soviet countries).

Ich Troje returned to Eurovision in 2006, this time without controversy. The band won the country preselection with *Follow My Heart*, another multilingual song (in Polish, Russian, English, and German), featuring German Eurodance star Real McCoy. The group also had a new female vocalist: Anna Świątczak. Also, two former female singers, Majkowska and Magda Femme, joined the group. In Athens, Ich Troje staged a highly theatricalized, extravagant show, including lush gold costumes, Venice masks, and pyrotechnic effects. Nonetheless, the band failed to qualify for the final. In Poland, the result was widely perceived as a failure.

Ich Troje's entries into Eurovision were criticized for reproducing traditional, patriarchal gender roles. The intentionally international message was also problematic. In the case of *Keine Grenzen / Żadnych granic*, while the lyrics depict a world without borders, states, and wars, the performance was deeply embedded in Polish national mythology and iconography, for example, referencing Artur Grottger's nineteenth-century Polish Romantic paintings of insurgents and their beloved. This kind of paradoxical national internationalism was often found in

²¹ Katrin Sieg, "Cosmopolitan Empire: Central and Eastern Europeans at the Eurovision Song Contest," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 247.

the work of nineteenth-century Polish Romantics, as its ideological underpinnings included the idea of transgressing one's national narrow interests. In the same period, Poles joined struggles and revolutions from Turkey to Haiti, and Poland was depicted as the Christ of Nations. In the context of Poland's accession to the EU, *Keine Grenzen / Żadnych granic* "illustrates a classically universalist, integrative discourse that is counterposed to a past marked by nationalist competition, imperialist aggression and military strife", Sieg contended.²² The band indeed aimed to convince Polish citizens to vote for joining the EU, which happened the following year.²³ According to Sieg, Wiśniewski's costume, jewelry, and a whole image "signal a pop reworking of militaristic codes, yet the politics of this European anthem cannot be reduced to a postmodern camping up of imperialist codes."²⁴

Rather than insisting on the emancipation of Poland (and its Central European neighbors) from the predations of imperialist powers, the song performs an imaginative alignment of Poland with the West, which symbolically dominates and incorporates the East through romantic conquest and familial generation.²⁵

Sieg contended that such discourse "drags in the essentialist divisions between genders and generations which have long fed colonial fantasies."²⁶ However, the author incorrectly claimed *Ich Troje*'s female singer was Marta Wiśniewska, the pregnant wife of Wiśniewski; actually, Majkowska was on the stage. Despite this, Sieg's analysis of gender roles seems accurate on the symbolic level, when she wrote: "the male lead aligns himself with the West, while Slavic languages are feminized."²⁷ Wiśniewski was active, strolling through the scene and gesticulating expressively, while Majkowska stayed passive throughout the performance, with her hand on her belly connoting pregnancy.

The song's highly theatrical, final image infuses the performance with a high chivalry that echoes old and enduring discourses of Eastern European sexual difference: the male singer abruptly kneels down before his lady and leans his forehead against her belly, as she lays her hands on his head. While the romantic drama in *Keine*

²² Sieg, "Cosmopolitan Empire," 250.

²³ Wiśniewski, Łągwa, and Świątczak, *Ich Troje*, 184.

²⁴ Sieg, "Cosmopolitan Empire," 250.

²⁵ Sieg, 250.

²⁶ Sieg, 251.

²⁷ Sieg.

Grenzen / Żadnych granic offers a Polish fantasy of desirability and consummated courtship, with the reformed German-speaking knight paying homage to the Eastern European princess, the chivalry of this romantic image assents to the gendered hierarchy familiar from colonial fantasies—now no longer produced by Germans, but by Poles themselves.²⁸

Such an interpretation has its limits, though. In the case of Troje's cooperation with Mücke's in German preselection and German-language album *Keine Grenzen*, released in 2003 (without commercial success), there was no "Eastern European princess", nor feminization of the Slavic language.

Sieg highlights the religious connotations of Ich Troje's performance and video: white doves, blessing gestures, and other symbols of peace and reconciliation between antagonistic parties. In the context of the Iraq war, the universalist rhetoric could be interpreted even as a vision of Europe united by Christianity against other religions.²⁹ Although Ich Troje turned away from ethnic self-exoticization at the ESC, a popular strategy among Eastern and South-Eastern European countries, the group's internationalist approach remained rooted in the national and religious rhetoric and gender dualism of the performance. In a similar vein, Johan Fornäs claimed:

The narrative locates the unifying erasure of borders not in the present but in a distant future, as a utopian dream and task, thereby implicitly confirming and perhaps even reifying them in the contemporary context.³⁰

Fornäs noted that Ich Troje's entry happened "at a time of a gradual rapprochement in Polish-German relations, unlike Polish-Russian relations," marking the shift of the East-West divide to the Russian border.³¹ For many Russians, the EU enlargement could be seen more as Western Europe's expansion than as the emergence of a future borderless utopia.

Nonetheless, such interpretations are not so obvious when considering other parts of Wiśniewski's career and activities. Far from a political conservative, he screamed "A wszystko to, bo Leszka kocham!" ('All of these, cause I love Leszek!') to Leszek Miller, the leader of the Democratic Left Alliance at the

²⁸ Sieg.

²⁹ Sieg, 252.

³⁰ 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), 204.

³¹ Fornäs, "Euro-Visions," 202.

2001 party convention, and he is openly bisexual and represents a quite bizarre type of masculinity. In the music video from 2000 for *Walczyk bujaj się* (Swing Yourself Waltz), Wiśniewski, half-naked, with female makeup and haircut, gazes seductively into the eye of the camera; the clip ends with a savage orgy scene. In the same year, the group was invited to the popular TV show *Muzyka łączy pokolenia* (Music brings together generations), where Ich Troje played the old schlager *Pamelo, żegnaj* (So long, Pamela) of Tercet Egzotyczny. This time, all members performed as cross-dressers: Femme as a pimp in a suit, Jacek Łągwa as a prudish, unattractive woman, and Wiśniewski as a sex worker in a red skirt. What's more, some fans interpreted Ich Troje's first single *Prawo* (The Law) from 1996 as one of the first LGBT anthems in Poland, partly due to the homoerotic scenes in its music video, an interpretation confirmed by Wiśniewski.³²

In 2007, Wiśniewski cross-dressed as Marie Antoinette for the photo session for *Machina* cultural magazine. In the 2009 comedy *Zamiana* (Conversion), Wiśniewski played a drag queen, Loletta Billas, giving a show in an LGBTQ club. The character of Loletta Billas was to resemble Violetta Villas, a Polish diva of Estrada music in the socialist era. As Loletta Billas Wiśniewski sang *Spójrz prosto w oczy* (Look straight into eyes) from Villas' repertoire. Despite a huge age disparity, Wiśniewski was a friend of Villas in the last years of her life, helping her while she was suffering hard times of poverty and loneliness. In 2003, Wiśniewski and Villas issued a joint album *Walentynkowe hity* (Valentine's Day Hits) comprising tango songs they performed together. Tango, as well as waltz and Estrada music, made an important part of the repertoire of Ich Troje, alongside more contemporary pop-rock. Due to Wiśniewski's interest in theatricality, Ich Troje concerts usually took the form of extravagant shows with many costumes, dancers, pyrotechnics, and light effects—a kind of spectacle that cannot be assigned to one genre or style.

Wiśniewski's ease in adopting different images and identities is confirmed by his cover songs (often rearranged and with Polish lyrics), mostly of German acts such as Matthias Reim, Rosenstolz, and Die Toten Hosen. His cooperation with Reim—joint tours and studio Reim Music Factory, besides many covers—can be perceived as precursors to his collaboration with Danyłko. Wiśniewski's attempts to cover German songs and enter the German music market stemmed from his almost native knowledge of music tastes and rules in this country: he was raised in Germany, where he attended music school. Covering songs of other artists lay at the beginning of Wiśniewski's career. Even before creating

³² Wiśniewski, Łągwa, and Świątczak, *Ich Troje*, 47.

Ich Troje, he and Łagwa launched the first karaoke parties in Poland, where they sang covers night by night to attract the public. In this context, familiar to the Polish audience, what Sieg interpreted as the amplifying of “the heterosexual particularism legible to Polish viewers” in the period of publicly manifested homophobia³³ seems to be a camp performance of gender as a spectacle, acted by the artist keen on genderbending. In the same vein, the theatrical display of national identity can be read as an exposure of its constructed nature, especially within the Eurovision paradox: “ESC entries accommodate the local, the national, and the international, or European, but they can only do this within the strictures of national committees and national broadcasting networks.”³⁴

Verka Serduchka at Eurovision: Post-Soviet *Stiob*

When Verka Serduchka—the drag stage persona of Danylko—performed at the Eurovision stage in 2007, her performance became a big success and an even bigger scandal. It was not the first time Verka Serduchka tried to reach the contest. Danylko had participated in the Ukrainian selections in 2005 but withdrew, officially because of overlapping dates of selections and his tour, and unofficially due to the Ukrainian jury’s aversion to his stage image (the year after the Orange Revolution, the jury selected hip hop act Greenjolly, which was associated with the social protests). Then Serduchka took part in the Russian eliminations but lost out in the semi-finals.³⁵ Joseph James Crescente noticed that the “question of national loyalty” was dismissed by Danylko even before starting in Ukrainian and Russian eliminations for ESC. In the music video for *Ya popala na lyubov* (I Fell in Love), Serduchka was asked by her mother if she would represent Ukraine or Russia in the Eurovision contest. “Verka hesitates amid the banter of her relatives and answers «Kazakhstan,» to which her mother remarks, «*pravil’no*» (that’s the correct choice).”³⁶

In 2007, the combination of jury and public vote picked Serduchka to represent Ukraine with the song *Danzing*, later retitled *Dancing Lasha Tumbai*. The piece was quite different from previous Ukrainian entries, such as Ruslana’s *Wild Dances* and Tina Karol’s *Show Me Your Love* (which exploited, respectively,

³³ Sieg, “Conundrum of Post-Socialist Belonging,” 225.

³⁴ Bohlman, *Music, Nationalism*, 216.

³⁵ Joseph James Crescente, “Performing Post-Sovietness: Verka Serduchka and the Hybridization of Post-Soviet Identity in Ukraine,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2007): 424.

³⁶ Crescente, “Performing Post-Sovietness,” 405.

Hutsul and Cossack folklore), that helped build the country's international image as attractive to the Western gaze: exotic, sexualized, and almost Oriental. Traditional dances, clothes, and customs of the Hutsul and Cossack people were essentialized as almost timeless, archaic cultural relics, somehow not impacted by modern civilization. Furthermore, Ruslana's performance "can be seen as an example of essentialization on several levels," as the project showed the essentialized tradition of Hutsul people that "were already a 'focal point' of folkloric representation in Ukraine," according to Catherine Baker.³⁷ Artificial status of musical Hutsul motifs was acknowledged by Serhy Yekelchuk, who admitted that they "could in fact be references to a generic southeast European folk idiom."³⁸ Baker claimed that, "marginalized regions of Europe maximize their chances of success in the European entertainment marketplace. ... by presenting something exotic and distinctive in an attractively modernized package" for the foreign (Western) gaze that would like to be entertained by the performance of cultural difference.³⁹ Although Ruslana gained success in the Ukrainian market as well as abroad, Yekelchuk pointed out that for people from the central and eastern parts of the country, Hutsul traditions and Ruslana's Ukrainian-English lyrics "must have sounded no less exotic."⁴⁰

Serduchka did not represent any such kind of essentialized national identity that could win for the country the Western interest. On the contrary, she revealed social and cultural divisions in Ukraine and incongruencies of the national identity. Thus, the decision to nominate her was widely criticized in the country. The act was perceived as kitschy and vulgar. From the Ukrainian nationalists' point of view, "the character was seen as denigrating Ukrainians on multiple levels—their folk culture, their linguistic identity, and the national feminine ideal."⁴¹ Taras Chornovil, Ukrainian MP, even called to boycott Eurovision, claiming that Serduchka as a representative of Ukraine would damage the country's image: "All these hermaphrodites have never been accepted anywhere. Therefore I think that this will be a serious embarrassment factor and the world will see us as complete idiots."⁴²

³⁷ Catherine Baker, "Wild Dances and Dying Wolves: Simulation, Essentialization, and National Identity at the Eurovision Song Contest," *Popular Communication* 6, no. 3 (2008): 175.

³⁸ Serhy Yekelchuk, "What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture? The Strange Case of Verka Serduchka," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 44 (2010): 223.

³⁹ Baker, "Wild Dances and Dying Wolves," 177.

⁴⁰ Yekelchuk, "What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?", 223.

⁴¹ Yekelchuk, 228.

⁴² Paul Jordan, "From Ruslana to Gaitana: Performing 'Ukrainianness' in the Eurovision Song Contest," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 2, no. 1 (2015): 127.

Serduchka performed on stage in a silver costume with a five-pointed star on her hat, resembling a Soviet-era train attendant, or a middle-aged woman of rural ancestry—a character Danylko used for years in his television show and videos. Other musicians and dancers wore silver and gold military- or Pioneer-style costumes; there was even a disco ball and an accordion on the stage. The song presented a combination of Eurodance and Soviet Estrada music; sung in Ukrainian, Russian, German, and English, it brought a carnivalesque atmosphere but also a political dispute ensuing from the phonetic resemblance of “Lasha Tumbai” to “Russia goodbye.” Serduchka insisted that the phrase was a Mongolian expression for whipped cream, but the Mongolian Embassy in Moscow denied that statement. Further political connotations were made with the shout “Maidan dancing!” (in Ukrainian) at the end of the lyrics—an obvious reference to Maidan Square, the place of the mass protests. As a result, according to Paul Jordan, “pro-Russian Ukrainians and Russian nationalists” perceived in the show “Ukrainian nationalism at its most vulgar. In Ukraine, nationalists rejected Serduchka as a parody of the Ukrainian nation,”⁴³ despite the fact, that it’s hard to find any part of Serduchka’s performance, costume, sounds or lyrics, that could be interpreted as offensive toward Ukrainian national symbols and traditions.⁴⁴ In Russia, consequently, Danylko was banned from television, and many of his performances were cancelled. Despite that, Verka received a lot of votes from former Soviet and socialist countries, including 12 points from the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Poland, 10 from Belarus and Georgia, and 8 from Estonia, Lithuania, and Russia. She lost only to Marija Serifovic from Serbia. Serduchka’s huge popularity among Eastern European voters worried many in the West, who complained about “bloc voting.”⁴⁵

As Gluhovic observed, Ukraine was among those Eastern European countries that “have mobilized significant resources. . . . to use the competition as a vehicle to construct and represent themselves to the rest of Europe and the world.”⁴⁶ Serduchka’s self-ironical, camp manifestation of Sovietness and post-Sovietness was perceived by part of Ukrainian elites as a threat to the country’s new, independent national identity and its unique brand, which interweaves local folklore with European values. Marko Pavlyshyn even called Serduchka’s performance “a sad

⁴³ Jordan, “From Ruslana to Gaitana,” 128.

⁴⁴ Yekelchik, “What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine’s Pop Culture?,” 229.

⁴⁵ Crescente, “Performing Post-Sovietness,” 427.

⁴⁶ Mililija Gluhovic, “Sing for Democracy: Human Rights and Sexual Discourse in the Eurovision Song Contest,” in Fricker and Gluhovic, *Performing the ‘New’ Europe*, 203.

parody of Ukraine's European aspirations."⁴⁷ But as Galina Miazhevich contended, "the show's role in rethinking sexual freedom after the fall of the USSR and the geopolitical status of contemporary Ukraine should not be underestimated."⁴⁸ Based on the stereotyped image of a female train attendant, Serduchka's character is at the same time glamorous and "openly explores (by using deviant excess sexuality) 'taboo' issues."⁴⁹ Brian James Baer noticed that in Russia, Serduchka's Eurovision entry inspired a poem by Ksenofont Prirodnyi (a nickname meaning "natural") published in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* and titled "Net, ne isportit appetit nam Ukrain-skij transvetit!" (No, You Won't Spoil Our Appetite, You Ukrainian Transvestite!):

The first verse of the eight-verse poem, which one can hear recited on the newspaper's Web site, ends with the lines "I'd prefer a hundred times to watch a boxing match / Than this open gay parade" [*Smotret' priiatnei boks mne sto krat, / Chem etot otkrovennyi gei-parad*!]⁵⁰

Pavlyshyn belittled Verka's gender-bending as "an exercise in clowning."⁵¹ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, on the contrary, underlined the uncanniness of Verka's character: "as her futuristic costume and awkward dance movements suggest more a mechanical essence than a sentient individual, she becomes, in the precise sense in which Freud uses the term, uncannily undecidable."⁵² Miazhevich claimed that the mask of sexually excessive, insolent Serduchka enables Danylko not to cling to the norms and values of only one nation or culture.

Playing with the controversial themes of post-Soviet identity and searching for new post-Soviet aesthetics, Serduchka's act signals the transformation of cultural memories and "talks" to a large former Soviet Union space.⁵³

In Helsinki, using German language and wearing military-like uniforms, Serduchka made fun of the legacy of World War II, once sacralized in the Soviet

⁴⁷ Marko Pavlyshyn, "Ruslana, Serduchka, Jamala: National Self-Imaging in Ukraine's Eurovision Entries," in *Eurovision: Identity and the International Politics of the Eurovision Song Contest since 1956*, ed. Julie Kalman et al. (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 135.

⁴⁸ Galina Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding Off-line and Online: Verka Serduchka at the Eurovision Song Contest," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 8 (2012): 1512.

⁴⁹ Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding," 1512.

⁵⁰ Brian James Baer, *Other Russias: Homosexuality and the Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 45–46.

⁵¹ Pavlyshyn, "Ruslana, Serduchka, Jamala," 136.

⁵² Rehberg and Tuhkanen, "Dancing Time," 52.

⁵³ Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding," 1513.

Union. Also, from a Western perspective, Verka's screaming to dance in German recalled periods of the German militaristic politics and conquests, and their catastrophic consequences for Europe. What at the first glance seemed a playful call to start a party, soon "becomes indistinguishable from the demand for the synchronous, orderly movement of a collective body, such as one finds enacted in marching orders."⁵⁴ Rehberg and Tuhkanen argued further that "Verka's *Eins! Zwei! Tanzen!* is a delirious repetition of this command for Europeans to get along and to 'enjoy themselves.'"⁵⁵ European demands of unity in such a "queer mirror" held by Verka appear to be quite hard to differentiate from Nazi Germany's fantasies of European purity.⁵⁶

At the same time, Serduchka made caricatural visual and sonic references to Soviet discotheques and rural parties. But the Western norms regulating sexual expression and individual freedoms were mocked as well, when the camp cross-dresser with "69" on his back slapped female members of the team on the stage. According to Miazhevich, such a "grotesque" representation of Eastern Europeanness disrupted "a predictable associative chain of fixed sexual identities and exotic sexual availability", typical for many Eurovision acts from the region.⁵⁷ Serduchka parodied "Western imaginings of an exotic, yet sexually promiscuous East", but also subverted and displaced the post-Soviet symbolic order, finally offering even more absurdity as a result of the conflict between different meanings.⁵⁸ Not being for or against anything, Serduchka found carnivalesque zones within the post-Soviet and post-socialist landscape, e.g., by alluding to popular Soviet comedy of errors, *Brilliantovaya ruka* (Diamond Arm) from 1968.⁵⁹ Domestic publics could feel "a comforting sense of superiority" due to her "kitsch, self-ironic homosexual eroticism" that misled Western fans, as Miazhevich claimed. By the same token, the act gathered votes from the West for a new "progressive" post-communist image.⁶⁰ Rehberg reminded that by projecting queerness (often equated with kitsch) on the Eastern European acts at ESC, Western countries stabilize their "straight" national identity, with Verka as an exemplification of the Eastern, kitschy, queer other.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, "Dancing Time," 53.

⁵⁵ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, 54.

⁵⁶ Rehberg and Tuhkanen.

⁵⁷ Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding," 1514.

⁵⁸ Miazhevich.

⁵⁹ Pavlyshyn, "Ruslana, Serduchka, Jamala," 138.

⁶⁰ Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding," 1521.

⁶¹ Peter Rehberg, "Taken by a Stranger: How Queerness Haunts Germany at Eurovision," in Fricker and Gluhovic, *Performing the 'New' Europe*, 184–186.

However, as Crescente contended, despite Danylko being described in the West as a drag queen, the Ukrainian public viewed him as an actor playing a woman's role. "It is not Verka's sexuality that is cited as the reason for her controversy among Ukrainians, but what she represents in the form of performance and language."⁶² Serduchka's usage of *surzhyk*, a mix of Ukrainian and Russian languages popular in the lower class of Ukrainian society, especially in central and eastern parts of the country, is far more provocative due to the meaning of the proper Ukrainian language as a marker of the country's new identity based on ethnicity. "Perhaps unwittingly, Danylko presented his audiences with a carnivalesque, liberating take on the very real cultural and political tensions caused by the imposition of linguistic correctness," Yekelchuk pondered.⁶³ That usage of *surzhyk* made Verka's persona "a runaway hit,"⁶⁴ and brought her closer to people than national elites. As a train attendant from the lower class, speaking *surzhyk* and behaving boorishly, Serduchka was, at the same time, both Ukrainian and post-Soviet, performing both identities simultaneously to a post-Soviet audience and affirming this ambiguity. As Crescente stated:

Nostalgia for the status quo of the past in tandem with political ideas for the future contributes to a present-day hybridized identity in Ukraine. One person can have elements of Soviet, Russian and Ukrainian culture—or a hybridized mix of all three—and still identify with the idea of Ukraine as a state. Verka Serduchka performs the idea of post-Soviet-ness in Ukraine by unabashedly adapting multifaceted elements of identity, and employing them to revel in the carnival of post-Soviet life.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, Yekelchuk pointed out the shift in Serduchka's character from the middle of the 90s to the end of the decade: "If the early Serduchka was a rude and plainly-dressed woman usually wearing a man's jacket and mixing Ukrainian and Russian in equal proportion, Serduchka the show host spoke mostly Russian with occasional Ukrainisms and was dressed as a kitschy female pop star."⁶⁶ As a pop star, Verka very rarely used *surzhyk*; actually, from her first album *Kha-ra-sho!* (2003), most of the lyrics were in Russian, not *surzhyk* or Ukrainian.

According to Miazhevich, Serduchka's carnivalesque post-Soviet hybrid aesthetics is close to the aesthetic of *stiob*, the late-socialist phenomena that "allows

⁶² Crescente, "Performing Post-Sovietness," 408.

⁶³ Yekelchuk, "What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?," 219.

⁶⁴ Yekelchuk, 218.

⁶⁵ Crescente, "Performing Post-Sovietness," 429.

⁶⁶ Yekelchuk, "What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?," 219.

the singer to 'get away' with ridiculing the sacralised World War II legacy."⁶⁷ In the *stiob's* framework, Serduchka mocked past and contemporary authoritative discourses while still being emotionally attached to them. Rehberg and Tuhkanen described Verka's ESC entry as an example of the dissociative camp, which "dissociates and critiques contemporary European narratives of the continent's past" but also "opens spaces for different futurities."⁶⁸ Analogously, Yekelchik analyzed Serduchka as a jester, who "makes audiences laugh at their own cultural stereotypes and prejudices," even though she shared a rather positive attitude towards Ukrainian folk culture.⁶⁹ This resulted in the public's ambivalent reception and mixed feelings toward Serduchka's stand on post-Soviet-ness, Ukrainian identity, and the national image at Eurovision.

Renia Pączkowska: Polish Covers of *Stiob*

According to Wiśniewski, Danylko sought to make contact with him as early as 2001. But because it was a busy time for Ich Troje, the band's manager did not accept any new cooperation.⁷⁰ Wiśniewski met Danylko a few years later. They made friends and cheered each other at the Eurovision, even though they never met on the ESC stage: Ich Troje performed in 2003 and 2006, while Verka Serduchka showed up in 2007. It was quite understandable that two extravagant individuals from neighboring countries, both fond of excess and genderbending, would want to collaborate on a joint project.

It seemed that the suitable time came in 2005. In those days, after Ich Troje's short break-up, Wiśniewski and Łągwa recorded a few new versions of their hits with lyrics in Russian, *Powiedz* (Tell Me) among them. Musicians planned to enter the Russian market, but they did not have a contract with a music company with a branch in Russia, and finally, the project was cut short. Soon, Ich Troje returned and became involved in the election campaign of the anti-establishment Samoobrona party, which was particularly popular in rural peripheries. The lofty anthem *Dokąd idziesz, Polsko?* (Where You're Going, Poland?) became Samoobrona's hymn. Just as in the case of *Keine Grenzen*, the song and its music video effectively reproduced Polish national myths and imagery. Joining the campaign of the protest party formed by the indebted farmers brought a new

⁶⁷ Miazhevich, "Ukrainian Nation Branding," 1514.

⁶⁸ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, "Danzing Time," 56–57.

⁶⁹ Yekelchik, "What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?," 218.

⁷⁰ Wiśniewski, Łągwa, and Świątczak, *Ich Troje*, 261.

controversy to the band, while tabloids focused on Wiśniewski's falling-apart marriage with singer and dancer Mandaryna. The escape for the idol became alcohol and a new side project: Renia Pączkowska. The nickname stemmed from the colloquial phrase for masturbation. For Danylko, the collaboration with a well-known Polish artist offers a chance to reach beyond Ukraine, Russia, and other post-Soviet countries and find a new audience in Poland.

Renia Pączkowska—that is, Wiśniewski in drag—sang covers of Verka's songs, in some cases with the participation of the Verka. The entire persona of Renia was created by Wiśniewski, including the idea that she should have had a hen (actually present in photos) called Czesia GrzebienóŹka.⁷¹ Wiśniewski, together with Danylko and his team, recorded and produced the new material, partly in Kyiv, partly in different locations (some recordings were made spontaneously). The album *1, 2, 3... Próba mikrofonu* consists of 11 original tracks and 4 additional remixes of *Hop Hop Hop*, the only single. All music was composed by Danylko, while most of the lyrics were written by Wiśniewski, with a few exceptions by Marta Sprzączak and Karolina Zawiasa or Sprzączak and Wiśniewski. All lyrics were in Polish, even the parts sung by Serdushka. Ukrainian musicians were enrolled to play the sessions, while Danylko, Wiśniewski, and Danylko's manager Yuriy Nikitin took charge of the production of recordings. The video for *Hop Hop Hop* was directed by Semen Gorov and shot in Kyiv as well. Despite some squabbles—Wiśniewski mentioned that while he had paid for the production, Nikitin was reluctant to issue the album—the process was joyful and resulted in extraordinary content.

Nonetheless, *1, 2, 3... Próba mikrofonu* turned out to be a commercial failure and got little critical attention. The album was issued in December 2005 by EMI Music Poland (earlier, Ich Troje were associated with Universal), but even such a professional company could not help promote the record. Broadcasters were not interested in playing such a celebration of what was perceived as bad taste. There was no promotional tour; only incidental appearances, such as in Słubice in 2005, where Renia came on stage for Wiśniewski's birthday concert. Renia also showed up at the Złote Dzioby (Golden Beaks) awards gala organized by Radio WAWA in Warsaw and at the 4th Polish Music Videos' Festival Yach Film, where *Hop Hop Hop* won the Cytryna (Lemon) award for most kitschy clip. For most of the year, Wiśniewski was busy performing with Ich Troje during Samoobrona's campaign, then working on the 7th album of Ich Troje and preparing for the second attempt at Eurovision.

⁷¹ Wiśniewski, Łągwa, and Świątczak, *Ich Troje*, 262.

Cover songs can bring new or modify meanings to the original piece. "Some cover songs explore cultural avenues that the original song only hinted at," Ray Padgett argued.⁷² Covers may find a new audience for an old song and redirect the reception to a different set of problems. Likewise, Dai Griffiths emphasizes that "covers illustrate identity in motion," involving crossings and comparisons of gender and sexuality, race, class, nation, or language.⁷³ According to the author, one may categorize cover songs as a "rendition," that is, "a 'straight' cover with little alteration," and a "transformation," "being a more determined claim on the original."⁷⁴ Since 1, 2, 3... *Próba mikrofonu* was not just a cover album bringing popular tunes from Ukraine to Poland—it was comprehensive and based on a joint partnership project by Wiśniewski and Danylo and their teams—the question about shifts in meanings and popular reception became especially relevant. Primarily, what of Verka Serduchka's post-Soviet imagery and camp sense of humor did remain in Renia Pączkowska's versions, and how did it affect the Polish audience?

The opening *Hop Hop Hop*, though concerning the same subject as the original song by Serduchka (the misery of not being loved), slightly differed in lyrics: Serduchka's was narrative, telling a story of a desperate girl who cannot find love, while Pączkowska delved into abstract musings and memories of an unfaithful relationship. Choruses and arrangements were almost the same, though, as well as the concepts of music video, in both cases referring to a village feast or wedding. Similarly, subsequent *Kochaj mnie* (Love Me), a cover song of *Lyubi menya*, was based on the same concept, but Wiśniewski employed a different set of comparisons. *Devochki's* (Girls) cover was more accurate, but a bit romantic: Verka's lyrics were about the treachery and shameless nature of (both, homo- and heterosexual) love that comes unexpectedly, while in Renia's *Dziewczynki i chłopaczki* (Girls and Boys), love (also in homo- and heterosexual case) was frantic, just like the world was ending. Despite that, the choruses and orchestrations were quite the same. Covers of *Chita Drita* and *Novogodnyaya* (New Year's Song) were also similar to their blueprint, with only minor differences in lyrics (though in Poland the title *Chita Drita* does not ring a bell, while in Ukraine it was a folk dance). All of these are renditions in Griffiths' conceptualization.

⁷² Ray Padgett, *Cover Me: The Stories Behind the Greatest Cover Songs of All Time* (New York: Sterling, 2017), epub.

⁷³ Dai Griffiths, "Cover Versions and the Sound of Identity in Motion," in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), 51.

⁷⁴ Griffiths, "Cover Versions," 52.

However, in other songs, important changes were made, e.g., in *Miłość jest grą* (Love Is a Game), Wiśniewski inserted a parody of the Polish prewar schlager *Miłość ci wszystko wybaczy* (Love Will Forgive You Everything) by Hanka Ordonówna. Furthermore, *Puk Puk Puk* presented a counter story to *Tuk Tuk Tuk* by Verka: the theme of the latter lyrics was getting in love and waiting for a date, the former's narrative depicted a miserable situation of two people who, despite mutual affection, only hurt each other. The message of *Bawimy się jak damy* (We Party Like Ladies), the next song on the album, sung together by Renia and Verka, was that partying together is better than sitting alone, desperately waiting and dreaming of love, the same as *My Festivalem* by Verka. But Renia made the song more cringe-worthy by adding the phrase 'like ladies' and shouting in the final: "wszystkie dziewczynki, ręce w górę" ("all the girls, hands up"), "i teraz chłopaczki dochodzą" ("and now boys come"), and "a teraz obojniaki" ("and now hermaphrodites"). In two cover versions of *Lyuta Bdzhilka* (Angry Bee), pop *Pszczółka* (Bee) and Eurodance *Pszczółka tańczy* (Bee Dances), Renia made more sexual allusions but also omitted Verka's reference to the socialist national holiday of May Day. *Lyuta Bdzhilka* was a rare case where Verka switched between Ukrainian and *surzhyk*, where the latter was performed as a "deviation" from the first;⁷⁵ the linguistic play was also lost in translation. The last song on the record, *Ty na Zachód, ja na Wschód* (You toward West, Me toward East), was a cover of Verka and Iryna Bilyk *Ty na sever, ya na yug* (You toward North, Me toward South), composed and written by Bilyk. Although the song told a story of a farewell between two lovers, in the context of Polish-Ukrainian cooperation, the shift from a North-South to a West-East axis in the title seems significant. The album ends with four club remixes of *Hop Hop Hop*, an apparent attempt to make the song a smash.

Lyrics written by Wiśniewski and his colleagues are more or less close to the original, sometimes even more frivolous and nasty. However, concerning Verka's post-Soviet-ness, they are more politically correct, as evidenced by the omission of the May Day mention. References to the socialist past remain only in the sonic dimension: a range of folk-pop, disco, Eurodance, and old-time Estrada music, quite the same as in Verka's works. As far as the linguistic side is concerned, there is no Polish equivalent of *surzhyk*, so Wiśniewski tries to imitate the provincial manner of speaking. Acknowledgments and other texts on the album's cover are written in a mix of Polish, Ukrainian, and English words, though such linguistic jokes do not challenge the national identity in Poland in

⁷⁵ Yekelchik, "What Is Ukrainian about Ukraine's Pop Culture?," 226.

a comparable way to the public usage of *surzhyk* in Ukraine. As Griffiths put it, language is one of the major limits on “coverability”.⁷⁶ Renia’s village accent is consistent with her image present in photos and *Hop Hop Hop* video: a middle-aged woman in traditional clothes, with long blond braid and wreath, but also sunglasses and red lipstick, as she wants to look attractive. Similar to Verka, Renia parties, drinks a lot, seeks love affairs, and behaves in an excessive way. Some of her songs are preceded by couplets and jokes made by Paweł ‘Koñjo’ Konnak, a poet, performer, and showman who, once, led a lot of Ich Troje’s concerts. ‘Koñjo’ brought to the project his absurdist sense of humor, enhancing the act’s carnivalesque, cringe-worthy frames.

Discussion and Conclusions

While the collaboration between Renia Pączkowska and Verka Serduchka was based on friendship and equal positions, the effect differed from what Serduchka presented in her previous shows and videos. Renia deployed similar camp aesthetics but cut out post-Soviet or post-socialist identity markers that were crucial for the disruptive ambiguity of Verka’s work. While it would be difficult to find Polish equivalent for *surzhyk*, besides the problems with cultural translation, there were also political ones. Rehberg and Tuhkanen contended, that “Verka produces for us a cover version, of sorts, of the idea of Europe,” that “cannot be reduced to a damning critique, a scandal-mongering exposé or a sovereign dismissal” but open spaces for other, different prospect of European futurities.⁷⁷ It is important then to see what Renia covers covered of Verka cover of the idea of Europe.

As Anna Zawadzka argued, after 1989, the Polish social sciences established the anticommunist paradigm, resulting in the erasure of the idea of social class from public discourse, discrediting post-Marxist theories, and reducing the history of socialism in Poland to the frames of totalitarianism or some alien (usually Jewish), demonic interferences.⁷⁸ Any attempts at researching the socialist modernization and emancipation processes had been marginalized. In 2005, the opening of the Warsaw Uprising Museum and the right-wing politics of memory offensive further strengthened the monolithic, anticommunist

⁷⁶ Griffiths, “Cover Versions,” 60.

⁷⁷ Rehberg and Tuhkanen, “Dancing Time,” 55.

⁷⁸ Anna Zawadzka, *Więcej niż stereotyp: „Żydokomuna” jako wzór kultury polskiej* (Warszawa: Instytut Slawistyki PAN, 2023), 205–206.

basis of Polish national identity. In such a context, it would be risky to transfer Verka's post-Soviet-ness to the Polish pop culture and articulate nostalgia for the people's republic. Therefore, Renia limited the expression of post-socialist nostalgia to sonic and visual codes: village clothes and accent, Estrada music, social rituals of vodka drinking, and festivities in the countryside. It was campy for sure, but not exactly a *stiob*. Regarding sex and gender dimension, Renia openly enjoyed love and sex affairs, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. However, within the frames of a carnivalized world turned upside down, her rude behavior can be easily infantilized as not really challenging social norms. Avoiding any references to the authoritative discourse, the act did not induce ideological or political controversies.

Griffiths remarked that even a rendition, "a 'straight' cover with little alteration, can alter meaning simply because the historical or cultural context of the performance or its recording changes."⁷⁹ In the case of Renia Pączkowska, the covers' lyrics and arrangements were quite close to the originals, but exactly the shortage of post-Soviet or post-socialist context, so important for Verka Serduchka, frames the act more with the carnivalesque absurdity than *stiob* aesthetics. While both Verka and Renia refused to reproduce legitimate national identities, the first problematized it by playing with Soviet and Western histories and ideologies, while the second played with stereotypical images of so-called backward, often rural, parts of the Polish ethnoscape.⁸⁰

Renia's character could become more challenging if it were to be developed. Her image and popularity suffered from a shortage of visual and performative dimensions: videos, photo sessions, TV appearances, live shows, etc. Verka's persona has been built for years in television, the internet, and live shows, so people in the former Soviet republics were familiar with her. Ich Troje gathered their extraordinary popularity in Poland thanks to highly theatricalized concerts, music videos, and regular meetings with fans. Renia, on the contrary, had only a few promotional photos, one video, and a small number of live cameos. Wiśniewski shortly abandoned her persona and jumped into other projects. Soon, she became forgotten by the audience, except for the core of Ich Troje fandom and LGBTQ milieus, but even within queer communities, the act had limited publicity. According to Wiśniewski, Renia was a blueprint for Sławomir, a popular musician and showman who merges rock with disco polo and plays

⁷⁹ Griffiths, "Cover Versions," 52.

⁸⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 33.

with camp images.⁸¹ While the comparison may be accurate, Renia employed Verka's instrumentations and arrangements almost without changes, not even trying to modify them to sound closer to disco polo, a genre extremely popular in small towns and villages of the Polish countryside. Perhaps shifting music genre closer to disco polo would make Renia more attractive—or irritating—for Polish listeners.

Back to the main question of this inquiry, about the alternative prospects of national identities offered by Verka and Renia, the answer seems to be ambivalent. On the one hand, Verka and Renia's critique of cultural hierarchies, gender norms, social behaving, and linguistic correctness provide at least an open door for a set of different features, e.g. affirming folk culture of lower class, enjoying sexual affairs with persons of the same or other sex, and embracing post-socialist past as well as belief in Europe where neighbor do not have to be an enemy. On the other hand, one can easily pacify all of that as carnivalesque cross-dressing and pure absurdity, where no meaning is serious. But camp works exactly this way: by being "serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."⁸² And what could be more camp and queer than the pathetic commercial failure of Renia Pączkowska, the project so meticulously envisioned by Wiśniewski?⁸³ Regarding national identity, Rehberg pointed to the impossibility of staging "a properly gendered performance representing country appropriately" in a frames of a pop song format. "Yet, this very same discrepancy opens up the possibility of camp in the first place. The best performances are the ones that acknowledge the inevitable failure of this demand by translating it into campy entertainment."⁸⁴ If camp lies in disclosing the very failure of any true performance of national, gender, or even European identity, Renia and Verka, working and losing together, should be perceived as its earnest champions.



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⁸¹ Wiśniewski, Łągwa, and Świątczak, *Ich Troje*, 267.

⁸² Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 288.

⁸³ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

⁸⁴ Rehberg, "Winning Failure," 65.

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