New Perspectives on Imagology

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# New Perspectives
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# Transnationalizing National Characterization: Meta-Images and the Centre-Periphery Dynamics in Spain and the South Slavic Region

*Josip Kešić*

## Abstract

This article compares two similar yet never compared cases of intra-European othering: Spain and the South Slavic region. Their common denominator is what I call the *Periphery Problem*: a hierarchical cultural difference between Europe's symbolic centre (Western Europe) and its exotic peripheries. Using paradigmatic examples intertextually linked to Prosper Mérimée, this article focuses both on the centre (exemplified by Mérimée), and the peripheries' recent responses to Mérimée through *meta-images* (your image of others' image of you). The structural commonalities in characterization and the entanglements of internal and external images show that national characterization in Europe is profoundly a *transnational* phenomenon.

## 1       Introduction

One of imagology's methodological assumptions, as outlined by Joep Leerssen in "Imagology: History and Method" (2007, 29), concerns its fundamentally transnational dimension:

> The study of national images is in and of itself a comparative enterprise: it addresses cross-national relations rather than national identities. Likewise, patterns of national characterization will stand out most clearly when studied supranationally as a multinational phenomenon. Certain imagined moral-characterological oppositions are nationally unspecific

and can be encountered in many different cases: northern-cerebral vis-à-vis southern-sensuous, peripheral-timeless vis-à-vis central-modern, or western-individualistic-active vis-à-vis oriental-collective-passive. This indicates that national characterizations are often specific instances and combinations of generic moral polarities, and that our way of thinking in terms of "national characters" boils down to an ethnic-political distribution of role patterns in an imagined anthropological landscape. It is in this comparatist aspect that imagology holds out a challenge and a promise for future research.

In other words, national characterization is not only inherently relational and therefore multinational, it is also often nationally unspecific and should therefore be studied comparatively. These theoretical premises are the starting point of this article that focuses on what I call the *Periphery Problem*. The Periphery Problem is a discursively constructed perception and invocation of cultural, civilizational, and temperamental differences within Europe. It is fundamentally predicated on the distinction between Europe's symbolic centre and its peripheries. Where Western Europe embodies Europe's core attributes (Leerssen 2021), the peripheries are often reduced to their relative lack of Europeanness.

The Periphery Problem can be observed in a great variety of historical periods and geographic contexts across Europe. This article compares two similar yet hardly ever compared cases of intra-European Othering: Spain and the South Slavic region.[1] More precisely, this article looks at how these peripheral countries are represented both from the outside (i.e. the centre) and from the inside. Although the peripheries hold a relatively subaltern position in the asymmetric power relations inherent to processes of representation, they are still agents actively positioning themselves vis-à-vis the European centre. This positioning occurs not only through the articulation of self-images—which always explicitly or implicitly involve hetero-images—but also through the articulation of *meta-images*. Coined by Hercules Millas, meta-images can be defined as "imputing to Others the way how we think that they look at Us" (Leerssen 2016, 24). The very act of articulating meta-images should be regarded as a distinct mode of positioning. Moreover, the concept is useful in understanding how and why "intellectuals from Eastern Europe [and Spain alike, J.K.] had to respond to images and formulas devised in Western Europe" (Wolff 1994, 373; see also Todorova [1997] 2009, 61). Such responses,

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1  Explicit imagological comparisons between Spain and the South Slavic are rare, brief, and general (e.g. Klobucka 1997, 235; Sekeruš 2007, 235).

as this article will illustrate, often consist of entanglements of meta-, self-, and hetero-images.

By comparing these entanglements in two cases, this article complements existing cultural research. Generally, cultural scholarship has been limited to one direction within a single centre–periphery relationship, that is, how a periphery perceives the centre, *or*, how the centre imagines one periphery (e.g. Hammond 2010; Milutinović 2011; Coenen 2013; Venegas 2018). This article looks not only at two peripheries but also how both are imagined from the inside *and* from the outside. Employing a comparative approach to the Periphery Problem—not as a unidirectional process but as a multidirectional dynamic—enhances our imagological understanding of transnational dimensions of image formation. The Periphery Problem is illustrated by a sample of paradigmatic and canonical source material intertextually linked to the figure of Prosper Mérimée, a transnational "nodal point" (Leerssen 2012a) where images of various European regions converge. In the next section, Mérimée's depictions of Spain and the South Slavic region are briefly discussed, followed by the cultural responses from both peripheries, with a particular focus on the peripheries' meta-images.

## 2        Images from the Centre

Prosper Mérimée's most well-known work is a literary thematization of Spain, *Carmen* (1845), turned into a global opera evergreen by Georges Bizet in 1875. The novella starts with a French narrator recounting his journey through southern Spain in the early nineteenth century. Initially undertaken with the purpose of archaeological and historical research, his journey revolves around encounters with two exotic, violent, and passionate characters: the soldier-turned-outlaw-murderer Don José and the seductive Gypsy outlaw Carmen. Carmen is imbued with "a strange and savage beauty [...] her eyes were at once voluptuous and fierce [...] eyes of a Gypsy, eyes of a wolf" (Mérimée [1845/1847] 2006, 24).[2] A major part of the novella is about Don José's journey from the north (Basque Country) to the south (Andalusia). Don José's geographic displacement corresponds with the increase and progression of passion and violence through seduction, infatuation, banditry, and—finally—multiple murders, all due to his involvement with Carmen. The more Don

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2   "C'était une beauté étrange et sauvage [...] Ses yeux [...] avaient une expression à la fois voluptueuse et farouche [...] Oeil de bohémien, oeil de loup." All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

José is exposed to Carmen's influence, the worse it gets for him, in contrast to the French scholar/anonymous narrator who remains the unchanged personification of superior civilization. That is why Mérimée's book shifts at the end from an adventure narrative to a scholarly (philological, historical, and anthropological) discourse on the distinctiveness of the Gypsies' origin, customs, and race.

Less known is the fact that the exoticism and narrative techniques in *Carmen* were already present in Mérimée's earlier book that deals with the South Slavic region. *La Guzla, ou Choix de poesies illyriques, recueillies dans la Dalmatie, la Bosnie, La Croatie et l'Hertzegowine* (1827) includes both an adventure narrative and scholarly essays on the local customs and the natives' character. Narrated from a first-person perspective, the narrative revolves around a protagonist who travelled through the Illyrian region populated by the uncouth and uncivilized Morlachs.[3] His partly Morlach background and the intimate knowledge of and experience with the region enabled him to find and translate the allegedly authentic local oral poetry presented in the book.[4] As in *Carmen*, Mérimée's 1827 book invokes the civilizational difference between the European centre (France) and its periphery (Illyrian region) through the quasi-colonial encounter between characters who metonymically function as representatives of their respective collectives. The main character is Hyacinthe Maglanovitch, a lazy, drunk local bard with a violent personal history who accompanies himself with a typically local one-string instrument (*gusle*) when performing the indigenous folk songs. In line with *La Guzla*'s general depiction of Morlachs as a "savage people," the bard's "cry or rather scream resembled a wounded wolf's" (1827, xi)[5] and his eyes had an expression of "savage beauty" (1827, 11).[6] Most of the folk songs performed by Maglanovitch and eventually translated by the narrator revolve around violent and passionate conflicts between either Morlachs themselves or Morlachs and the invading Ottomans. For both the anthropological and poetic aspects of the Morlach culture in his literary hoax, Mérimée strongly relied on Alberto Fortis's *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (1774). Fortis's travel account played a crucial role in the European literary "discovery" of the

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3   The term Morlach had been in vogue in the nineteenth century to denote the Slavic populations in present-day Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia, later replaced by South Slavs/Yugoslavs. Illyria is the geographic equivalent of this supranational aggregate, also used by the French administration to name the region under its rule (1809–1814).

4   Shortly after the publication, Mérimée admitted that most of the poems were his own fabrications.

5   "le chanteur pousse un grand cri ou plutôt un hurlement, semblable à celui d'un loup blesse."

6   "ne expression de beauté sauvage."

South Slavic region, mainly due to the extraordinary popularity of the ballad "Hasanaginica," also included in Mérimée's *La Guzla* (Leerssen 2012b).

Mérimée's primitivist imagery applied to both Spain and the South Slavic region is primarily invoked through the main characters, Carmen and Maglanovitch, both synecdochally standing for their region and peoples at large. His works also employ the much older conflation of civilization with urbanism, and primitivism with rurality or nature. Urban settings are either avoided, merely mentioned, or employed as a picturesque background of phenomena and peoples that are more deeply associated with uncouth spaces where the supernatural and/or the immoral prevail. Another structural similarity between how Spain and the South Slavic region are represented is the centrality of outlaws, in *Carmen* as Gypsy bandits and in *La Guzla* as Hajduks, described by Mérimée as "a variation of bandits" (1827, 6).[7] A more general similarity has to do with Orientalization.[8] Spain has been associated, compared, or even equated with the Orient by an impressive number of famous cultural producers, such as Voltaire, Hugo, Stendhal, Irving, and Ford, to name just a few (Colmeiro 2002; Charnon-Deutsch 2004; Domínguez 2006; Steingress 2006; Venegas 2018). Where the Moorish past played a central role in the Orientalization of Spain, the Ottoman past has had the same function with regard to images of the South Slavic region. Telling are the phrases used in the West to refer to this region such as the "Orient within the Occident" or "Turkey in Europe" (Wolff 1994; Todorova [1997] 2009; Raspudić 2010).

All these aspects amount to the centre–periphery differentiation with regard to human temperaments and the concomitant social organization. The peripheries' exoticism lies not only in their relative social backwardness regarding technology, politics, and economy but even more in the primitive character of their uncouth peoples. These peoples are imagined as possessing violent temperaments governed by the ethos of honour and shame, as well as heated but unpredictable passions such as jealousy, hatred, and seduction. Such images, which invoke both repulsion and fascination on the part of the "civilized" observer from the centre, are in both cases contrasted with the same symbolic centre of European civilization, in Mérimée's case epitomized

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7    "Heyduques [...] espèce de bandits." The importance of outlaws is in line with the imagological insight that "certain ethnotypes will gravitate to certain sociotypes" (Leerssen 2016, 26), i.e. that national characterization is disproportionally correlated to particular social (not national) categories such as class, gender, or age.

8    I prefer Orientalization over Said's Orientalism because intra-European cases of Orientalism, generally speaking, lack straightforward colonization, an institutionalized tradition of knowledge production, and are more ambiguously in-between than the Orient Said wrote about.

by France. The centre consists of ordered civic societies governed by the rule of law and the state's monopoly on violence and populated by rational, cultivated, and reserved citizens. Their behaviour is regulated by the bourgeois morality whose pillars are Christianity, inhibited sexuality, and economic productivity. Such images have materialized in many cultural fields (e.g. Davies and Powrie 2006; Utrera Macías and Guarinos 2010). That Mérimée as a single author produced two similar books on two different regions in Europe should not be seen as an individual idiosyncrasy but rather as a paradigmatic example of a broader pattern of imagination.

## 3       Responses from Spain

The reception of Mérimée's *Carmen* in Spain can be seen as a representative microcosm of the much broader Periphery Problem as invoked by Spaniards themselves in a great variety of genres of cultural production (Perriam and Davies 2005; Utrera Macías and Guarinos 2010; Miralles 2016). Telling are the titles of Spanish cinema adaptations of *Carmen* from 1938 (*Carmen, La de Triana*) and 1959 (*Carmen, La de Ronda*) in that they emphasize the local rather than the foreign origin of the heroine. The lyrics of Carmen Sevilla's paso doble *Carmen de España* (1953) articulate the coexistence of meta- and auto-images even more explicitly: "I am Carmen from Spain, not the one by Mérimée."[9] Perhaps the most famous Spanish adaptation of *Carmen* is the work of one of the icons of twentieth-century Spanish cinema, Carlos Saura. The foreign success of his work has also made him a key figure in the international diffusion of images of Spanishness through multiple flamenco films, *Carmen* (1983) being the most famous. It shows a group of flamenco dancers rehearsing a dance performance based on Mérimée's novella. Antonio, the choreographer, falls in love with the main dancer called Carmen, mirroring the fictional love story they rehearse. The French novella is literally quoted by the voice-over at the beginning of the film, and the actors are instructed by the performance's director, choreographer, and main protagonist Antonio, reading aloud Mérimée's prose in Spanish. For the music of his performance, Antonio uses the score from Georges Bizet's 1875 opera version of *Carmen*, which is even more famous and influential than Mérimée's original. The permanent presence of mirrors in front of which the actors change appearances and practice the flamenco dance movements continually reminds us of the artificial character of what

9   "Yo soy la Carmen de España, y no la de Mérimée [...]."

is considered to be typically and authentically Spanish. That flamenco has become a cliché performed by Spaniards to meet the expectations of foreigners is also suggested in a scene where Carmen dances in a traditional Andalusian polka dot dress for Asian tourists. By attributing Spanish local colour to the realm of the stage performances rather than to offstage authenticity, Saura shows the intricate entanglement of foreign literary expectations and the Spanish reality, of meta- and self-images.

Saura's *Carmen* does not merely dismiss its French predecessors. Illustrative of the Spanish negotiation of the French images of Spain is the scene that revolves around the problem of which music should be used for the performance. The camera moves from the Spanish musicians playing flamenco to Antonio listening to French music from Bizet's opera. The hesitation in Antonio's look is reflected in the simultaneous coexistence of Spanish flamenco and French opera music. This tension between two cultural models serving as the basis for the onstage performance, is resolved through the *hispanicization* of the French music. One of the leading musicians in the film and in real life one of the iconic giants of modern flamenco, Paco de Lucía, uses the French melody to create a flamenco version (*por bulerías*), making it more suitable for the flamenco dance onstage. The most important aspect of the film is the resemblance between the plot of the play as enacted onstage and the offstage developments: Antonio falls in love with Carmen, but the despair of not being able to possess her eventually drives him to kill her. The French novel and opera are not dismissed but rather used as the inspirational template for Saura's more hispanicized version. In Saura's film, he Spaniards act exactly according to Mérimée's depiction, both on and offstage. Saura's film teaches us that "Carmen" is not only a foreign, fictional construction of Spanishness but also a Spanish reality that Spaniards themselves accept and internalize. In this internalization through hispanicization, the meta-image and self-image become indistinguishable.

Illustrative of the Spanish critical responses in cultural production to the foreign exoticization of Spain is a novel written by Román Gubern, a prominent scholar in film and literary history who had already analysed the Carmen myth in depth in his *Máscaras de la ficción* (2002). His first fictional work, *La confesión de Carmen* (2012), recounts Carmen's coming-of-age story during the journey she undertook with her family from the north of Spain to the south. When the book's plot concerns Carmen adult life, it largely overlaps with Mérimée's novella even to the point of literally replicating many dialogues and phrases. Yet the differences are telling. More than any Carmen adaptation inside or outside Spain, Gubern's book provides a broader picture of the heroine, making her more human, and relatable.

In comparison to Saura, Gubern pushes further the notion of the "periphery talking back." The most important aspect of the book is the fact that Carmen herself is both the narrative's narrator and focalizer. This hispanicization of both authorial agency (Gubern) and narrative perspective (Carmen) also entails a characterization of the European civilizational "centre" differing from the French novella. In contrast to Mérimée's novella, where Frenchness and its superiority remain mainly implicit, Gubern's prose renders Frenchness more present, explicit, and negative. Frenchness is repeatedly depicted as a despicable phenomenon throughout the novel at both political and personal levels. The French army invading and conquering Spain is mirrored by the personal trauma of Carmen's mother who was raped by a French soldier, tellingly called "barbarian" and "gabacho," a pejorative word for the French. Gubern's engagement with Mérimée becomes explicit through Carmen's gaze: "*mesié* Próspero […] seemed a stranger to me, and I thought I could have easily strangled him" (2012, 173).[10] Mérimée's foreignness, weakness, naivety, and elegance make him, in short, feminine. The English are depicted in a similar way, as cultivated, artistic, feminized, sexually submissive, and homoerotic. Carmen is aware of the cultural difference between England and Spain. Where in England dandies are considered elegant, "In Spain this cannot be encountered, and men who are men do not like it when one confuses them with a faggot" (2012, 138).[11] Where Carmen despises the feminized masculinity attributed to Northern Europe (France and England), she prefers the virility of Spanish masculinity, characterized by courage, uncouthness, energy, and dominance.

*La confesión* does not only reinforce the European North–South divide by differentiating forms of masculinity. Gypsies are also depicted in a stereotypical way, as joyful, promiscuous, incestuous nomads, magicians, guitarists, fortune-tellers, bullfighters, sharpeners, and bear trainers with strong family ties and a rigid regulation of behaviours according to their own specific laws. The end point of Carmen's geographical journey from the North to the South during which outlawry, promiscuity, and violence intensify is Andalucía: the "Gypsies' second homeland […] where almost everybody was their friend […]" (2012, 53).[12] Saura and Gubern are two representatives of the immense corpus of Spanish Carmen adaptations which differ in the critical nature toward

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10    "*mesié* Próspero […] me pareció extranjero y pensé que podría sangrarle sin much dificultad."

11    "En España eso no ocurre y al hombre que es hombre no le gusta que le confundan con un marión."

12    "la segunda patria de los gitanos […] allí casi todo el mundo era amigo de los gitanos […] pues la primera es Egipto."

their meta-images, yet all perpetuate the conflation of ethnicity (Gypsies), sociotypes (outlaws), and geography (Andalucía), thereby internalizing and reproducing the centre's gaze.

## 4    Responses from the South Slavic Region

Cultural producers from the South Slavic region have also positioned themselves vis-à-vis the European center through direct responses. As a direct reaction to Alberto Fortis's influential *Viaggio in Dalmazia* (1774), Mérimée's main source for *La Guzla*, the Dalmatian Ivan Lovrić wrote his *Osservazioni di Giovanni Lovrich sopra diversi pezze del Viaggio in Dalmazia del signor abate Alberto Fortis: coll'aggiunta della Vita di Soçivizça* (1776) in order to correct the exaggerations and errors in *Viaggio*. In order to attack and counter Fortis's account, he provided ethnographic counterevidence from the insider's perspective by adding a chapter on the outlaw "Soçivizça" (Gulin 1997). Ironically, only this part of his book, which perpetuates the stereotype, was translated into many languages and received literary success in learned Europe. Telling for the continuity of the responses from the periphery to the centre by means of meta-images is the frustration expressed by one of the former Yugoslavia's most eminent writers of the twentieth century, Miroslav Krleža. He had visited Paris in the early 1950s to curate an international exhibition that was supposed to provide a panoramic overview of Yugoslav culture from the Middle Ages till the present. The exhibition's main purpose, showing the world that the rich and civilized Yugoslav culture has always been connected to and a part of Europe (Ravlić 2011), clashed with the harsh reality of French expectations. Echoing the Romantic imagery created by Fortis, Goethe, and Mérimée, the contemporary French gaze holds, in Krleža's own words,

> the picturesque, commercial, touristic image of our country, with veils, Turkish drums, turbans, folk instruments, and vendettas, the myth of an archaic, backward Balkan people of blind *gusle* players, hajduks, and vampires, […] of an oriental mystique and melancholic passivity […] and cruel vendettas […] What Western Europeans deemed interesting about us, is a decorative optical trick totally incongruent with the truth.
> KRLEŽA [1953] 1966, 51

Such discontent with foreign representations of the South Slavic region articulated through meta-images can also be found in Danilo Kiš's *Homo Poeticus* (1995). In this collection of essays and interviews, he denounces the European,

and in particular French, misconceptions of his home culture. Kiš criticizes Mérimée's *La Guzla* because it contributed to the foreign exoticism of the alleged primitive spirit of the South Slavs and, as a result, feels the need to emphasize that "we belong to the family of European nations" (1995, 79).

Perhaps the most eminent, contemporary voice from the region that reflects on the European Periphery Problem is the internationally established author Dubravka Ugrešić. The main topic of her fictional and essayistic work is the dynamics within the cultural and political relations between Eastern and Western Europe, in particular the complex entanglements of self-, hetero-, and meta-images. Representative of her oeuvre is the collection of essays *Nobody's Home* (2007), where she critically addresses the ways in which Europeans from both the East and the West view themselves and each other.[13] This East-West dynamic is most explicitly formulated in the essay *Europe, Europe.* This essay focuses on the official EU literary project Literaturexpress 2000 that entailed thirty-five European writers traveling across Europe and participating in many cultural events. Ugrešić reveals the discrepancy between the hegemonic identity narratives that portray Europe's unity and equality, on the one hand, and the (historical and current) realities of conflict, dividedness, and hierarchy as reflected in the prevalence of stereotypes, prejudice, and exclusion, on the other. Approaching this literary project as a microcosm of intra-European relations more generally, Ugrešić asserts:

> I am sure that many of my fellow West European writers felt uncomfortable during the trip or even felt scorn for the East which is not the West, for the East aspiring to be the West, and for the East which is like the West. I believe that many writers brought along in their mental luggage a significant overweight of stereotypes about Eastern Europe, but they paid no mental fine for that. [...] Do they [the Easterners] harbor fantasies of their own about the West? Indeed they do. Many of them want to be the West, because many are ashamed that they are East. Most of the Western fantasies about the East come from an unarticulated feeling of superiority, just as most of the Eastern fantasies about the West spring from an articulated sense of inferiority.
>      2007, 114

The articulation and negative evaluation of meta-images by cultural producers from Southeast European peripheries, here exemplified by Ugrešić,

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13    The original in Croatian, *Nema nikog doma* (2005), was published two years earlier. All the Ugrešić quotes are from the English 2007 version.

is often accompanied by additional forms of positioning by means of alternative self- and hetero-images. One of the strategies employed by Ugrešić to respond to meta-images is what can be called *subversive equation*. Her reflection on her migration experience from the nationalist, war-torn ex-Yugoslavia to Western Europe is exemplary of this type of self-positioning vis-à-vis the centre: "I thought that emigrating from that country would mean getting away from stereotypes. I was wrong. They rather multiplied" (2007, 26). Even in the allegedly cultivated realms of high-brow literature, the old East–West divide and the concomitant stereotypes remain resilient. Western Europe appears to be the same as her nationalist home country in that she is never seen as an individual but always as a representative of a region or ethnic group: "I am, namely, a Balkan woman [*Balkanka*]" (2007, 26), ironically referring to the meta-image. Ugrešić subverts the self-congratulatory meta-images of the West that assume the contrast between tolerant cosmopolitanism (centre) and intolerant nationalism (periphery) by invoking the omnipresence of ethnic stereotypes and the obsession with national/regional in the context of Western Europe.

Another prevailing strategy to deal with meta-images is the *inversion of characterization*. Reminiscent of Occidentalism, Ugrešić turns the chauvinistic Western perceptions upside down by invoking the image of Western Europe that has lost its cultural refinement, specificity, and heterogeneity due to the homogenizing effect of global capitalism. As far as there is still a European culture it can only be found in precisely that region that the West has placed outside the symbolic boundaries of Europeanness. The old idea of Europe as the cradle of civilization, art, and culture has survived only in Eastern Europe. Exemplary is also how she deals with outlawry, one of the central elements stereotypically associated with the South Slavic region and Spain alike by Western Europeans. With an ironic tone, Ugrešić inverts the meta-images when writing:

> A Slovak writer's bag was stolen in Madrid [...] From that moment forward, a writer had something nicked in almost every city, including the very last day in Berlin, when 1000 US Dollars disappeared from the inside pocket of a Serbian writer [...]. I lent an Italian writer my hair dryer which he returned immediately.
>
>     2007, 106

These examples of meta-images show that the Periphery Problem exemplified by Mérimée still haunts the cultural producers from the South Slavic region.

What this representative sample also illuminates is that meta-images are accompanied by various strategies through which writers from the periphery position themselves vis-à-vis the centre, often perpetuating the European centre–periphery divide with slight variations in characterization and valorisation.

## 5 Conclusion

The central idea of this contribution is the Periphery Problem, the belief that European peripheries lack "Europeanness" due to their exotic liminality and are therefore hierarchically different from the European centre. More specifically, I focused on the Periphery Problem with regard to similar but hardly compared cases in Europe, Spain, and the South Slavic region, both from external and internal perspectives, with a particular emphasis on the peripheries' meta-images.

Such an approach demonstrates that "national" characterizations operate as *transnational* phenomena. Any characterization of a nation or region inherently involves a relational embeddedness in a broader framework. For both Spain and the South Slavic region this overarching whole is Europe, functioning as the default and often implicit master frame in which the national becomes meaningful. The transnational dimension can also be discerned in the peripheries' relation to the whole's symbolic representation, Western Europe, which in both cases functions as the main point of reference or the Big Other, regardless of whether it is considered inferior or superior, same or different, to be resisted or emulated. Why "national" images are transnational in nature also becomes clear in the fact that similar or even the same characterizations occur in and are imputed onto different contexts.

Foregrounding similarities does not mean that differences are absent or overlooked. Whereas Spanishness is articulated through cultural symbols (flamenco, bullfighting) and iconic figures (Carmen, Don Juan) that are immediately associated with Spain as a specific geocultural space, imageries of the South Slavic region, generally speaking, lack such a high degree of particularistic recognizability. Another difference between the two cases is that images of Spain are predominantly informed by the North–South polarity, whereas images of the South Slavic region are primarily invoked in an East–West opposition. I would claim however that the North–South and East–West polarities, operative both within and between European countries, are variations of the underlying centre–periphery distinction. As they differ more in the recognizability of their form than in relative position and characterological content,

national characterizations are highly unspecific.[14] I regard the similarities between the contexts more important than the differences.

A final note on the broader impact of such cultural stereotyping. Although cultural production is where "national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated" (Leerssen 2007, 26), the *political* relevance of the Periphery Problem can hardly be overestimated. It is telling that the nation's "Europeanness" is a central topic during the pivotal events and turning points in Spain's and the South Slavic region's recent political history both as self-image and meta-image of cultural and/or political belonging and legitimacy. In his speech after the 1975 coronation, the king of Spain said to the not yet democratic parliament that "Europe must count on Spain and we Spaniards are Europeans. It is a necessity of this moment that both sides understand this, and that all of us draw consequences from it" (quoted in López Gómez 2014, 83). Representative of the South Slavic region is a statement made by the first democratically elected Croatian president, Franjo Tuđman. He hoped that:

> the European countries and the EU will understand that the Croatian struggle for its territorial integrity, its freedom and democracy is not only the fight of the Croatian nation, the fight against the restoration of socialist communism […] but the fight for normal conditions when Croatia can join Europe, where she historically belongs.
>
> QUOTED IN LINDSTROM 2003, 317

The trope of "return to Europe" was not only omnipresent in the public discourse regarding the transitional process from one political system to another (from Francoism and socialism to democracy, in 1975–1978 and 1991 respectively), but also in the accession to the European Union (Spain in 1986 and Croatia in 2013). There is something ironic about this urgency to emphasize the respective nations' "Europeanness": the more one foregrounds that self-image of Europeanness, the more one confirms the opposite (as implied in the meta-image).

The Periphery Problem has also remained prominent in the Western European political and public discourses. A case in point would be the essentialist perceptions of the war in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Part of these

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14      Henry Remak makes a similar point with respect to Romantic exoticism, that there are "manifold conceptual, functional, and strategic links between and among exotic targets, several of which seem, to varying extent, interchangeable" (1978, 62).

essentialist perceptions is the interpretation of the war "as the re-emergence of an inborn tendency to ruthless, genocidal violence" (Leerssen 2008, 16), which is a recent variation within the historically resilient "discourse about savages and barbarians" invoking the liminal "non-Europeanness of [...] the Balkan peoples" (Sekeruš 2007, 236). For Spain it was not a war but the Eurozone crisis from 2009 onward that triggered the transition from relatively latent to manifest stereotyping (cf. Leerssen 2016). The belief, or rather hope, held by many Spaniards that "[s]ince its entry into the EU, Spanish society has broken all the stereotypes, changing the image of it held by the rest of Europe" (Borrell 2006, 6), here formulated by the president of the European Parliament Josep Borrell several years before the crisis, was premature. Instead, public discourse gave new life to the old North–South axis dividing the continent into a hardworking, honest North, and a lazy, corrupt South, the latter referred to by the derogatory acronym PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain) (see Capucha et al. 2014). The prevalence of such stereotyping in European politics and media cannot be better summarized than by a statement made by the head of the Eurogroup Dijsselbloem, which triggered fierce criticism from high-ranking politicians in Southern Europe. Referring to the position that solidarity (of the Northern countries) requires duties on the part of the South, he said: "I can't spend all my money on women and alcohol and then at the end ask for your help" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2017).[15] One of the detrimental effects of such stereotyping is that it obstructs a more serious analysis of highly complex economic-financial problems, including the publicly unaddressed issues of the involvement, interests, and partial responsibility of "Northern" private and public actors.

By illuminating how Spain and the South Slavic region have been culturally imagined by both others and themselves, this article argues that there are striking structural similarities between these analogous albeit never compared cases. For the common denominator of these geographically distant but symbolically proximate regions I used the label the *Periphery Problem.* Both the commonalities between the peripheries' characterization and the entanglements between self-, hetero-, and meta-images show that national characterization in Europe is profoundly *transnational* in nature.

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15    "Ich kann nicht mein ganzes Geld für Schnaps und Frauen ausgeben und anschließend Sie um Ihre Unterstützung bitten."

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