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Moving images of exclusion: Persisting tropes in the filmic representation of European Roma

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the most prominent tropes in the earliest and most recent filmic representations of Roma. Stereotypical images of Roma abound in many fictional features as well as documentaries, from the representation of Roma as eternal nomads to racially prejudiced depictions of Roma women and the alleged innateness of music to Roma. Because images and modes of representation change over time, the paper juxtaposes the earliest portrayals of Roma with those produced in the last 15 years. The analysis particularly centres on two dominant reoccurring tropes: types of spaces typically occupied by Roma in film, that is the lack of a place or so-called placelessness of Roma; the gendered other, or the Roma woman and the culturally and ethnically othered Roma musician. Ultimately, by analysing how these tropes have persisted in varying forms over 100 years, this work points to the filmic imagery that perpetuates antiziganism, but also how the same has changed over the years to offer possible counter-narratives.

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Since the early 2000s, a series of initiatives from the European Union and beyond has led to numerous film productions focusing on the status of European Roma. These recent films make it evident that Roma are nestled deep in the collective imagination of the West. For more than a century, a large number of films thematically centering on Roma, spanning all genres, have been produced and seen throughout Europe, North America and other parts of the world: from one of the first, Campement de Bohémiens (Georges Méliès, France 1896) to current cinema, Brüder der Nacht (Brothers of the Night, Patric Chiha, AT 2016).

In this paper, we are interested in ways in which film has imagined and reimagined Roma over time, in the functions those representations might serve for the dominant society, and what effects they have on today’s European
Roma. The paper will examine the legacies of early film and their relation to the most recent filmic representations of Roma. The incentive for studying early film is cinema’s innovativeness, novelty and originality of approach, and how this emerging art aesthetically and thematically imagined and epitomised Roma. Cinema has taken up the centuries-old narratives and presumptions and shaped them through its own customs; it has formed persistent images and filmic figures, or ‘gypsy-figures’, and further developed and modified them for over a century. The constant interest in the cinematographic representation of Roma across genres has led to certain cinematic conventions and aesthetic archetypes. For the purposes of this paper, we concentrate on two compelling tropes that are essential for the creation of the ‘gypsy-figures’: first, we examine specific sites and places as ‘ethnic’ markers, and placelessness as well as the denial of imagined spaces as a way of othering and a sign of alterity. Second, we focus on figures of the gendered, ethnic and cultural other, that of the woman and the musician. Both sections begin with a historical framework, followed by an analysis of the early film period, and end with the survey of recent film productions.

We use the term ‘trope’ in a wide sense (White 1973), and analyse only a few that have left an enduring mark on filmic representation as they relate to Roma; each trope is further comprised of many characteristics as to be outlined. Ultimately, by pointing out the inherent biases, but also recent modifications of filmic representations, our hope is to open up spaces for reimagining Roma and challenging antiziganism in all its aspects. In other words, much has changed over the first 100 years of filmic representations of Roma; however, by examining those tropes that we find most crucial for the endurance of antiziganism, we draw attention to them and illustrate the need for further change. Although these tropes have to be understood as flexible and multivalent, producing a variety of meanings over time and can be read in differing ways – they can be playful, ironic and are not necessarily intended to be read as generalising truths or there to homogenise a group – we find them most crucial for the endurance of antiziganism in the given discursive context. By examining them we draw attention to them and illustrate the need for further change.

The panoptic analysis of films from various culturally different European countries is possible due to the films’ reoccurring themes of space, nationhood, race, and gender, transcending cultural and national borders and genres. As aptly described by Iordanova in ‘Images of Romanies in Cinema: A Rough Sketch’ (Iordanova 2003), and Imre’s ‘Screen Gypsies’ (Imre 2003), or by Gay y Blasco in ‘Picturing “Gypsies”’ (Gay Y Blasco 2008), whether in fictional features or documentaries, a set of characters, narratives and settings are recurrently emphasised: nomadic lifestyle, patriarchal power structures within extended families, coerced urbanisation, passionate music and much-photographed poverty. Although we recognise that documentaries and features are two discrete forms with different modes of production, distribution and reception,
we focus less on these distinctions, as our analysis is informed by tropes and not necessarily how those get distributed across filmic forms and genres; the point is that they do, and it is the form of these tropes that we wish to elucidate, as we identify them as uniquely related to the perseverance of antiziganism. Other film scholars have focused specifically on the film form, such as William Hope’s important recent study of Italian documentaries about and by Roma (2016); some have taken a somewhat similar approach to ours by examining the wide-ranging TV genre, including reality shows, dramas, comedies and so on, as exemplified in Adina Schneeweis and Katherine A. Foss’s article on representations of Roma culture in American television (Schneeweis and Foss 2017). Some have directed their critical lens to the relevance of the author’s intent or the lack thereof as it might relate to a text or film; again, our commitment is to the reoccurring tropes that matter across the diverse film forms, genres and contexts.

By engaging in objective critical argument across genres, we hope to be able to reach conclusions that will transcend the time parameters we have selected. Our look at early and recent cinema with apparent disregard for much of the longer twentieth century sheds light on some specifics of filmic representation of Roma over the decades. In other words, we chose to concentrate on the early film, which will forever remain of great importance as the first occasion of Roma representation on screen. Additionally, recent filmic productions are highly informative about current trends in the mainstream representation of Europe’s most disadvantaged minority, and their position on an opposite pole, enables strong comparison.

This study is theoretically grounded in film-studies research that examines film as a text. Our critical lens comes from textual analysis and draws on literary and cultural theory, as we are interested in how meaning is created as it relates to the aforementioned tropes that clearly demarcate, symbolise and signify, while being aware that there is no singular, fixed meaning deemed ‘correct’ (Stam 1992). As film scholars informed by cultural studies we intend to analyse filmic strategies that create types and stereotypes; moreover, we are committed to the practice of close reading in an effort to delineate those signifiers that constitute a given trope. Less guided by production, distribution and reception, we examine a metalanguage that reflects on the points of identification with the established culture, while re-evaluating the coexistence of the same with Roma often imagined as the alleged outsiders. We therefore chose films representative of their time and place in history, and concentrate on reoccurring themes and tropes of alterity. We envision film as a polysemic field of negotiation and battle for meaning and the production of knowledge. Therefore, our analysis will also emphasise the historicised nature of discourse, with strategies of knowledge production as a backdrop.
We acknowledge that the images of Roma in film have been produced primarily by non-Roma, and that only recently have scholars and activists from different fields critically addressed filmic misrepresentations. In our efforts we are indebted to many researchers who have decisively challenged antiziganism, and in doing so have defined scholarly debate centering on the analysis of the centuries-long relationship between Roma and non-Roma communities in Europe and elsewhere. Film scholars, such as Iordanova, Imre and Pasqualino; literary critics, including Patrut, Bogdal, Breger and Houghton-Walker; historians and sociologists like Hancock, Wippermann and End; and activists and political figures, such as Rose and Heilig, have effectively elucidated the scope and character of Romani studies and the fight against antiziganism. One of the tenets of the common research focuses on the twofold nature of the relationship: specific to the period, the portrayal of Roma vis-à-vis the majority reflects European identity en masse, while also elucidating Roma identities and activism in this ever-changing process of negotiation. The extent to which these representations remain conflicting is captured by Rosenhaft (2008), who in her artistic portrayals of Roma speaks of the methodological difficulties of assessing representations as straightforward when in fact they are inherently multivalent and the product of a negotiated encounter. The multivocality compels a view of Roma not as eternal and powerless victims.

Roma constitute the largest minority within European nation-states. To dispel any ambiguities, we remain committed to the term Roma throughout our work to refer to an extremely heterogeneous group of people affected by antiziganism. We are fully aware that the very category ‘Roma’ is on some level problematic, as it tries to encompass a very diverse group of people with distinct historical and cultural backgrounds and tends to homogenise, something we wish to avoid. For the purposes of our argument, whenever we use the word ‘gypsy’ we refer to the construct or figure encapsulating the mindset of a dominant society that often exoticises, stigmatises and excludes people so labelled. The beliefs and concepts characterising antiziganism, always in flux, are a crucial part of the violent phenomena of marking and exclusion, whereby the culturally constructed figures play a critical role. The term Romaphobia is closely related to antiziganism and, as encompassing racially prejudiced fear and rejection of Roma people, is favourable when describing some of the major consequences of antiziganism. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will continue to refer primarily to antiziganism, as it is useful in its delineation of the semantics of othering.

**Trope 1: spaces of alterity – geographical and imagined spaces of othering**

The representation of Roma has had fundamental significance for European concepts of the self since the seventeenth century. Iulia Patrut shows that the imagined ‘gypsy’ has served for many centuries as a screen for self-description
and differentiation in the European history of ideas (Patrut 2014, 8). Markus End explains that the stereotypes, such as ‘parasitic’, ‘indolent’ and ‘thieving’, still in use today, are rooted in the early modern socio-historical processes that introduced and enforced norms and morals during the development of Europe’s capital-based nation-states (see End 2012, 13). During this profound shift, the counter-figure served as means of disciplining, opening up a space onto which individuals of the dominant society could project their failed attempts to live according to the new values and rules (see End 2012, 10). Nineteenth-century Romanticism was a particularly prolific period in which idealised images of Roma abound. According to Klaus-Michael Bogdal (2012), these romantic fantasies reflect the longing to break out of narrow bourgeois conventions. A substantial reservoir of images, figures and narrations about ‘gypsies’ accumulated up to the end of the nineteenth century. These inventories of knowledge, modified in the respective historical context, were taken up by early cinema and were adapted for the new medium.

**Spaces of alterity in early cinema**

Many early films centring on Roma show their protagonists mainly in the open air. The figures live in and with nature, and roam through fields and forests, as for example in the films Two Little Waifs (James Williamson, GB, 1907), Gypsy Blood (Zigeunerblut; Peter Urban Gad, FRG, 1911), A Romany Spy (Das Mädchen ohne Vaterland; Peter Urban Gad, FRG, 1912), Gypsy Raphael (Zigeuner Raphael; DK 1914), Aniula. The Gypsy girl, The Love of the Gypsy Horde (Unknown, HU 1919), Daughter of the Road (Die Tochter der Landstraße; Peter Urban Gad, FRG, 1915) or Amarant. Love of a Gypsy Woman (Amarant. Die Liebe einer Zigeunerin; Martin Haras, FRG 1916). Identifying spaces of alterity as a unified trope allows for the examination of many persevering features in early and recent film: the ‘gypsy camp’, being on the road, placelessness, idealised rural settings and the associated poverty, and social neglect in post-industrial societies. Just as specific sites and places function as ‘ethnic’ markers by extension, the access to imagined spaces like ‘home’ or ‘nation’ is denied to Roma. Putting the ‘gypsy camp’ on display is a fixed element and a visual attraction of most early films. Aside from the recurring visual spectacle of the campfire, with its music and dancing, the camp is a structuring location shown full of mystery and eroticism. The dissolution of this location, the decampment, is part of a recurring portrayal of ‘being on the road’ (as in Two Little Waifs, Gypsy Blood, A Romany Spy, Gypsy Raphael and Aniula). In both the early fictional film and early documentaries, the focus is on travelling. Nomadism is shown as a ‘natural’ part of ‘gypsy’ life. The various genres build on the same prior knowledge, and narrate with the same aesthetic means. In both feature and documentary films, opening titles like ‘Early one morning I discovered some Gypsies “preparing for the road”’ (A Day with the Gypsies, Cecil Hepworth, GB 1919) are given no further temporal or regional classification.
In early film, Roma are characterised by having no ‘regular’ and permanent place. Their representation as ‘placeless’ is particularly shown in the way they are denied the repertoire of imaginary places available to the dominant society.\textsuperscript{11} This is exemplified in Two Little Waifs, in which siblings have been ‘stolen by Gypsies’. When the children escape, they are helped by a man who brings them to ‘his parents’ home’ and sets out to ‘search for the Gypsies’.\textsuperscript{12} Meanwhile, in their ‘new home’, the children are ‘hugging, laughing, and dancing’ with their new, caring parents.\textsuperscript{13} Until their return to their actual ‘home’, the crime story develops through dichotomies: the dominant settled society is contrasted to the ‘gypsies’ on the move, the fine detached house to communal tent living, the bourgeois nuclear family to the horde.

Many early films unfold their drama through the presumed lack of a concept of a ‘parental home’ or ‘home’, ‘homeland’ or ‘fatherland’. In A Romany Spy, the figure of the ‘gypsy girl’ Zidra is identified through the value of an imaginary place. For financial gain Zidra steals secret military documents. Dismayed by this betrayal, her lover, a sergeant, explains the meaning of ‘fatherland’ to her. Her question, ‘Did I do something wrong? Homeland? … What is homeland?’\textsuperscript{14} describes her presumed ignorance of concepts like homeland and nation, and by extension indicates all ‘gypsies’, who move on while the sergeant pays for Zidra’s treason with his life. In the later Heimat film\textsuperscript{15} When the Curfew Sounds (Wenn die Abendglocken läuten; Hans Beck-Gaden, FRG 1930), another imaginary place – here an ethnic idea of homeland – is outlined by means of the ‘gypsy girl’ Saffy. Only after Hans abandons the “gypsy girl” can he return to his “German wife” with the exclamation ‘Ah, Annerl – home(land)!’\textsuperscript{16} and become part of the village and ethnic community. In all these films, the poverty and concomitant conditions depicted are shown as something inherent to the ‘gypsies’, and are frequently set against the bourgeois milieu of other protagonists (as in Two Little Waifs, Gypsy Blood, Gypsy Raphael, Aniula. The Gypsy girl, Daughter of the Road, Amarant. Love of a Gypsy Woman).

Roma are shown as placeless in the early films, as without a homeland, even though Europe is their homeland. By describing them as ‘bound to nature’ and on the move, the opposite position of belonging to a culture and living in stability and beingcivilised is a proxy for self-description. In the early film, the fascination with the ‘gypsy’ as ‘other’ is always inextricable from the assumption of incompatible difference. This symbolic exclusion culminates in being ousted from differently levelled ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983), from home to ‘Heimat’ and nation. The films identify ‘being part of a nation’ with being part of a community with shared values and culture, providing security and stability. Described as nationless, ‘gypsies’ are pictured as quintessential strangers unable to socialise within established cultural models and perceived as an attack on the dominant society.
**Spaces of alterity in recent film**

A century later, many films featuring Roma still show their protagonists mainly in the open air, roaming unbound territories. This is evident in the documentaries concentrating on the living conditions of Roma in rural areas, such as *Zigeuner* (Stanislaw Mucha, GER/SK 2007), which takes us to a cliché-laden journey from slum to slum through an idyllic Slovakian landscape; *The Gypsy Vote* (Jaroslav Vojtek, CZ/SK 2012), which accompanies the activist Vlado Sendrey campaigning to be the first Slovakian Roma to be elected to a local council; and *The Forest Is Like the Mountain* (Christiane Schmidt/Didier Guillain, RO/GER 2014), which observes life in a Romanian village inhabited by Roma. In this settlement, the streets are dirt tracks, the fields are worked with scythe and plough and its proximity to the town is hard to gauge. The images of pre-industrial village life are timeless and placeless. Recurring views of the village during the cyclical changes of the seasons structure the film and evoke the idea of a communion of man with nature. The images of poverty are reminiscent of early film, in which where the poverty shown is depicted as something inherent to the ‘gypsies’, and is frequently set against the bourgeois milieu of other protagonists (*Two Little Waifs, Gypsy Blood, Raphael, Aniula, Amarant*). Now, the images of enforced poverty and ostracism vanish partly in the beautiful and affectionate images of people in nature. Romanticised nature and the iconography of its eternal recurrence impart social relationships with an apparent sense of ‘naturalness’. The naivety and deep religiosity of the village community recall narratives of the ‘noble savage’ living in harmony with nature. Likewise the other documentaries play out in nameless remote locations with the same stereotypical images of rural poverty: dirt roads, slums, freely roaming animals, Roma dancing in the streets and waving groups of children, not necessarily in relation to the rest of the filmic narration (*The Gypsy Vote; Zigeuner*). Importantly, this idealised version of nature and the shove to the outskirts correlate with the idea that Roma still live in a pre-modern era cut off from the advancements of the modern society. These images of pre-industrial labour and poverty illustrate supposed different stages of development. In a different context, Richard Dyer describes this approach as evolutionary ideology (Dyer 1996). The boundaries of feature film and documentary are particularly blurred in this area. The feature films with rural settings operate with original locations and Romani-speaking amateur actors, and they frequently refer to real circumstances and adopt the aesthetic schemata of the documentary, as in *Cigán* (*Gypsy*; Martin Šulík, CZ/SK 2011), a coming-of-age story of a Romani boy set in an impoverished settlement, in *Just the Wind* (Bence Fliegauf, HU/F/GER 2012), a feature about a series of murders on Roma in Hungary, and in *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (Danis Tanovic, BA/F/SLO/I 2013), a docudrama that has
the protagonists play out their life-story as amateur actors. The observation of the difficult daily life of Nazif, his pregnant wife, Senada, and the two little daughters in a Roma settlement in Bosnia looks like an ethnographic study. We watch water being collected, pastry made, the search for firewood and the slow salvaging of junked cars. In very long scenes we follow the activities, carried out with simple tools or bare hands. The film shares its interest in the depiction of pre-industrial labour with the aforementioned documentaries.

In the fictional films, the protagonists are also generally shown in the open air. The protagonists of all the films mentioned are explicitly subject to the changes in the weather: to the heat in *Just the Wind*, which follows in close-up the sweating bodies of its protagonists and their unclothed children in the unspoiled countryside; or the cold in *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* and *Cigán*. The latter is also structured around the changing seasons in the beautifully photographed settlement. The geographic distance and remoteness are always accompanied by socio-economic difference. Features of contemporary life such as electricity, heating and health insurance are nonexistent in these films. All films, features and documentaries, exhibit a pronounced interest in images of poverty.

Images of poverty are also central to recent feature films set in cities. But rather than employing exotic images of simple pre-industrial life, they tend to show the social neglect of the European suburbs and ghettos. It is less the idea of the ‘noble savage’ than the cohesion of poverty and delinquency exposed here. Dina Iordonova writes, ‘In the feature film, images of “raw reality” have taken over the role of exoticism’ (Iordanova 2008, 308). But exoticism and spectacular images of neglect go well together, as exemplified by contemporary films *Khamsa* (Karim Dridri, F 2008), about a Romani boy returning to his family’s camp in Marseille, and *Geronimo* (Tony Gatlif, F 2014), an update of *West Side Story* dedicated to disenfranchised migrant youths in southern France. Children are left to themselves in these films, confronted with alcohol, sex and violence, and the families are dysfunctional. The images are predictable: burning oil drums, scrapyards and rundown tower blocks; abandoned factory buildings and endless graffiti become stages for folkloristic cockfighting or erotic and sensational dance scenes. The setting of the films is ‘somewhere in the open’, ‘on the street’ and ‘on the move’, replacing the remoteness of the country by images that narrate the suburbs fallen into disrepair.

The places and people presented in these films appear infinitely far away. The geographical distance is conveyed through the repeatedly staged remoteness of the locations and the endless expanse of nature around the settlements. The temporal distance felt is manifested in the horse-drawn waggon and the images of pre-industrial labour. The villages without central heating and electricity, in which computers are only fakes, stand in
opposition to ‘our own’ highly networked lives. This type of geographical and temporal detachment is a visual performance of otherness.

Numerous images of Roma in nature and always ‘on the go’ are reminiscent of early cinema. As in early films, the non-regular places epitomise the protagonists, and assume the portrayed distance between the dominant society and Roma as unbridgeable. Ethnographic interest and a fascination with sensational living conditions are also present in recent film, often with the implicit assumption of the incompatibility of cultural otherness. In all recent films, the ‘gypsy camp’ as structuring location is replaced by the exotic, impoverished settlement in the countryside or the urban ghetto. The excessive production of spectacular images of destitution is readable along established ideas of foreignness and poverty. These images of poverty are usually separated from their historical and political context, and aside from empathy they always create a distance from ‘the poor’. Despite recently increased awareness of the discriminatory social situation of many Roma in Europe, many current films perpetuate othering and symbolic exclusion by drawing on well-established visual and narrative tropes. The unwittingly used images can access, continue and update a discriminatory historical body of knowledge. Due to insufficient contextualisation, these images are flexible and open to a variety of readings.

Some recent documentaries successfully depart from the representational status quo by avoiding conventionalised settings and images that direct the attention explicitly to the role of the dominant society: Container 158 (Stefano Liberti/Enrico Parenti, I 2013) shows the European dimension of the desperate situation in Salone, a container camp outside Rome, where the Italian government relocated more than 1000 Roma from different countries; Natasha (Ulli Gladik, A 2008), despite potential bias, documents the life of a Bulgarian Romni working as a beggar in Austria, contextualising begging and poverty, making the protagonist visible and audible as an intelligent woman facing enormous adversity; or Revision (Philip Scheffner, GER 2012), which provides a filmic revision of a legally closed criminal case of two murdered Romanian Roma, giving the involved parties a voice at the witness stand that had been denied to them by the German justice system. The film’s montage highlights the connection between the two murdered men, Velcu and Calderar, German antiziganism and European border security policies.

**Trope 2: figures of alterity – gender, ethnic and cultural othering**

As espoused in the previous section, one can trace Western ideals of self and society throughout history along the trajectory of the othering of Roma; in particular, the section showed how space is crucial to the processes of marking and othering. The impetus is to affirm one’s preeminence through the differentiation and exclusion of the other. The ways in which such
projects were carried out are numerous, but here we concentrate on two more tropes of othering: the concept of the ‘Roma woman’, and that of the often marginalised yet ubiquitous ethnically and culturally othered ‘Roma musician’. Here again we remain committed to the emphasis that not all representations of Roma women or musicians are intrinsically antiziganistic; however, those narratives that other Roma culturally, ethnically and on the basis of gender are those we term ‘gypsy woman’ or ‘gypsy musician’.

Certainly, there is some overlap between tropes and self-representation; however, we analyse how noncontextualised tropes get distributed across genres and time, contributing to ostensibly fixed representations of Roma. We see the prejudiced narrative in the ways in which non-Roma are juxtaposed to Roma in a hierarchical and stigmatising form.

These tropes of two iconic figures notably capture the reoccurring filmic representations of Roma, and are therefore distinctly worthy of analysis; their iteration points to the fanciful preoccupations of non-Roma that have resulted in two clearly stereotypical concepts. The first trope is signified by the eroticised and sexualised, yet primitive ‘gypsy woman’; the second consists of the description of ‘gypsy music and musicians’ as substandard, nomadic, timeless, antagonistic, at best folkloristic and ultimately non-European. The second trope is more specifically subdivided into a section on general features of othering and spaces of othering as they relate to music.

**Gendered other: Roma woman**

Gender, ethnic and cultural stereotypes are inextricably woven together in the construction of ‘gypsy’ figures in literature and film. In her recent article ‘Doing gender doing gypsy’, Rafaela Eulberg points out the parallels in the construction of a feminine identity and a specific so-called ‘gypsy identity’, as many of the characteristics ascribed to Roma, such as irrationalism, intuitiveness and mysteriousness, are also attributed in the history of Western ideas to the feminine (Eulberg 2011, 47). The nineteenth-century binary structure of ‘civilised’ versus ‘primitive’ is analogous to the notion of women as close to nature and men as the producers of culture. The magical abilities often ascribed to Roma and the notion of women’s intuition are both set up in opposition to the capacity for logical thought (Eulberg 2011, 53). Romanticism served to popularise the figure of the ‘beautiful gypsy woman’, which was already firmly established as a counter-image to bourgeois femininity. Examples include Alexander Pushkin’s *Zemfira* (1827), Victor Hugo’s *Esmeralda* (1831) and Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen* (1845). Similarly, the first ‘gypsy’ photographs of the 1850s are situated within the orientalist context. The figure of the Gypsy as it relates to early photography is a trope staged for the camera, and is often eroticised, always in the open air, barefoot, with orientalist embellishment (Holzer 2008, 403–404). The orientalist discourse further othered the ‘gypsy’
as the exotic non-European, a part of that irreconcilable binary opposition between the West and the East (Yeğenoğlu 1998; Hadzivadic 2007). At the intersection of exoticism and orientalist discourses, the ‘beautiful gypsy woman’, with her wild nature that cannot be tamed, her ‘primitive’ ways, and her promiscuity, became the object of projection for masculine sexual longing (Bogdal 2012, 2). Often, as in Carmen, she appears as a femme fatale bringing misfortune or the irrational obsessive love that itself leads to destruction. Through her death, the bourgeois gender order is re-established, bearing in mind that the conventions of the dominant society are constantly renegotiated and in flux. The capricious, erotic woman, dancing for all to see, is often portrayed in opposition to the bourgeois ideals of stability and uniformity (Brittnacher 2012; Hille 2005). This dancing image became an enduring visual icon from early cinema to the present day.

In her article ‘Imagining the gypsy woman’, Iulia Hasdeu (2008) points to first romantic and then sexually explicit fantasies of non-Roma about Roma women’s dress, movement, imagined occupations and general appearance. From the earliest authors, such as Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb (1783), who established the field of ‘Tsiganologie’, the Western eye has been gazing at an allegedly ‘promiscuous seductress’ with an ‘ominous destiny’. In the aforementioned Amaran and Aniula, the love interest is between the ‘gypsy girl’ and the count, or another person of authority. While Amaran poses as a model and threatens the count’s marriage, Aniula cunningly seduces and steals. Impressed less by the glimpses into the wealthy world of the Count, Aniula returns to her original ‘gypsy lover’. Not so lucky, Amaran tragically commits suicide at the prospect of her unrequited love. In the Finnish feature Mustalaishurmaaja (Valentin Vaala, FI 1929), the central narrative is a love triangle. Esmeralda, the guitar player, entices Manjird, who cannot resist; predictably, it all ends in jealousy, murder and suicide. The figure of the ‘gypsy woman’ possesses exaggerated sexual allure and the romantic involvement with ‘gypsy women’ is shown as momentary recklessness (The Curfew, Raphael, Aniula, Amaran, Mustalaishurmaaja).

In numerous recent fictional features and TV shows, the figure remains as an erotic fantasy, a marker of authenticity, and an instrument of othering. Typically, when women are on stage and performing, the colourful costume is still a welcome requisite used for representation and self-identification, as in When the Road Bends (Jasmine Dellal, USA 2006) or Newo Ziro (Robert Krieg and Monika Nolte, GER 2013). Also in the critically engaging documentary films, such as Container 158 and The Gypsy Vote, the return to the stereotypical figures of the past is perceptible. However, in some recent documentaries with a socially critical lens, the stereotypical figure of the erotic femme fatale ceases to exist. In previously cited films in which Roma women play a prominent role, there is usually little explicit eroticism. In the
Iron Picker, Natasha, Revision, and Container 158, women protagonists deal with harsh and real life struggles, from lack of access to health care and hustling to support the family, to accounting for the murder of a spouse, and the challenges of living and raising children in the isolated periphery of Rome. And finally a Romni, Iovanca Gaspar, directed the inspiring documentary Dui Rroma (Iovanca Gaspar, A, 2014) – unimaginable a century ago.

To sum up, in many fictional films, the stereotypical figure of the Roma woman with all of the abovementioned connotations became part of the film vernacular. The trope of eroticised women featured prominently in early film and even though it finds its dazzling resurgence in recent films, today’s Roma women can direct films and can be shown as self-determined and successful. Most are shown living in poverty, but not as passive onlookers; rather, they are active and committed members of their communities.

The Roma musician and music as figures of othering

Just as Roma are othered by the persistent emphasis on imagined nomadism and the description of their dwelling places as distant and different, the figure of the ‘Roma musician’, and with it that of ‘Roma music’, ubiquitous across genre and types of scholarship, functions as an archetype that commonly stereotypes. There are many accomplished and talented Roma musicians in the world, but the prevailing discourse has largely epitomised Roma as the ‘othered musician’, and has additionally asserted a racially prejudiced innate connection between Roma and music. Both of these tropes, ‘Roma music’ and ‘Roma musician’, unduly deny Roma the right to be considered full citizens of the nation states where they are born and live; additionally, their right to self-determination and self-expression is curtailed. On one hand, if they are culturally othered to the point where they cannot be considered Hungarian or German (in what and how they play, where they play, and so on), then they are not considered people of these countries; on the other, if music is innate to them, then they are racially othered, hence cannot be Czech or Italian. The lack of belonging to a community or larger nation accompanied by the loss of identity is further implied; lastly, in the wider process of ethnic and cultural othering, they are additionally othered along gender lines, as they are usually featured as male musicians. The great composers Liszt, Brahms and Bartók, who might be best described as showing regard for Roma musicians and infatuation with their music, often hyped the myths and tried to separate their own country’s music from so-called Roma music. The very term ‘Roma music’ becomes distinguished from any given country, so that it can never be viewed as coming from the German or Hungarian tradition. Even in those instances when conceivably music might not translate into othering and exclusion from the grand national narrative, as in the example of Spanish flamenco tradition
being rooted in the Roma heritage, nevertheless the result is often the opposite (Washabaugh 2016; Brown Julie 2007).

David Malvinni, in his book *Gypsy Caravan* (2004), aptly describes the nineteenth-century Central European reverence for ‘gypsy music’ as partly stemming from exotic Romanticism. This music was usually construed by the big composers as improvisational, not fixed in writing, deep with subjectivity, romantic, emotional, melodic, with nostalgic memories of seduction, but also of pain and suffering. According to Malvinni, these composers insisted on two essential stereotypes: the improvisational character of so-called ‘gypsy music’ and its inherent difference from Hungarian peasant music. He points out: ‘Improvisation can thus be used to describe how nomadic music culture detersitorializes musical models. This is a nomadic logic of improvisation, and I think it comes as an aesthetic principle of at least professional Gypsy music-making’ (2004, 69). Even though the majority of Roma by then were sedentary, a powerful stereotype of nomadism still persisted, and with it a myth of ‘gypsy music’ as something inherently different from the European. Roma music was thought of as a transcription of ‘gypsy’ lifestyle and character, and it functioned as an ethnic marker; the same discourse, even if well intentioned, can pigeonhole Roma as street, restaurant, and wedding entertainers, to whom access beyond this milieu is for the most part denied.

Isolated figures of ‘Roma musicians’, vignettes with little contextualisation, are typical for the early film period; they usually function as a way of scene set-up, establishing shots or character introduction, characterised by ethnic marking. Thus they became widely used archetypes recalling a vast repertoire of stereotyped images that had clear filmic functions. In *Raphael*, the ‘gypsy intruders’ (identified as such in the intertitle) enter the salon where a lavish party is in progress; some play instruments while randomly milling around the room, others read palms. The spatial organisation, high-angle shots and dim lighting of this sequence, through which the relationship between Roma and non-Roma is constructed, are used in other films of the period as a tool to depict ‘Roma’ and ‘Roma musicians’ as outsiders, intruders and often antagonistic foreigners. In the feature film *Aniula*, the ‘gypsy caravan’ is introduced by men randomly standing around the wagon, playing violins, moving in a dance rhythm as other protagonists move around often glancing at the violin players; the constant awareness of music around them is assumed. These random music vignettes link Roma to alleged criminality, as in the child kidnapping in *Raphael*, or stealing in *Aniula*, and presumed general otherness.

Some hundred years later, in the critically engaging documentaries, *Gypsy Vote* and *Container 158*, there are significant departures, mostly reflected in the urgency of the individual protagonists’ livelihoods and political involvement. Roma are stronger characters in these films, with agency: running for an election as a city councilman, or a young entrepreneur fighting for his future in Italy. These documentaries show the
severity of the living conditions, daily discrimination and lack of basic legal rights – a true change from the romanticised, exoticised or vilified representations of the past. However, even here the tropes triggering ethnic marking persist: as a colourful intro with folkloristic music, women dancing and animals roaming on the streets in *The Gypsy Vote*, or women dancing in the open air in *Container 158*, in an ornamental evocative of the stockpile of stereotypical images from the past.

**The spaces of music and musicians**

Just as Malvinni concluded that even during the period when Roma music was held in some high regard, it was still described as an improvisational, on-the-road type of music including the derogative subtext, we see how the same type of thinking was reflected in the early cinema. Here film strictly tied music to the alleged inherent nomadism of Roma, a fact perceptible in the choice of outside locations: under the open blue, on the horizon, in a restaurant or master’s house, on the street or by the caravan. *A Day with the Gypsies*, which follows a group of Roma for one day, shows people dancing by the fire and playing violins late one evening somewhere in the open field. In *Mustalaishurmaaja*, most of the action takes place in a tent, even though we witness how unstable that dwelling place really is, as Roma quickly flee the area after being pursued for murder. In *Two Little Waifs*, children are kidnapped and brought into the woods where music continues.

In the recent productions, spaces have partly changed: we see Roma as wedding musicians, but also major commercial bands competing on a national stage, as in *Brasslands* (Meerkat Media Collective, USA 2013). In *Newo Ziro*, Roma live in apartments and houses, even though most of the music-making is still shown in the open air, next to trailers. Also, *Gypsy Spirit: Harri Stojka – A Trip* (Klaus Hundsbichler, A 2010) and *Desert Inspiration* (Robert Krieg, Monika Nolte, GER 2014) are filmed primarily in the desert, but these scenes are juxtaposed with filmed interviews in apartments in Vienna or Sweden. *When the Road Bends* portrays the present-day commercial exploits of such popular vestiges as Spanish ‘gypsy flamenco’, ‘Balkan gypsy music’ and mystical Indian music; although on the road again (in a bus called the ‘Gypsy caravan’), as the title of this documentary suggests, we hear the musicians speak on camera about antiziganism in their respective countries, reflecting thoughtfully on the diversity of music and the daily prejudice they face. Actually this type of reflection is perceptible in each of the abovementioned examples. *Brasslands* shows an awareness of long historical tensions between non-Roma and Roma Serbs (implied is the notion that other European nationalities could be superimposed), notably paying attention to nationalistic and extremist elements.
In these recent films, there are no images of concert halls, indoor stages, conservatoriums, music schools – all those places that are used to represent musicians as musicians and not as ethnically marked ‘Roma musicians’ – that might indicate a real departure from presenting Roma music as something non-European and less desirable in the hierarchical order of music prowess; and there are hardly any films that simply do not care about ornamentally using Roma music as a way of character or plot device, or leave it out altogether. This type of a perspective offers usually prejudiced interest in musicology and is detached from music as a form; it relates closer to ethnography as its objective is to put on display for others to behold the difference. Two notable exceptions are the documentaries *Dui Rroma* and *Iron Picker*; the latter marks a significant departure inasmuch as it incorporates no music whatsoever. Less remarkably on its own, perhaps, but in relation to films featuring Roma this approach seems unconventional and cutting-edge. *Dui Rroma* stands contrary to the usual de-historicised trope of Roma music, as it features Sinto Hugo Höllenreiner, Auschwitz survivor. At the same time, the film captures the process of writing music for the oratorio *Symphonia Romani* – *Bori Duk*, by the Viennese Romani composer Adrian Gaspar, who puts the story of Höllenreiner into his composition. The film oscillates between Höllenreiner’s story and the oratorio narrating it. What is so exhilarating about this approach is that it stands as an excellent example of not just Roma writing about Roma, and also of Roma writing music for Roma, but above all of a storyline so fundamentally contextualised and framed by music.

Early films adopted the beliefs of the time about the inherent nomadism and innateness of music to all Roma. The trope of a ‘Roma musician’ and the spaces this trope was allowed to occupy were primarily ways in which film engaged with its other. The music became a part of essentialising discourse pinning down the ‘Roma character’ as perceived in their music. 100 years later, some of the same ethnic markers, imagery and spaces remain.

**Conclusion**

We have shown that certain tropes of othering persist in contemporary film, and that the dominant tropes are retrievable a century later. Those tropes always in flux nevertheless insist on perpetuating the myth that they are not invented figures and imaginations with an obvious objective benefiting the dominant society. As in early films, the irregular places epitomise the protagonists, and portray temporal, geographical and cultural distance between the dominant society and ‘the Roma’ as unbridgeable. Ethnographic interests as well as the fascination with sensational living conditions have led to spectacular images of poverty, separated from their historical and political context and updated spaces of alterity. In numerous fictional features and TV shows, the trope of the erotised
'gypsy' woman remains as a short cut to character introduction or scene set-up, as a marker of authenticity, as erotic fantasy and the instrument of othering. In most films, music made by Roma is still a field of unquestioned exoticism often represented as something essentialised, non-European, and less desirable in the hierarchical order of music prowess. In identifying these tropes and explaining how they forcefully lead to symbolic exclusion we want to open up new spaces of representation and contribute to fighting antiziganism. Even in the twenty-first century, Roma people are imagined and stigmatised as ‘other’ in order to channel and direct national and transnational developments. Political ruptures within the European Union are often followed by an intensified incriminating discourse about Roma, which in turn frequently has direct legislative consequences. Against this background many recent films cannot keep pace with their own political demands. Some ambitious films do not become effective or readable as progressive because they have not enough distance to conventionalised semantics they are overshadowed by a stigmatising discourse and the political reality. But there are also successful departures from the status quo; particularly since the 2000s film has shown its ability to appropriate current theoretical approaches towards gender, identity and ethnicity. Some recent documentary films have been able to develop a politically progressive impetus and a challenging aesthetic form by avoiding established filmic tropes and elements of antiziganistic media discourses. They have successfully worked on finding other forms of representation, and directed the attention to the role of the dominant society. In these documentary films, spaces and settings were carefully chosen and visualised to lever out essentialising and stigmatising attributions; many female protagonists deal with harsh and real-life struggles, and are shown as active members of the European societies fighting for their rights. If films want to intervene into present European reality and oppose ruling factions, aesthetic practices have to be profoundly re-examined. More than ever images and sounds must call into question their relationship to historical predecessors and the contexts that link them with mass media. To challenge antiziganism, we need an arrangement of images, sounds and voices that radically disrupts the established system of knowledge and creates other ways of seeing, listening and thinking.21

Notes

1. The EU Roma Summit, the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies by 2020 and many projects by Roma and non-Roma activists have targeted the difficult political situation and living conditions of many Roma in Europe.

2. As a convention, we use ‘gypsy’ as a construct as opposed to ‘Gypsy’, a self-determining label. Accordingly, we use ‘Roma’ as a cultural construct.
3. We acknowledge that a future research paper might include a twentieth-century survey of film, including the Nazi-era films, followed by the rebirth of the New Wave as influenced by the student movement, and ending with the 90s film.

4. The International Romani Film Commission has been supporting Roma film projects since 2012, achieving an increased awareness for films and filmmakers, and providing for improved evaluation.

5. We use the term ‘Roma’ for members of extremely diverse groups as described by others, or for those who identify as Roma, ‘Gypsy’, ‘Gitano’, ‘Czigany’, ‘Zigeuner’, or otherwise; in doing so, we refer to the first World Romany Congress (1971), which condemned traditionally applied ethnic appellations and instead adopted ‘Roma’ as a self-chosen ethnonym. We are aware that the term ‘Gypsy’ or its local translations remain a preferred mode of self-identification for some individuals and communities across Europe, and is the subject of much debate.

6. Concerning the debate around the terms such as ‘antiziganism’, ‘romaphobia’, ‘antiromaism’ or ‘racism against Roma’, see Markus End (2013). For the relations between antisemitism and antiziganism, see Wolfgang Wippermann (1997).

7. Own translation from the original title.

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10. The often romanticised depiction of ‘wandering gypsies’ neglects the fact that decrees and edicts passed by the European authorities as early as the fifteenth century limited the movement of Roma, preventing them from acquiring permanent residency and employment, and forcing many of them to be on the move. See Mohammad Hassan Gharati (1996).

11. For the identification of ‘gypsies’ as ‘placeless strangers’ in German-language literature around 1800, see Claudia Breger (1998).

12. For the development of the stereotypical accusation of child abduction, see Stefanie Kugler (2008).

13. Translated from the intertitles.


16. Despite Iron Picker’s fame, the protagonist, Nazif Mujic (Silver Bear for best actor), has seen no improvements in his living situation. See Sören Kittel (2017).

17. The director Toni Gatlif is still the only internationally known film-maker with a Romani background. He became renowned worldwide for his trilogy on the ‘Gypsy’ people: Les Princes (F 1983), Latcho Drom (F 1993), Gadjo Dilo (F 1997).

18. For the concept of Orientalism, see Edward Said (1978).

19. The iconic figure of the erotic ‘gypsy woman’, dancing for all to see, finds its dazzling resurgence in fiction films like the Walt Disney animated film Esmeralda (Gary Trousdale/Kirk Wise, USA 1996) or current horror films like Drag Me to Hell (Sam Raimi, USA 2009) or The Wolf Man (Joe Johnston, USA 2010) – and especially in current reality TV, such as My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, Swapping Housewives for ‘Gypsy’ Figures in Reality TV. See Tremlett (2014).

20. Many thanks to Juliette Cherbuliez, University of Minnesota, for her valuable contributions.
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