

# NEW ROMANI-THEMED CINEMA FROM EASTERN EUROPE

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I first focused on the matter of Romani (Gypsy) representation in international cinema back in 2003, relying on my expertise in Eastern European and Balkan film, thinking that it was within this group that most Romani-themed films abound. Back then, I edited a special issue of the New York-based film journal *Framework*, which was the first attempt to start organising and discussing this body of work. It did not take long to realise, however, that the scope of this project was much bigger. In fact, it was huge. After all, the Romanies are not only Europe's biggest ethnic minority, but also one of the most sizeable and significant transnational minorities in the world at large.

In the course of working on these matters over the years – with a second instalment in the special edited issue of the progressive London-based journal *Third Text* in 2008, which I co-edited with my friend and colleague Paloma Gay-y-Blasco, I had the chance to learn (and continue learning) about an incredibly rich and versatile variety of films, which, in one way or another, feature Romanies. It transpired that films representing Romanies originated from a much wider territory than I originally had imagined, stretching far beyond the countries of Europe and North America and including cinematic works from Egypt, Argentina, India, Iran and many more. It soon became clear that Romanies have been appearing on the silver screen since the first days of cinema, in a range of films by well-known pioneers and as early as 1896.

I continued my interest over the years and have been publishing various texts on these matters in the past decade or so. I also helped various film festivals with their programmes related to the Roma – some instances include the film festival in Rotterdam (Netherlands, in 2003), the festival in Douarnenez (France, in 2013), as well as the dedicated Roma Film Festival in London (2009). This year I decided to come back and organise this work, by bringing it all together, adding some more material, and preparing a monograph.

The film discussions I offer here to the attention of *Celluloid* readers – which all relate to important Gypsy-themed films made in recent years across the countries of Eastern Europe – form the building blocks toward this forthcoming book project on *Romani Representations in Film*, a monograph that will look at the massive body of films dedicated to the Roma over a longer period of time as well as over a wider geographical region. The discussion in the book also covers films from a number of other countries, including France (by Tony Gatliff), Russia, Germany, Turkey, Canada, Bulgaria, and many more.

### **POLAND: PAPUSZA**

The Polish biopic PAPANUSZA (2013, Joanna Kos-Krauze and Krzysztof Krauze), shot in beautiful B&W, is one of the few films dedicated to a real Romani figure, the poet-songwriter Bronisława Wajs (1908-1987).

The focal point of the narrative is in 1949, when Papanusza (Doll), a swarthy 40 year-old, meets and befriends the Polish poet and ethnologist Jerzy Ficowski who

encourages her to write and who eventually publishes and publicizes her work, with support from senior poet Julian Tuwim. This period immediately precedes a series of efforts toward the sedentarization of nomadic Gypsies in the period 1952-1964. Up until then, Papsza has thrived at freedom in the forest and in the fields. She has learned to read and write on her own.

Whilst the Romani community does not stand in Papsza's way to being a poet and a singer, a range of difficulties and condemnation come about once her poetry is published, in 1956, in a bilingual edition in Ficowski's translation, i.e. when she opens up her creativity to the wider public and engages in an act of communication with the outside world. She is judged and ostracized by her own, and then spends a period in mental hospital followed by multiple years of claustrophobic isolation. So whilst at first Papsza is pleased to see her work published, eventually she feels that her appropriation by and institutionalization within official culture was forced on her. She is expelled by her own people, and she has not sought to be accepted elsewhere. She still prefers the nomadic existence of her childhood. In the final scene that plays out under the accompaniment of her songs, the tabor goes away through a wintry field.

### **ROMANIA: *AFERIM***

The Romanian film *AFERIM!* (Radu Jude, 2015) is one of the most important films on the Roma.

The story is set in Tara Romaneasca, Wallachia, in the 1830s and follows a bounty hunter and his son. They are in the footsteps of a Romani man, a runaway slave, who

has escaped the estate after his affair with the boyar's wife has come to light. The Rom, Carfin, is apprehended and hauled back, then publicly humiliated and castrated whilst his family members look on shamefacedly. It also becomes clear that it was not the Rom who pursued the lady of the house, but it was rather her, a frustrated consort, who reached out and summoned the slave to take care of her (lower body) needs.

With its plot and execution, *AFERIM!* is significant on two planes. One is that it is a milestone in acknowledging the slavery aspect in the history of European Gypsies – a fact that is little recognized and under-discussed, at best, in official histories and which Romologists like Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov have been trying to bring back into the narrative. Once again, as I have claimed in many other instances, the medium of film proves more progressive than the social sciences in recognizing certain realities and encouraging discourses of importance. Like all other films about slavery, *AFERIM!* is a vital piece of testimony of the social position of the Roma – and in that it has been compared to the Oscar-winning *TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE* (Steve McQueen, 2014).

The other important aspect is that *AFERIM!* tackles matters contextually. It does not place the Romani protagonist in the centre of the narrative but keeps him on the sideline whilst focusing on the overall attitudes toward the Roma. For the most part of the film, the Rom is silent and mistreated. I find this a particularly productive approach – as it showing the Gypsy existence in context – Carfin is silenced, beaten and downtrodden, deprived of say and agency and yet treated as a fully fledged subject who can be kept responsible and punished as the sole perpetrator of crime.

*AFERIM!* was the Romanian nomination in the best foreign language film category at the 2016 Academy Awards, but was not shortlisted. It is one of the rare films to have

achieved a 100% rating on the web-site Rotten Tomatoes. It won Silver Bear at Berlinale in 2015.

### **SLOVAKIA: *KOZA***

The slow continuous shots, exquisite framing and wintry aesthetics of *KOZA* (2015, Ivan Ostrochovský), this beautifully crafted film from Slovakia, make it one of the best portrayals of Romanies' limited opportunities.

Former boxing champion Peter Baláž, plays himself, and it seems he also plays his own life. He is a loser now, with no chances of ever winning, entrapped in a downward spiral. A fallen man in every other respect, he is not able to keep the child that his girlfriend has conceived. No endurance is left in his small muscular body; he can no longer fight, and there is no respite for him, no retirement, and no cushion. The incessant disoriented traveling between matches, on snowy provincial roads, conveys the feeling of freezing and discomfort from beginning to end. His is a modern-day slavery: calling him a 'dumb cripple, his manager tries to sell him.

*KOZA* is an existential tale of a beaten protagonist that will endure, if it is properly distributed and seen. I found it more moving than the Romani-themed Berlinale-winner *AN EPISODE FROM THE LIFE OF AN IRON PICKER* (Danis Tanovic, 2013), which belongs to the same genre. The film is reminiscent of the tableaux in Ulrich Seidl's *IMPORT/EXPORT* (2007) and of the gloomy *THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY?* (Sydney Pollack, 1969). There is no direct blaming, and not even an explicit mention that the protagonist is a Rom – it is obvious to those who

come from this region. KOZA was the Slovak entry to the foreign language Oscars but it has not been shortlisted – and I doubt it if the proverbial Academy members are able to understand what this film is about.

### **SERBIA: THE KENEDI FILMS, Željimir Žilnik, Serbia, 2003-2007**

This is a longitudinal project, in which the famous Black Wave director Žilnik follows the fate of a young Romani man from Kosovo, who has been displaced by the conflict in the early 1990s and who is now in search of place for himself. The three films discussed here have been made two years apart from one another. Žilnik is now in process of shooting a fourth instalment, where he depicts Kenedi's new life in a provincial French town. The film will most likely be finished and released later in 2016.

#### **KENEDI GOES BACK HOME**

Set in and around Belgrade airport, the first film of Žilnik's Kenedi series, KENEDI GOES BACK HOME (*Kenedi se vraća kući*, 2003) takes an issue with the concept of 'home'.

His protagonist, Kenedi Hasani, is a twenty-something year old Rom from Kosovo — a place where he can no longer return to, in 2003. Like many others, he and his family have been displaced early in the 1990s. Most of his fellow-Romanies have left at the time of Yugoslavia's dissolution and have spent a decade in Germany. The children have grown up there. Kenedi himself is more fluent in German than in the Romani or Serbian languages, which he also speaks, along with Italian and Albanian. Serbia, as

the official recipient of whatever is left out of Yugoslavia, must become his new homeland — but it is one where no one expects nor welcomes people like him.

In this first part of the series, we meet Kenedi as taxi driver in Belgrade. He is making a living by meeting Roma who have been dragged out of bed and thrown out of Germany the previous night, and flown into Serbia on charter flights in the early morning hours. He is driving them around wintry Belgrade during the first day of their new life 'home' and provides assistance.

Žilnik's anti-racism is one of the most consistent features of his approach. In this film, he provides a record of something that never made it into the official media discourse at the time, but that he records persuasively at the affected/receiving end. **KENEDI GOES BACK HOME** shows how in that period Germany engaged in a systematic and organized deportation campaign of Roma refugees from former Yugoslavia back into Serbia, thus effectively not only shutting them out of sight but also engaging in active racial segregation by sending them to territories outside the European Union.

After a decade-long sojourn in Germany these people have been pulled out of bed in the small hours of the morning, loaded onto a plane and sent 'back home.' They report about immigration squads that break into their flats with no warning, on a false pretence of emergency, and that make them pack within minutes, without any chance to appeal or contest the extradition. Not even a trip to the ATM is allowed: they are denied an opportunity to accessing their own cash. Even Roma that have settled successfully are forcefully turned into homeless outcasts within a matter of hours. A German immigration official admits to the camera that his is a 'shitty work.'

## **KENEDI LOST AND FOUND**

In the second part -- KENEDI LOST AND FOUND (*Gde je bio Kenedi 2 godine*, Želimir Žilnik, Serbia and Montenegro, 2005) -- the litanies of Kenedi become a longitudinal project. The main part of the film is shot at an airport in Austria, just before Kenedi's voluntary repatriation to Serbia. Where was Kenedi for the past two years? Well, he was trying to get established somewhere in Europe, to no avail. He tried Hungary, then Sweden, and then Finland, but he also tried Germany and Switzerland. And Italy...He knows all the laws and enforcement practices and one thinks he could play the system -- but it is not happening. He spoke Romani to the immigration officials, but they had brought an Albanian translator and then send him a letter of their decision, in Russian...He stayed the most in Austria where conditions were bad but where he sometimes had work, at 3 Euros an hour...Ah, he also tried in Great Britain, and in the Czech Republic, and in Poland... Why don't you try in Turkey?, someone asks him - 'Yok para,' he replies.

His household is packed in a few bags; it is hand-to-mouth existence, even though he is wearing a formal suit and tie, and a hat. Back in Serbia he will sleep in a shared bed in the slum, and later on, in summer, will try to build an extra room to the house. His mother, a diabetic, has been deported from Germany after fifteen years and has got no access to medical care.

It is all reported in a matter-of-factly manner, no complaints, this is just the way it is. One must survive somehow, even if 'life and destiny are not going my way' as Kenedi puts it. He will now spend some time in Serbia, before trying again...

I particularly like the narrative positioning of Žilnik's take on this episode in Kenedi's life -- the ending point is not the departure from the West, the story may start in

Austria but then goes on in Serbia, and will go on wherever he will happen to end up next.

When deciding what to focus on in his films, Žilnik is always at least two years ahead of times -- if he makes a film about something today, it is a sure bet that this will be a major issue in the public discourse two years later. This observation, on the forward-anticipating nature of Žilnik's work, which I first made some years back, has been confirmed again and again -- his *OLD SCHOOL OF CAPITALISM* (2009), where workers occupy the factory in protest, was made two years before the Occupy! movement, and his *LOGBOOK SERBISTAN* (2015) which follows around several refugees, was in proposal stage in the summer of 2013, two years before the current refugee crisis. In the case of the Kenedi films, however, he is more than two years ahead -- *KENEDI LOST AND FOUND* is made eleven years ago now, yet shows in unblinking detail the way things are today -- because they were the same ten years back as they are now...

And, of course, *KENEDI LOST AND FOUND* is made some eight years before *AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF AN IRON PICKER* (Danis Tanovic, 2013), the story of which evolved around the cold-blooded withdrawal of emergency medical aid to a Gypsy woman who found herself in mortal danger in Serbia. Nazif Mujic, a Bosnian Rom who played himself in *THE IRON PICKER*, won the best actor award at Berlinale. He then tried to get asylum in Germany, but, like Kenedi, was denied and deported.

## **KENEDI IS GETTING MARRIED**

KENEDI IS GETTING MARRIED (*Kenedi se zeni*, 2007) is a film of hybrid nature in that it is neither documentary nor fiction, but both -- as many other Roma-themed films. It has been described as 'social docudrama' and as an 'acted documentary', and has been called 'provocatively authentic'. Žilnik claims that, like all his other films, it is rooted in reality. But this film includes professional actors from Germany and also some fantasy subplots. There is more re-enactment and staging than in the other parts. Surprisingly, I also realize that even though this is a well-known title, very little information and images of the film have circulated in public space; not even a clip is easily accessible. Perhaps it is because of a certain awkwardness related to the subject matter and the film's focus on uses of sexuality as means for social advancement. But then, Žilnik would not stay away from what may appear controversial where he believes he is showing the reality, even if it may come across as unpalatable for some.

Since expanding the house where his large family live, Kenedi is in debt. The odd construction jobs that he and his pals get will never allow him to pay off the few thousand Euro that he owes. He thinks of emigrating again. The new laws on gay marriage allow foreign partners to be sponsored, so Kenedi meets Max, a guy from Munich, who is willing to help legalize him. The couple chart a nice future together. On the farewell party night, however, Kenedi is caught with a female mistress, and the whole plan collapses.

At the end of the film, the series takes an existential pensive turn. Kenedi is alone and with no prospects for the future. He goes to Istanbul, as someone had suggested to him earlier on. He seeks out his Roma brethren there, but the prospects are not good — even though they supposedly speak the same language, the dialects are too far

apart, to the point of incomprehensibility. He feels lost in the vast city, surrounded by the signing of imams from the minarets.

At the Serbian national film festival in Novi Sad that year Kenedi Hasani was awarded for best male performance -- by a jury chaired by Icelandic director Fridrik Thor Fridriksson. Reportedly, the news of the awards triggered adverse reaction. 'Most of the film-makers and particularly actors were surprised and angry that the jury awarded the best actor prize to Kenedi Hasani, the non-professional star of Želimir Žilnik's *Kenedi Is Getting Married*' , *Screen International*'s correspondent Vladan Petkovic wrote, <http://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/reviews/vladan-s-summer-festival-hell-1-novi-sad/>). Apparently, quite a few people expressed disapproval: 'How can this be,' they said. 'Kenedi is not at actor, he is a Gypsy.' Žilnik is also telling me that after the award Kenedi had offers to act in a Danish film, but it could not work out due to his uncertain immigration status.

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