

THREE EARLY ROMANI-THEMED FILMS BY TONY GATLIF

Dina Iordanova @ 2021



In this short essay, I would like to present information about three important early films by French-Romani director Tony Gatlif: *Corre Gitano* (1981), *Canta, Gitano!* (1982) and *Les Princes* (1982).

Gatlif is perhaps the most prolific film director of Romani origin. Born in Algeria in 1948, Gatlif mainly works in France and is acknowledged as an idiosyncratic and highly original contemporary auteur, not dissimilar to other celebrated directors of the same generation such as Robert Guedigian (b. 1953), who is of Armenian descent and is based in Marseille – and whose films, like Gatlif's, focus on the experience of protagonists from this respective ethnic

group, or some of the key directors of the so-called *beur* cinema, such as Algerian-born Merzak Alouache (b. 1944) and Rachid Bouchareb (b. 1953).

Gatlif is known as leftist, and early on had interest in acting; in the 1980s he also made two romantic quasi-erotic films. He is well connected internationally and has had the opportunity to realize projects that indulge in his interest in pursuing Godardian approaches to cinema and has experimented with the cinematic form over the years. If there is one theme that he always returns to, however, this is the Romani topic. He has been working on Romani-themed films since 1981, as I report here, and is most likely to continue with this line of work. Whereas his later films have been widely seen and discussed, and have often been the centre of controversies, the earlier films that I am reporting on here are rarely seen and little known. I imagine that it would be of interest to the readers to get acquainted with this understudied aspects in Gatlif's work.

CORRE GITANO (1981)

Tony Gatlif's *Corre Gitano!* (Spain, 1981) seems to be the earliest film of the director to address the Romani topic. This 80-min long film is shot in Andalusia, around Grenada and Seville, and is largely unavailable. It played as part of the Entrevues Belfort - Festival International du Film programme curated by Lili Hinstin in France in 2014. There is quite a bit of confusion in regard to this film as many mistake it for the next film I am discussing here, the short *Canta, Gitano*, which is a French production from 1982. This one, however, is made in Spain and it is a dance film that is about 75 min long. It does not appear in Gatlif's filmography at imdb, which is perhaps why it has remained invisible to researchers so far.

Based on the work of Andalusian poet Juan de Loza, the film is somewhat of a preparatory Spanish-focused study for Gatlif's later *Latcho Drom* (1993) in that it combines acted episodes (showing various aspects of Romani life and discrimination) and dance performances of fiery flamenco, by established and respected dancers Mario Maya and Carmen Cortes. Gatlif himself also has a role in the film, and in general he is known to have cast himself in small cameos in most of the early films on the Romani topic (he was also an actor at the time, known for having roles in several romantic films). In some respects, there are overlaps with the subsequent Porraimos-themed short *Canta Gitano* (1982), which also features Maya -- but these are two distinct works that should not be mixed up.

In many respects *Corre Gitano's* short sketches of everyday life confrontations with the authorities in present-day Spain, interlaced with emotive dance episodes are a much denser and accurate depiction of issues related to the community than those found in Gatlif's later work, such as *Vengo* (2000), a later film that retains many of the early topics and visual/dance elements but also become more susceptible to stereotypes that are found in general circulation.

CANTA, GITANO (1982)

Canta, Gitano (1982) is a feature short by Tony Gatlif, an early effort to present the Romani view to the Holocaust (or Porraimos, as it has come to be known). It can be seen in full on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lZ-7tn5ue5U>).

This ten minute long musical film features no dialogue but only choreography and singing. It breaks down in three parts, all related to the Romani experience in the Porraimos. In the first part, a group of Romanies are shown detained by the Nazis, crammed up on a stage that is

made to resemble a camp, with barbed wire and train wagons nearby. They witness how one of theirs is destroyed for behaving proudly: the man is taken to his death into the night, with raised head, and singing.

The second part is a proud flamenco-style dance asserting love to freedom, performed by Mario Maya, who is also author of the music for the film. Maya (1938-2007) was a famous Spanish flamenco performer who has spent a formative period of his life studying under the leaders of modern dance in New York City, and who subsequently fused traditional flamenco with American avant-garde influences from Merce Cunningham and Alvin Ailey.

In the third - - and most important – part of the film, evolving on the background of the dramatic song *Corre, Gitano*, a Rom and a Jew are seen escaping together from a camp transport. They are shown running through hills in a frantic dash for freedom, where the Rom leads the way and the Jew follows. The Rom is played by Tony Gatlif himself, and in the opening shots of the sequence he is seen leading the break from the train. Clearly, Gatlif's view here can be broken down to three elements: First, both Jews and Roma were equally persecuted during WWII – as they are being transported to the camp together. Second, they actively supported one another as they escape together. Third, the Roma were often leaders in bravery and resistance to oppression, as shown here.

THE PRINCES (1982)

The important and little seen 1982 film *Les Princes*, written and directed by Tony Gatlif, is now available in full on YouTube from the channel of Gypsy Floyd, which also features a number of other Romani classics (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90nTR4ZyPTU>).

Unfortunately, it is only in the original French language version and not subtitled. Still, having the chance to see this legendary film after so many years is an important development,

especially as this is one of the key films in Gatlif's long filmography. Carrie Tarr's analysis of the film in *Framework* (2003) is one of the few texts dedicated entirely to it.

Les Princes stars Gerard Darmon, who is a young actor at the time but later on will be one of the best-known personalities of French cinema known for his good looks and also famous as singer and cabaret performer. Darmon is a heart-throb of Algerian-Jewish descent -- whilst Gatlif, who is also Algerian born, is of mixed Berber and Romani extraction; Gatlif also appears in a small role in this film, as a local Romani gangster.

Les Princes shows the difficult and squalid life of Nara's family in a remote French town (the film is shot in the town of Guise, Picardy), around the *Bar Les Princes*. It shows 'the France that we do not normally see' -- as seen in more recent French films like Bruno Dumont's *Hors Satan* (2011) and in Jacques Audiard's Cannes-winner *Dheepan* (2015).

The protagonist, Nara, is full of anger -- to his wife who he estranges by his unforgiving attitude, to his French associate-petty crook, to the wealthy ladies - slim and elegant - that appear to be interested in him, to the school who may teach his daughter to seek to part with her roots, to the authorities, to the gendarmes who first rudely evict them and then mistreat them for being 'nomads', to everything and everybody -- he simply does not seem to have been given much choice of being not angry. The only person truly close to him is his mother, a picturesque granny, who is the strongest person throughout this whole ordeal. At the end of the film, she passes away on a muddy roadside -- and the only thing Nara is able to do for her is to embrace her lovingly and stick one last cigarette in her mouth. Like other Romani-themed films, *Les Princes* is an intense drama that interrogates matters of quick-temper and abjection, and yet I was much more touched by it than many other films I have seen.

In a comment added to YouTube, some has commented: 'Toute ma jeunesse à Montreuil ...' (All my youth, in Montreuil...), clearly alluding that this is an authentic representation of Romani life in France in the early 1980s.

Whilst watching *Les Princes*, I could not help being reminded of Aleksandar Petrovic's classic *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (1967) -- the styling, the costume and the behavior of the protagonist is extremely close to the styling, costume and movements of actor (and heart-throb) Bekim Fehmiu in the Yugoslav film. Further, there is clear influencing that is revealed in the staging of the way the musical scenes are interwoven in the text – particularly those set in the pub, as well as in the way the neighborhood and the muddy roads are presented. I have no information if Gatlif had Petrovic's film as a model in his mind, and in my experience as researcher directors rarely acknowledge their influences, but what better Romani movie one could be influenced by than this recognized classic?

To conclude, these three early Romani-themed films by Gatlif are of foundational importance for his later oeuvre, as they remain, in many respects, definitive for his entire filmography. Some of the most important themes that he will keep coming back in his later work are already present here:

First, the social confrontation, which is shown mainly through unspoken dance sequences in *Corre Gitano* (1981) will be revisited in many of his later films, and which is one that is presented somehow outside of specific historical framework – an approach discussed by Katie Trumpener in 1992 and that Gatlif is recycling in numerous later films, most notably in some of the final sequences of his famous *Latcho Drom* (1993).

Second, the treatment of *Porraimos* as summed up in the 1982 short, which has importance as a 'statement' film. Gatlif has often said that there is very limited concrete historical

information that he can use in films on this topic, so this more impressionistic approach seems to suit him well. It is revisited in a different way in the Czech-based sequence from *Latcho Drom* (1993). In his later period, Gatlif made the Porraimos-themed film *Korkoro* (2009), which is set in Vichy France and is based on specific historical episode. The film, however, pales by comparison with the intensity of *Canta, Gitano*.

Third, the social realism of *The Princes* (1982) makes an important contribution in the history of cinematic representations of the Roma. Later on Gatlif veers away and prefers to deploy a fairly romanticized and idealized approach – as seen in films like *Gadjo Dilo* (1997), *Swing* (2002), or *Transylvania* (2006), yet remains committed to tackling the social dimension, as seen in *Geronimo* (2014). However, *Les Princes* remains his only film that is made entirely in the conventions of social realism and is thus one of the most accessible texts on the Roma in France, marked by definitive specifics related to region and period.

REFERENCES

Bibliography:

Iordanova, Dina (2001) 'Gypsies: Looking at 'Them', Defining Oneself,' In: *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*, London: BFI, 2001. pp. 213-235.

Tarr, Carrie (2003) "Les Princes/ The Princes," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*: Vol. 44 : Issue 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/framework/vol44/iss2/12>

Trumpener. Katie (1992) 'The Time of the Gypsies: A "People without History" in the Narratives of the West,' *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Identities, pp. 843-884.

Filmography (chronologically):

I Even Met Happy Gypsies, Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Petrovic, 1967

Corre Gitano!, Spain, Tony Gatlif, 1981

Canta, Gitano, France, Tony Gatlif, 1982

Les Princes, France, Tony Gatlif, 1982

Latcho Drom, France, Tony Gatlif, 1993

Gadjo Dilo, France-Romania, Tony Gatlif, 1997

Swing, France-Japan, Tony Gatlif, 2002

Transylvania, France, 2006

Vengo, Spain-France-Germany-Japan, Tony Gatlif, 2000.

Korkoro, France, Tony Gatlif, 2009

Hors Satan, France, Bruno Dumont, 2011

Dheepan, France, Jacques Audiard, 2015

Geronimo, France, Tony Gatlif, 2014