

# African-American and Romani Filmic Representation and the ‘Posts’ of Post-Civil Rights and Post-EU Expansion

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## Abstract

In this article I explore linkages between the evolution of African-American filmic representation and the patterns of Romani representation in films from Central and Southeast Europe (CSEE). More specifically, I use the 1970s Blaxploitation movement and subsequent shift of African-American representation into films reliant on a realist aesthetic to contextualize analysis of the shortcomings of the Civil Rights Movement to provide broad integration for African-Americans. Given other similarities between the racialized positionalities of African-Americans and Roma, I argue that Blaxploitation can illuminate trends in the cinematic depictions of CSEE Roma, since the Roma Rights movement has had to contend with similar shortcomings in achieving political, social, and economic inclusion. The films I analyze in this piece include *Roming* (2007), *Just the Wind* (2012), *Episode of an Iron Picker* (2013), and *Bravo!* (2015).

## Keywords

- African-American
- Film
- Roma
- Race
- Representation

## Introduction

Despite the distance in their disparate histories, geographies, and cultures, African-Americans in the United States and Romani peoples in Central and Southeast Europe (CSEE) share much in common when it comes to their representation and treatment within majority societies. Both groups are defined by histories that frame them as internal others bound by marginalization. The effects of segregation linger on for both groups. Both groups are defined by way of their difference that is imposed, most notably, by structural barriers and the racialization of blackness and whiteness. The representation of African-Americans and CSEE Roma in film historically has employed “race” as a means to illustrate difference and engaged in stereotype recycling to reinforce the narratives of their universally marginalized positionalities. By “race” I refer to a manufactured “global color line” that burdens Roma and African-American representation and structural hierarchies that “rely not necessarily on biological conceptions of race but on institutional and biopolitical mechanisms, which differentiate populations into subgroups having varied access to means of life and death” (Mazrui, 1991; Sharad and Verdery, 2009: 12).

Within contemporary representations, it is possible to locate nuanced images of African-Americans and Romani peoples. Contextualizing African-American representation against a backdrop of socio-historical realities reveals how the movement from caricature to realist representation parallels the history of the Roma Rights movement and evolution of Romani representation in the cinemas of CSEE. Although the recycling of stereotypes in film certainly persists, representations now exist among a multiplicity of genres, characters, and situations. Of particular importance is the movement toward to realist aesthetics that developed alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, Blaxploitation, beginning in 1973, as it allowed for a multiplicity of experiences and verisimilitude that did not just rely on easily accessible stereotypes. For the purposes of this article, I define realism as the attempt for verisimilitude on the screen, as a means of giving the viewer an unvarnished glimpse into lives and cultures outside of the purview of dominant society. In films from CSEE with Roma-majority casts, we can detect a dialogue with the European Union focus on the “Roma Question”, where the inclusion of Romani people has moved from an issue of human rights to a question of economic and social inclusion (Rövid and Kóczé, 2012; Bhabha, Mirga, and Matache, 2017). While diverse African-American representation now has a history that spans decades, that was not always the case. In fact, this shift in cinematic image tracks African-American achievement and failures of aspects of Civil Rights, which itself was the result of a shift in focus of economics to human rights. Given that Blaxploitation film arose in the 1970s as an African-American response to the shortcomings of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, I posit that the shortcomings of the Roma Rights movement, from the early 2000s, to advance Romani social and economic inclusion in CSEE countries provides a foundation for the evolution of Romani representation to move from predictable stereotypes and metonymic symbols to more realistic, and diverse, portrayals. Numerous scholars address filmic representation of people of color and race; however, there has been minimal comparative work on screen representations of African-Americans and Romani peoples.<sup>[1]</sup>

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1. The list of scholars is long, but those referenced in this piece include Aniko Imre, Nikolina Dobрева, Dina Iordanova, Stuart Hall, Donald Bogle, Paula Masood, and Ed Guerrero.

The 1970s African-American cinematic movement of Blaxploitation and its immediate aftermath offers a compelling point of reference for the trajectory of Roma representation. Blaxploitation arose out of a confluence of realities, including a realization of African-American economic power and the shortcomings of the Civil Rights movement, that superficially produced a (legal) means to realize equality but spurred little meaningful inclusion. Also important was the growth of an African-American educated class that challenged African-American representation. Among this group were filmmakers, activists, and an engaged viewing public. The output of African-American filmmakers contributed self-representation as the primary framework for diverse portrayals and even film genres.

The EU Eastern Enlargement (2004–2013) profoundly affected the Roma Rights movement, as the position of Romani communities in CSEE states has become a focal point for EU directives, Council of Europe initiatives, and NGOs. New concern for the socio-political position of Romani communities in CSEE provides a firm platform to move away from static Romani images dependent on long-standing stereotypes. This shift in focus corresponds well to changes in Romani representation in CSEE cinema, which, similar to Blaxploitation, is in dialogue with the unfulfilled social, economic, and political goals of Roma Rights.

This article employs an interdisciplinary approach to both analyze and catalog film history. The article contributes to a transatlantic dialogue by exploring similarities in the cinematic representations of African-Americans and Roma – two racialized transnational communities. In offering this comparison, I aim to dissect how racialized images of African-Americans and Roma are coded to articulate difference. I begin by engaging with the literature addressing the uses of race in film. Then I analyze how African-American cinema responded to a post-Civil Rights social insistence for assimilation with Blaxploitation, which, in turn, was challenged by even more diverse portrayals in the decline of Blaxploitation. I continue by analyzing post-2004 CSEE films with significant Romani casts to illustrate how similar histories and social trajectories of marginalization make Blaxploitation and its immediate aftermath illuminating counterpoints to the Romani cinematic image. Finally, I address Romani self-representation as a means of complicating the stereotypical images common to the Romani filmic image.

## 1. Framing Difference: Encoding/Decoding and Representation

Stuart Hall's reinterpretation of the communications model of encoding/decoding illustrates how images are created for and processed by the viewing public, including a space for individual interpretation beyond what is prescribed or assumed true based on dominant constructs. He illustrates how images work unconsciously for viewers and reinforce ideologies that are created and nurtured by societies (Hall, 2001). Thus, ideologies produce social consciousnesses and not the converse, such that ideologies can be "taken for granted" as true and appear on screen as natural. Hall recognizes race as one such ideology, manifesting in both *overt* and *inferential* forms. Overt racism happens when "open and favourable coverage is given to arguments, positions, and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view" (Hall, 1995). By contrast, inferential

racism privileges *unquestioned assumptions*, that allow for a unchecked statements about “race relations” and neutral language about race that fails to check its intricacies, applying language “impregnated with unconscious racism” and “the unstated and unrecognized assumption is that the *blacks* are the source of the problem” (Hall, 1995).

In the American context, “race [...] has profoundly shaped, and continues to shape, the history, polity, economic structure, and culture” (Omi and Winat, 2012). In European contexts, however, race has ceased to be a dominant organizing principle since the Second World War. Nevertheless, I choose “race” in reference to Roma, as opposed to the term “ethnicity” used more regularly in the region because similar “mechanisms of racist exclusion in the United States and the rest of the world are not [...] completely different” (El-Tayeb, 2011: xxi). Moreover, as Catherine Baker points out, race has been an “undeniable category of analysis for Romani migration” (2018). Given that race manifests itself in “racialized hierarchies of power” and relies on a social structure and cultural representation, racism has become a globalized feature underpinned by local features (Batur, 2006: 5).

While it is true that the CSEE states tend to form understandings of belonging and distance on “ethnicity”, it is also necessary to understand that race affects the position of Romani people. Race is a construct imposed from the outside, informing daily interactions, European Union directives, and the perception of Roma as outsiders. Moreover, discourses of Roma difference continue to be linked to migration narratives – real or imagined – to a “mythical arrival to Europe from India” illustrating how “racism and discrimination have been a constant feature of their history” (Moschel, 2014: 141). Thus, their filmic image as different contributes to a well-established system of racialized signifiers encoded by way of forms of racism – both overt and inferential – that position Roma outside of the discourse and culture of the majority.

As an aspect of media, film acts as a “language” that reinforces ideologies, advancing the difference of African-Americans and CSEE Romani populations, offering “one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated” (Hall, 1995: 20). Images and collective notions of race, and groups defined by their race(s), can constantly be in flux, as cultural imaginaries dictating the constructs of race can change. However, images reinforce inferential racism in employing a predominance of recycled stereotypes. Film responds to the dominant discourses related to the dislocated position of African-Americans and Roma, and tends to reinforce difference and, in doing so, ensures the distance of minority groups from the majority. Such deprecating portrayals of people of color code minorities as outside the structural mechanism of the majority, which reflects the desires and imaginings of the nation as homogenous. Both Europe and America are bound by whiteness and social mechanisms that buttress its dialectic (Rucker-Chang, 2018).

While whiteness has connections to power and access as well as imagined progress and humanism, the uses of whiteness within the U.S. and Europe, particularly CSEE states, varies (Mills, 1997; Imre, 2005). In American cinema, the prevalence of whiteness reflects long-standing social hierarchies that privileged dominant means of articulating the nation, leaving minimal expression for minorities and people of color. African-Americans have contributed to the cinematic landscape since the early days of cinema. However, the presence of African-Americans on mainstream screens relied on stereotypes

and caricatures that presented African-American actors, and therefore Blackness, as reducible to a small set of expected stereotypes that illustrate African-American inferiority. Visual difference offers an easily decodable signifier in that there is little need for nuance. Donald Bogle highlights the tried and true archetypes of African-American caricatures as toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks, while Ed Guerro and Paula Massood account for variation in representation throughout different time periods (Bogle, 2016; Guerro, 1992; Massood, 2011).

Encoded Romani difference has roots in Socialist and Communist films where Roma are connected to the pastoral, a lack of progress, criminality, and rootlessness. Through the frameworks referenced above, we can better understand that, despite some legal and cultural inroads in society, the marginalization of African-Americans and CSEE Roma are reinforced through the reproduction and reinterpretation of on-screen stereotypical portrayals.

These Romani stereotypes serve as a basis for the representation of Romani peoples on screen, including a distance from whiteness, and therefore the national imaginary, which motivate the structures of power and illustrate a relationship to whiteness that establishes who belongs and who does not. Given that East Europeans are considered conditionally European, or, at least believe that they are viewed from the outside as such, the need to tie into transnational flows and mechanisms of "race" to solidify their whiteness has become incredibly important in the region (Todorova, 1997; Imre, 2004).

Aniko Imre, Dina Iordanova, and Nikolina Dobрева have provided useful categories of Romani filmic types. Imre, recalling Erzsébet Bori, highlights how Romani filmic portrayals default to "**Screen Gypsies**": metonymic presentations of Romani people, who are imagined as "quite alike all over the world". They have "souls [...] made of songs, and [...] hearts are made of gold; they live in picturesque and photogenic poverty, and survive on the surface of ice; they fear God and the police, because their passionate temperament and indestructible vitality make them prone to violating the Ten Commandments and state laws" (Imre, 2003: 16). These filmic "gypsies" stand "in contrast with real ones who are extremely diverse in their languages, lifestyles and values" (Imre, 2003: 16). Similarly, Nikolina Dobрева describes representation of Roma as "**Celluloid Gypsies**", and Dina Iordanova argues that Southeast European films featuring Roma on screen are mere allegorical symbols relating to the outside status of the Balkans to "Europe" (2008; 2001). In the film *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*, Radmila Mladenova sees a translation of literary "gypsiness", or "European non-Whiteness" into "imaginary gypsies [who] gain visibility only as deviant creatures, their bodies and identities providing a symbolic space on which the boundary of Europeanness (=whiteness) is inscribed" (Mladenova, 2016: 3–9). While these scholars converge broadly, there are important differences, namely, they trace Romani portrayals to specific spaces: Iordanova and Mladenova focus on filmic images originating from the Balkans, whereas Imre works primarily on Central European Romani representation, especially Hungarian. These similarities suggest, however, that the regional specificity need not constrain analysis.

These portrayals of Romani peoples parallel images of African-Americans on screen; outside representations fill the role of racialized internal other, despite multiple generations of existence within the lands of their citizenship and virtually no historical memory or cultural connections to the spaces of their defined origins – West Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Further, the rise of diverse images of

Roma on screen bear a similar relationship to the rise in diverse African-American images all of which were facilitated by historical, political, and legal battles.

## 2. Blaxploitation and the Failure of Civil Rights

In the 1960s, the target period of political activity that led to Civil Rights, African-Americans “created a political and cultural atmosphere in which the issues of race and freedom could not be ignored” (Guerro, 1993: 29; Scott, 2012: 173 – 75). These protests of “interpretive activism” carried over to film (Scott, 2012: 174–220). In addition, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) pressuring Hollywood to “upgrade the cinematic image of blacks” resulting in a number of changes in representation, most notably the portrayals of slavery (Guerro, 1993: 29–31). This period of the mid-1960s saw the rise of Sidney Poitier in the role “ebony saint”, a favorable portrayal previously evaded by black actors. Despite being well-paid and in possession of a brand all of his own, Poitier represented for many African-Americans the superficiality and failures of Civil Rights in that it afforded legal equality on the condition of assimilation for acceptance. Poitier’s early characters lacked depth and sexuality and, “the revolution in black consciousness very quickly rendered Poitier’s saintly roles as laughably out of touch with the rising demand for assertive, realistic, black images on the screen” (Guerro, 1993: 76).

What followed then were more masculine and assertive roles for men and eventually women in the Blaxploitation films in the 1970s. Melvyn Van Peebles “ushered in a new Black aesthetic” in the 1970s with his film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) that asserted black “sexuality, violence, and freedom” (Bausch, 2013: 263). The film was independent, directed by an African-American, and created for an African-American audience. It featured an African-American lead in a powerful position, unafraid of the law, and unapologetically Black. The film proved groundbreaking: and as an independent film with minimal funding, it surpassed any and all expectations for profit. It responded to a desire to be seen as not simply subjects but as individuals previously not accommodated in representations by white directors and studios (Masood, 2011; Bausch, 2013). Thus, in *Sweet Sweetback*, the possibility of self-representation was realized, and what followed was nothing short of an explosion of self-representation, what would come to be known as Blaxploitation film. This 1970s movement paved the way for a multiplicity of African-American filmic representation, proving impactful and even influential in films that followed in the 1980s and even in the New Black Realism of the 1990s (Bausch, 2013; Masood, 2003). The movement would be known for its reinterpretations of genre films through powerful portrayals of masculine testosterone-driven action, overtly sexual, and powerful “black superwom[e]n” (Bogle, 2016).

In many Blaxploitation films, stereotypes appeared alongside rectifying structural and racialized violence directed at Black bodies. Therefore, in analyzing African-American representations as a window into the possible trajectory of on screen Romani representation, it becomes necessary also to unpack some of the wealth that Blaxploitation film offers in its frequent unabashed exploration of structural injustice and inequality deployed on African-American populations. There are hundreds of Blaxploitation films spanning various genres. Many critics of these films dismissed them as extended explorations of the worse stereotypes associated with African-Americans, including criminality, hyper sexuality, and drug activity. Among those actively opposing the proliferation of these films were Civil Rights figures and

organizations including Jessie Jackson, NAACP Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (Guerrero, 1993: 100–101). Nevertheless, these portrayals of African-Americans on screen were empowering and enjoyable for many, offering “compensatory fantasy” in urban settings (Symmons, 2015: 293).

While Blaxploitation films engaged in some of the worst stereotypes about African-Americans, these Hollywood productions were open for broad consumption and helped to pave the way for variation of African-American screen representations, carving space for African-American inclusion into mainstream films for mass consumption. What this transition illustrated, however, was that African-Americans would only be offered a place in mainstream cinema if the actors and directors provided a framework that was familiar to diverse audiences. In other words, the images in Blaxploitation cinema could be decoded differently depending on the audience. What was created for Black consumption relied on some of the worse stereotypes projected on Black people and communities for generations: hypersexuality, violence, and criminality. Nevertheless, for some African-Americans, these Blaxploitation films finally offered visual redemption for the oppression their powerful, white co-nationals had inflicted on them for generations and visually represented through powerful white men: police, business owners, government officials, and even members of the Ku Klux Klan. White audiences, and some activists, including African-American author and poet Amiri Baraka, saw in these films simply the fantasy of triumph over oppressive power systems (Symmons, 2015: 285). Of the 1971 Blaxploitation film, *Shaft*, for example, film critic Clayton Riley stated that it “provide[d] whites with a comfortable image of Blacks as noncompetitors, as people whose essential concern in life is making Mr. Charlie happy” (1971). John Semley similarly argues that the films created an outlet for white filmgoers to enjoy visualized segregation since the casts were dominated by black actors (2010). Baraka argued that films like *Super Fly* “gave the specious appearance of black empowerment, when in fact they reinforced dominant ideology and disguised black America’s continuing subjugation under white patriarchal capitalism” (Symmons, 2015: 285).

Blaxploitation expression relied on a familiar trope of playing to expectations for a white ethnographic gaze, or a means of seeing someone as a subject who is distant from the immediately familiar surroundings of the viewer, by way of self-Orientalizing and self-Othering. These films simply updated Bogle’s stereotypes of the imbecilic child-like non-threatening figure, the oversexed female, and the brutal buck, but within time and space frames relevant to the then contemporary audience. These films opened a space for audiences – both Black and White – to become accustomed to seeing African-Americans on screen, arguably initiated by Poitier, and fostered the inclusion of diverse African-American portrayals in the 1970s, visible in the following films: *Lady Sings the Blues* (1974), *Boy and Man* (1971), *Sounder* (1972), *Black Girl* (1972), *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) and the film adaptation of Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (1973). These films offer a stark departure from the Blaxploitation films that debuted alongside them, because of a desire to distance images of Blackness from stereotypes. Representation afforded in these films remains limited, but they offered what Guerro defines as a “viable black alternative” to images associated with Blaxploitation cinema (1993: 130). These films diversified the cinematic Black-American experience without the overlay of the stereotypes. Arguably, this diversity of experience offered in film would not have been possible without Blaxploitation, both conditioning audiences to seeing African-Americans and African-Americans continuing to seek broader representation beyond experiences imagined as real and endemic to the Black experience.

### 3. Romani Screen Representation

Films with large Roma casts from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia illustrate that a long history of stereotypes, including criminality, a lack of progress, poverty, and rootlessness inform Romani filmic representation. These representations engage in inferential racism emphasizing Romani inferiority, and in doing so, enforce the position of the majority group, which correspond to transnational mechanisms of racial hierarchies based on articulations of visual difference, even in their absence. In the case of Roma, as is true for African-Americans, this positionality is supported by an association with Blackness, which, of course, works in opposition to whiteness – a European ideal.

Romani and African-American representation overlap in many ways because of their historically marginalized positions in society and legacies of posts: post-colonialism, post-socialism, and post-Civil-Rights, which, despite historical differences, engage with western mechanisms of power, social, and racial hierarchies. This proves particularly true in considering the movement of the European Union's Eastern expansion that began in 2004. This movement toward Western systems included disrupting Socialist and Communist social orders where discourses of neutrality toward race and difference dominated generations, and operated with an understanding that the acceptance and incorporation of diversity was a strength of Communist and Socialist systems. In fact, this advertised acceptance of diversity functioned as a counterpoint to Western mechanisms of discrimination (Dudziak, 2000). With the incorporation of Western structures into the East, however, the rhetoric of racial equality was revealed as questionable and even meaningless in light of the disparities, physical abuse, and social inequities faced by minorities and people of color in those societies (Imre, 2004; Matusевич, 2008; Bhabha, Mirga, and Matache, 2017). This “long shadow of discrimination and exclusion” continues to affect Romani communities and motivate the force behind Roma Rights – an ongoing movement pushing for broad Roma equality (Bhabha, Mirga, and Matache, 2017). The setting of EU expansion brought heightened attention to the dislocation and discrimination faced by Romani communities, prompting the EU, Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundations, various NGOs, and even the World Bank to take action. Most agree, however, that, for various reasons, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful. One of the most salient aspects of these failures is a general lack of social acceptance and inclusion of Roma in Europe as indicated in the two Special *Eurobarometers* on Discrimination from 2012 and 2015. However, “Roma activism has forced EU policy makers to engage with the Roma community on more equal terms” (Bhabha, Mirga, and Matache, 2017). However, accommodation of this parity must exist beyond the political and legal: images and interactions must relay similar forms of sameness as representation can play a powerful role in deconstructing presumed difference.

As such, the filmic representations of Roma on screen are in dialogue with conflicting political, social, and arguably cultural trends: The European Union is advocating and pushing for “unity in diversity” while CSEE states are keen to illustrate their European bonafides – i.e., whiteness. Thus, the challenge of filmmakers is to project an image of inclusiveness while simultaneously illustrating Romani distance from the majority. It is a delicate balance to maintain but has parallel precursors in the Blaxploitation movement where Black directors employed stereotypes to quell white viewers and simultaneously satisfy black visual desires. There are, of course, differences between the filmic images of African-

Americans and Roma, chief among them that the films relevant for this discussion are about Roma but not by them, reflecting an importance difference between not only about the films I analyze but also the Roma Rights movement.

The post-2004 CSEE films with majority Romani casts that I analyze below are not made by Romani directors but respond to external pressures, nevertheless – namely, the EU and the push for Romani economic and social inclusion. Interestingly, this dominance of non-Roma directors producing rich films with Roma-majority casts, parallels the broader movement of Roma Rights, which experts have long-recognized as dominated by non-Roma actors (Kóczé and Rövid, 2012; Bhabha, Mirga, and Matache, 2017). They also respond to the stereotypical images of Communist/Socialist films much in the way that films following the height of Civil Rights engaged in stereotypes, but the films that followed debunked them. Similar to the films that followed Blaxploitation, these films about Roma employ a realist aesthetic and evoke empathy for the viewer. Thus the immediate cinematic output reacting to the social movements of Roma and Civil Rights possess a character similar to the movements themselves, whereby those seen as the dominant stakeholders are the ones producing the films. As a result, these films necessarily differ from Blaxploitation in their transmission; however, they similarly engage with stereotypes of the time as a means to address the positionality of Roma. In that way these films illustrate a movement away from the overt racism of films from the Communist/Socialist period to inferential racism used to evoke sympathy, pity, and even empathy. In that way, these films correspond to those produced alongside Blaxploitation films that pushed back against stereotypes to offer more diverse and varied images of African-American life. These films differed from the earlier Poitier films, however, as the casts were overwhelmingly African-American, but the goal was to seek other forms of African-American entertainment, not to assimilate or diffuse the African-American experience through the gaze of the majority.

The films I analyze below respond to Roma social inclusion in that they employ realist narratives to reflect on contemporary Romani positionalities by way of docudrama and a variety of other genres. If the 1960s renewed African-American stereotypes as irascible, militant criminals, then the image of Sidney Poitier helped to diffuse those fears. Blaxploitation confronted those stereotypes and provided sources for multiple ways of decoding those messages, and the films that followed provided even broader means of analysis. The image of Romani characters in recent film similarly addresses stereotypes by offering characters with whom the outside can sympathize and question a basic denial of general human rights, including equality, standard of living commensurate adequate for health and well-being, and education, returning to the movement of Roma Rights articulated above (UN Charter for Human Rights). These films rely on a history of filmic marginalization and overt racism on screen that dates from the Communist period. These films respond primarily to the “Roma Question” articulated earlier in the paper. However, they also interact with a Roma image predicated on a history of stereotypes and image of alterity.

Jiří Vejdělek's *Roming* (Czech Republic/Slovakia/Romania) premiered only a few years after the European Union began its eastern expansion in 2004 and marks a transition from stereotypical to nuanced Romani portrayals. *Roming* is an example of the road film genre. It confronts stereotypes but simultaneously reinforces them, and in this tension exists the encouraging and frustrating aspects of the film. However, to understand how *Roming* confronts the ossified stereotypes of Roma, it is necessary first to illustrate how it is also engaged in contradictory images of Roma and therefore, supports and challenges the

position of Roma within the Slovak imagination as a broader question of the relationship of CSEE to Europe (McCormick, 2010).

The film focuses on two generations of a Romani family and their trip from the city to the country: a son Jura, a father Roman, and the father's old friend, Stano. There is great contrast in these two generations: the father is an unemployed widower who depends on his son for financial support. The father is a combination of Roma stereotypes: he is able bodied but does not work, likes to drink, and is a romantic dreamer. He is shown in at least one scene paying the postman in refundable recyclable bottles instead of cash and turns off the lights as an act of solidarity with other Romani people who cannot afford electricity. Roman will define his Romani credentials by penning a Romani epic structured around Somali, the Roma king whose story serves as a backdrop for the entire film. Stano and Jura are at odds with one another: Stano because he claims to be "Gypsy" and regularly challenges Jura to prove his "Gypsy" bona fides while Roman serves as a foil to Somali but is otherwise a passive observer of events.

Jura provides an example of a character type that I would classify as an "educated Rom", but this privileged position comes by way of his assimilation. When he is introduced in the film, extreme close up shots only show his hands and a city skyline in his window that frames him. The camera then pans back to reveal Jura packing for his journey home. He is revealed, first by his books in his hands, his arms, and then his body as he puts the books into his rucksack. Jura has been obfuscated and is then shown in reference to his girlfriend who is watching him pack. In both frames in which Jura appears, he is not his own, but rather he is defined by something (the city) or someone (his girlfriend Vera), who, like Jura, is not framed for who she is, but by what she is – a white female. She also enters the film, by way of extreme close ups of her naked midriff, her hand, and the door. These scenes introducing Jura highlight the prevalence of whiteness as a contrast to Roma blackness in the film. Other examples include an abundance of blonde hair as an assertion of Slovak Europeanness and whiteness, Somali as the only Romani individual who actually works in the film, which he performs in secret, and, perhaps, most shockingly the well-known Slovak actor, Marián Labuda and Czech actor Bolek Polívka, who engage in "Gypsy face", or "brown face" to play the characters of Stano and Roman (Perez, 2016; Piero, 2012). This portrayal presupposes an inability of Roma to fulfill the cultural expectations of the majority and resonates with other minstrel acts of brown face, which, in turn, relates to the long-standing tradition of Black face in American cinematic history (Perez, 2016).

Thus the humor of the film relies on inferential racism whereby Romani culture is predictably coded as inferior and worthy of ridicule. If being "Black" or "Brown" is simply a matter of painting one's face, it minimizes the experiences and lives and experiences of "Black" people, rendering them irrelevant and unimportant, and reaffirming the position of the majority and perpetuation of Romani exclusion. Even if race itself exists by way of signifiers and structural imposition, those whose lives are affected by race will not explain daily racism as symbolic or constructed. As such, performing race is an act of cultural appropriation without the burden of experiencing daily racism. In an interview, Polívka and Labuda joke about which one of them plays "the Romani spirit" best – as if Romani lives, culture, and "spirit" are something that can be performed, akin to a costume that you can take on and off at will (Čorna, 2007).

There is a great deal more that can be said about this deeply rich film, but in considering the frames of Europeanness, the nation, and "race", the film creates an overall space for Romani peoples to be

incorporated into the nation – all films referenced here do. What *Roming* promotes, however, is limited belonging based on the confines of the nation, Europe, and whiteness. Roman, Stano, and all others in the Romani cast cannot enjoy the benefits of incorporation as they are. In fact, Romani participation in the nation is categorically limited and embodied by performativity such that it can only be claimed by those who are deeply assimilated, which is the case with Jura.

*Just the Wind* (Benedek Fliegauf, Hungary/German/France, 2012), *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (Danis Tanović, Bosnia and Herzegovina/France/Slovenia/Italy 2013), *Bravo!* (Radu Jude, Romania/Bulgaria/Czech Republic/France, 2015)

Three films that debuted after further European expansion eastward and track the increased interest in NGO and governmental focus on Roma are *Just the Wind* and *Bravo!* Both films mostly abandon broad character typologies for their Romani actors and opt instead for a dialogue with the past to offer commentary on the current state of Romani affairs throughout CSEE by way of a categorization that I would define as the “documented Rom”. Characters that I consider “documented Rom” appear in films that are based primarily on historically accurate event(s) and or situations. They exist as a result of generations of struggle to be recognized as individuals and members of the nations in which they were born and live and also for possible inclusion into the mainstream. Roma featured in the films are presented as subjects worthy of pity while based on reliable stereotypes and expectations. Members of the Romani community are primarily screened as cultural outsiders, working against endemic barriers of structural and daily racism that seems only to affect them. The “documented Rom” tracks the ethnographic gaze projected on Roma and uses historical settings to comment on the present.

*Just the Wind* is a docudrama that focuses on the personal narrative of one family to recount actual events from 2008. The film documents the tragic lives of members of the community who are under attack and being murdered simply because of what they are. The narration unfolds in such a way that we become familiar with the protagonists, and empathize with their experiences and their struggle for existence despite a multitude of obstacles including social ostracism, underemployment, general vulnerability, and social hostility. The film is shot in muted colors and uses intertitles at the onset of the film to convey the veracity of events.

The mise-en-scène provides a context for the drab, documentary feel of the film, positioning the protagonists as “documented Roma”. The film is shot primarily through medium and close up shots to evoke feelings otherwise not present in the film owing to the film's documentary-like quality. The close up shot, paired with cool, drab colors, hint at the depth of feeling the film evokes. These features define the mood of the film, particularly in the final scenes as they are marked by virtual silence except for the sounds a worker creates diegetically from moving clothing and shoes from a rustling plastic bag as he dresses the lifeless bodies of the killed Romani family in preparation for their funerals.

Roma characters in Bosnian director Danis Tanović's film, *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (2012) are also “documented Roma” in which the film explores fictionalized accounts of actual events. In this film, the wife nearly dies from lack of access to healthcare; the “actors” are the family to whom the horrific events actually occurred. This verisimilitude personalizes the experiences of these characters making

their actions, experiences, and reactions to their settings seem universal, but the empathy is primarily a result of the symbolism of the Romani experience that is encoded by misfortune as evidenced by the examples above. What these film share is that the Romani characters have ceased to be the stereotypes of generations past as the characters parallel developments and trends in diverse representations and probes into historical settings. These portrayals help inform and challenge flat narratives of the present much in the same way that directives, initiatives, and Roma Rights organizations are insisting for dynamic narratives for the Romani people.

*Bravo!* is a 2015 film that blurs the road, heritage, and western genres by Romanian director Radu Jude. The black and white film is set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and tells the story of a policeman charged with finding and returning a fugitive slave guilty of having an affair with his master's wife. In *Bravo!* the focus is on the distant historical record. In this discussion of history and slavery, the film enters into a dialogue about the complicated roots of Romani difference and ostracism from Romanian society in which they live as well as their distance from positions of power. By properly historicizing the roots of the contemporary Romani positionality in Romania to slavery, the film forces the spectator to “confront [...] mentalities, prejudices and biases” that he or she may hold (Barsan, 2016). This notion can be extended through the region, to parallel the generational dislocation of Romani populations in Europe to a history of *de facto* marginalization. That the fugitive slave is guilty of having sexual relations with the master's wife connects this film with reliable racial stereotypes of hypersexualization and racialized peoples. This provides the Romani slave character with depth: he is simultaneously worthy of pity as he is a slave and has no agency but has committed what would be an irredeemable crime at the time.

*Bravo!* provides a causal link between Romani slavery and contemporary Romani positionality. The film demonstrates the harsh reality for slaves in Wallachia, so that the status of internal other that Romani populations in CSEE occupy is directly related to Wallachian history. This dislocated position of Romani populations informs a contemporary reality, and provides a context for understanding the distance of Romani populations from the majority. This approach is new, and offers a positive point to begin a dialogue about systemic inequality as a contributing factor to the contemporary marginalization of Romani peoples in Romania. Debuting in 2015, *Bravo!* coincides with the end of the Decade of Roma Inclusion (Decade), a non-governmental directive with a number of ambitious goals for Romani economic and social inclusion. The Decade concluded with an acceptance of its failures, as there was no significant difference in the economic and social inclusion of Roma throughout CSEE. *Bravo!* relies on this post-Decade period to explore slavery as one historical source of Romani distance from the majority.

There are a number of post-Civil Rights era American films with narratives centered on African-American slavery including *The Slaves* (1969) and *Roots* (1977). These early examples engaged with distant history to open important dialogues about race in the United States, and helped establish a connection between African-American marginalization and the history of slavery, serving a similar function to *Bravo!* These early forays into slavery and the connections that it has to African-American cultural and national ostracism offer compelling comparison points to explore the role of a film like *Bravo!* in creating new narratives of the sources of Roma Otherness. These American films differ from *Bravo!* in narrative point of view, but converge in the harsh reality of slaves and their inhumane treatment. Though aesthetically different, the films converge in connecting dislocation and marginalization to the abhorrent and dehumanizing practices of slavery.

The importance of the introduction of *Bravo!* into Romanian new wave cinema cannot be understated. Rade Jude, the film's director, stated in a *Calvert Journal* article that, "The topic of the film is not the past nor the present but the connection between them" (Goff, 2015). *Bravo!* is the first Romanian film to address the history of slavery and hint at its connection to contemporary Romani marginalization in Romania. In Romania, unlike in the United States, there is little formal recognition of Romani slavery – it does not appear in textbooks, documentaries, or public discourse, so this film could be a catalyst to not only begin a discussion of Romani slavery recognition, but also make connections between the structural roots of Romani marginalization. *Bravo!* begins a long path of recognition and reconciliation so necessary for a collective understanding of the lingering effects of slavery on those who suffered under that system. That Romanian Roma have a history of slavery based solely on their difference further implicates Romanian Roma as affected by racialized hierarchies of superiority and inferiority based on "race".

While the contemporary period does not directly correspond to the Blaxploitation movement of the 1970s, there are compelling similarities in the cinematic reaction to social injustice. Neither presented as stereotypes nor as the butt of a joke, Roma in these films are seen as members of their societies. Both *Just the Wind* and *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* focus on injustice and everyday racism that the characters experience. Given that these stories are based on true events, one can assume that they simply represent the broad discrimination, ostracism, and racism that Roma face on a daily basis. These events simply caught the attention of the press and therefore the filmmakers who chose to immortalize them. These films operate on a universal condemnation of the denial of Human Rights for Romani communities, much in the same way that films focusing on slavery functioned in the post-Civil Rights years and sparked a broad conversation about race and the American project.

What remains missing from this discussion, however, are examples of self-representation as a means to change the dialogue. CSEE Romani filmmakers similarly are responding to their inaccurate portrayals by providing examples of self-representation to challenge long-standing stereotypes and static images associated with Romani peoples. Clearly, there is much work to be done in facilitating diverse portrayals of Roma, but it is encouraging that some filmmakers are moving into that direction. In fact, within CSEE, Roma filmmakers Sami Mustafa, who is from Kosovo but based in France, and Katalin Bársony, who is from Hungary, use their art to actively push back against Romani stereotypes. Mustafa, whose NGO, FOCUS – Roma Cinema Youth Project – encourages young Romani filmmakers to create films that actively challenge stereotypes and assumptions about the Romani community. Both Mustafa and Bársony have each founded their own production companies, Romawood and Baxt Films, respectively, which produce documentaries and sponsor film festivals throughout Europe to showcase other Romani filmmakers. In addition, Bársony directs the NGO Romedia foundation, which similarly works to push back on static stereotypes of Roma. Past work of the Romedia foundation includes an advertising campaign running throughout CSEE countries to change the image of Romani women, training young women to become filmmakers, and their program "Mundi Romani" features documentaries showing the world "through Romani eyes". This work is promising as it highlights the potential in a younger generation to contribute to a new cache of images and expectations of Romani communities. Their work illustrates what is to be reaped from the struggles, sacrifice, and hard work of the Roma Rights movement. Romani filmmaking currently abounds in documentaries, which seem to respond to the NGO and European imagination where Roma persist in relation to stereotypes

associated with poverty and helplessness. As such, documentary films relate to Blaxploitation in that these films respond to an ethnographic gaze. By taking control of the “language” of the documentaries, these Romani directors can encode their own images, paving the way for self-representation, and if Blaxploitation can be a model, Romani directors can and will use their racialized positions to advance dialogue and challenge their current positions through their filmmaking.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have illustrated how images have tracked the position of African-Americans and Roma in the U.S. and CSEE states. Following the period of Civil Rights, African-American representation became more varied and nuanced to reflect the market demands of a recognized African-American audience. As Roma Rights has come to the fore of European policy and the focus of European directives and initiatives, Romani filmic representation also has become more nuanced, and representations are beginning to highlight a variety of experiences and forms. That is not to say that filmic representations have completely abandoned the stock characters of earlier periods that were limited to stereotypes and outside projections of Otherness, or even earlier films that equate the Romani experience with the pastoral. It also remains true that European Romani peoples remain outside the constructions of whiteness and therefore outside of the dominant paradigms of belonging, but these contemporary representations hint at a process of renegotiation and interpretation of the positionality of European Romani peoples much in the same way that African-American filmic images became more nuanced and varied as self-representation comingled with long-standing external representations and the dictates of political and social change such as the Civil Rights movement and its immediate aftermath. If the history of post-Civil Rights filmic images of African-Americans can serve as a comparison, an assertion that the author supports, perhaps the continued persistence of diversity in African-American images, despite the contemporary erosion of Civil Rights, can offer insight into the trajectory of Romani representations and inclusion into diverse genres. There remains a great deal of work to be done on the relationship of the movement of Roma Rights and how accompanying cultural changes might be analyzed alongside other more established political and social movements. This work offers only an introduction on the subject, but with the goal of expanding the content in a future piece to track continued developments in Roma filmic representation throughout CSEE states.

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