

# The Gypsies, Poor but Happy

## A Cinematic Myth

Caterina Pasqualino

Many filmmakers have been inspired by the theme of Gypsy poverty. At first, the destitution of the Roma helped foster the myth of the ‘noble savage’. From the 1960s on, the theme was dealt with less in aesthetic than in social terms. Despite this evolution, most films have continued to draw on preconceived notions, perpetuating a moralistic vision that has little to do with Roma reality. The cinematic construction of Roma poverty gives way to a powerful myth: that of the ‘poor but happy’ Gypsy.

### POVERTY: VICE OR VIRTUE?

The Roma’s nomadic lifestyle and their subsistence economy are perceived as clear signs of social maladjustment that engenders bad health, squalid housing and inadequate culture.<sup>1</sup> The press has encouraged this attitude, increasingly reinforcing the equation between poverty and delinquency. The poorest populations are described as pockets of corruption and immorality and, therefore, as the justification for legal intervention. Recently, laws dealing with these populations have become increasingly strict. The Sarkozy Bill passed on 18 March 2003, for example, authorised the Paris Court of Appeal to prosecute three mothers accompanied by their children for begging in the streets (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, 11 January 2005). Fear of Gypsies also inspired a local by-law on encampments, known as the ‘anti-bivouac’ law, adopted in early 2002 by Alain Juppé, deputy mayor of Bordeaux, intended to prevent settlements of nomads in a particular area by prohibiting ‘any gathering of individuals likely to disturb public peace’. Deliberately ignoring the historical and political contexts that have led to the precarious situation of the Roma, the police and citizens alike have unanimously perceived various Roma groups as violent and backward.<sup>2</sup>

American scholar Elijah Anderson, who studies poverty in the urban environment, celebrates the integrity, honesty, decency and frugality of Philadelphia’s impoverished black population.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the author paints an extremely negative picture of those he refers to as ‘street families’

- 1 Christophe Robert, ‘Tziganes et voyageurs. Pour une définition contextualisée de la précarité’ (‘Gypsies and Travellers: For a Contextualized Definition of Precariousness’), *Recherche Sociale*, 1999, October–December, no 152, p 60
- 2 Alain Reyniers, ‘Migrations Tsiganes contemporaines’ (‘Contemporary Gypsy Migrations’), *Hommes et Migrations*, Paris, no 1205, January–February, 1997, p 21
- 3 Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, W W Norton, New York, 1999

whom he depicts as drifters. He makes the distinction between two types of poor people: 'decent families' who are honest and 'street families' stigmatised as deceitful individuals living on the streets. The 'decent families', according to him, are responsible, saving their money to educate their children in order to improve their social situation, while 'street families' neglect their family responsibilities and have no sense of community. Unfortunately, Roma populations in Europe are perceived in a similar fashion. The wave of Roma immigration from Eastern Europe has reinforced the image of the poor, wandering Gypsies who force their children to beg, as well as that of Gypsies who get rich by theft and travel around adorned with sumptuous jewels, in shiny new cars.

Social workers I interviewed in Spain (in Andalusia, Extremadura and Aragon) complained about the Roma's lack of hygiene, their duplicity and immorality.<sup>4</sup> Those working in the Barbastro sector characterised the Roma population residing in the run-down centre of town as wasteful criminals and 'evangelical nomads', even though in reality they were simply moving around the nearby villages with their wares. These groups were typically assumed to consist of drug-addicted, violent individuals. In the opinion of these social workers, only two Roma families were exempt: those reputed to live sedentary lives, to be practising Catholics and to be clean and cooperative. Police and the local press referred to these families as 'our Gypsies', in order to differentiate them from the others; they protected them and cited them as role models, explaining that these two families were of old stock and had managed to remain faithful to Catholicism. In Extremadura and Andalusia ostracism is widespread and the distinction between 'our Gypsies' and the 'others' is prevalent; the former are considered clean and respectful of moral values while the latter are perceived as dangerous.

In contrast to media stereotypes, Roma themselves tend to liken their poverty to a kind of state of grace, an original purity. But if one of them becomes gentrified or even acquires what is considered to be excessive wealth, he is regarded as suspect; he has gone astray. As shown in the writings of Michael Stewart, money should not be saved but immediately redistributed within the community.<sup>5</sup> A similar rule prevails among the Roma I studied in Jerez de la Frontera: the poorer one is, the more one considers oneself a true Gypsy. Those who acquire a certain level of material ease exclude themselves from the community.<sup>6</sup>

Although the press likens poverty to immorality, poverty is seen, on the other hand, as a guarantee of integrity, even of a certain innocence: the poorer the group is, the more it is seen as simple and naive. This more positive vision of poverty is fostered by older representations that are no doubt linked with the myth of the 'noble savage'. These images have not only permeated public opinion, but are exploited in literary and cinematographic works dealing with Gypsies.

## STAGING POVERTY

It is a little known fact that Gypsies contributed widely to popularising cinema, starting with the earliest silent films. Gypsy stallholders, thanks to the first film projectors purchased from Leon Gaumont and Charles Pathé, could offer film shows in addition to their own travelling performances.

4 Caterina Pasqualino, 'Politique, catholicisme et évangélisme. Les Gitans d'Estrémadure (Espagne)' ('Politics, Catholicism and Evangelism: The Extremadura Gypsies, Spain'), *Gradhiva*, 2002, no 32, pp 37–52; Caterina Pasqualino, 'Un Saint Gitan' ('A Gypsy Saint'), *Etudes Tsiganes*, no 20, Paris, 2004. Special Issue edited by Caterina Pasqualino under the title: 'Religions Revisitées' (Religions Revisited), pp 64–74.

5 Michael Stewart, *The Time of the Gypsies*, Westview Press, Oxford, 1997, p 92

6 Caterina Pasqualino, *Dire le chant. Les Gitans flamencos d'Andalousie* (*Speaking Song: The Flamenco Gypsies in Andalusia*), CNRS MSH, Paris, 1998, pp 33–4

In spite of difficulties with representatives of the law (particularly in Vichy France), they brought cinema even to the most remote villages. They thereby preserved, until the 1950s, reels of silent film that had otherwise disappeared from the more usual circuit of city cinemas. Gypsies also took an active role in film shoots. From early on, various authors have noted, films featuring Roma were infused with the romantic atmosphere of Central Europe: their passionate, impetuous characters would be love-struck, suffering a tragic destiny or overwhelmed by chronic melancholy.<sup>7</sup> Their roles were not especially edifying: Romanichal child-snatchers, treacherous *zingaras* with velvety eyes, and knife-wielding Gypsies quick to anger. Dressed in vivid, multicoloured 'bohemian-style' costumes, they often resembled circus actors and were subject to flagrant errors regarding their identities: a Spanish Gypsy might be dressed like a Rom from the Ukraine, while a Hungarian Gypsy woman might wear an Andalusian costume. Following the tradition of European Romantic literature, cinema also started to borrow from historical, geographical and psychological exoticisms. The Gypsies' mysterious charm was linked to a kind of primitive freedom, combining nature with the love of liberty and independence. As De Vaux de Foletier accurately notes, these stereotypes had been lying beneath the surface since the fifteenth century. Gypsies had already played carnivalesque roles and, in Shakespearean theatre, had performed the parts of social outlaws, mysterious, dark and infatuated with freedom.<sup>8</sup> The *Zingaresche* fascinated the public in Italy, while eighteenth-century English literature perceived the Roma as mysterious Orientals. Later, Romanticism appropriated the myth of the wandering Gypsy: a strong, proud individual, intensely emotional and eager to defend his honour. While maintaining the image of Roma as Spanish bandits and characters of oriental mystery (as in the writings of nineteenth-century novelist Théophile Gautier), nineteenth-century literature turned their nomadism and their fierce independence into a melting pot for colourful new stories (culminating in Prosper Mérimée's *Carmen*, 1852).

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, Roma worked in films as actors and extras. In 1896, Georges Méliès drew from the fantastic rocambolesque salesmen in *Campement des Bohémiens* (*Bohemian Encampment*, France, 1896). Stallholders from the Pays de Galles, the Haggars and the Mottershaws made several films, including *La vengeance des Romanis* (*The Revenge of the Roma*) in 1907. They also acted in Westerns filmed in southern Spain and France. In the Camargue, the Marquis of Baroncelli, an important Roma advocate, encouraged the 'Gypsy tribes of Saint-Gilles' to take part in certain films such as *Roi de Camargue*, for example, made in 1934. These films, however, did not necessarily validate the Roma point of view. Georges Sadoul recalls that for a long time Roma were regarded as 'nomads of the wild mountains of Bohemia, as greedy robbers, familiar with the highroads and of dubious occupations, whose presence we were wrong to tolerate, and who lived only for plundering and crime'.<sup>9</sup>

In his attempts to seduce the public with eye-catching movies, in 1910 Charles Pathé produced the Spanish film *Amor Gitano* (*Gypsy Love*), directed by Segundo de Chomón, in which Raquel Meller, a famous dancer and singer known as La Argentina, performed before a backdrop of tambourines, fans, mantillas and guitars. Later, for *Los Tarantos* (*The Tarantos*, Spain, 1963), director Francisco Rovira Beleta

7 Alain Antonietto, 'Les Tsiganes dans le cinéma' ('Gypsies in Cinema'), in *Etudes tsiganes*, no 4, 1985, Paris, p 42; Alain Antonietto, 'Le cinéma forain et... bohémien (Du "muet" au début du "parlant")' ('Fairground and Bohemian cinema, from Silent Films to the Arrival of the Talkies'), in *Etudes tsiganes*, 3, Paris, 1985, p 10; Dina Iordanova, 'Editorial', *Framework: The Journal of Film and Media*, Special Issue on Romanies in International Cinema, 44:2, Autumn 2003, available at: <http://www.frameworkonline.com/latest442.htm>.

8 François De Vaux de Foletier, *Mille ans d'histoire des tsiganes* (*A Thousand Years of Gypsy History*), Fayard, Paris, 1970, p 226

9 Sadoul quoted in Alain Antonietto, *Etudes tsiganes* 3, op cit, 1985, p 15

recruited a number of celebrities from the world of flamenco (Pastoria Imperio, Carmen Amaya, Julio Peña, Antonio Gades). Festive and passionate, the film tells the story of the impossible love of two Gypsies born to rival families of different social standing. Juana, the young woman, comes from a well-off horse-trading family; Rafael, who is in love with her, is poor and lives by his wits in a Cádiz shantytown. The differences between the two families are obvious: while the women of Rafael's family appear gaudy, sporting long hair and wide, colourful, polka-dot skirts, those from Juana's family dress in more sober fashion, generally in black, with their hair tied back. Juana's father opposes the marriage and thwarts their love story which ends in bloodshed when a jealous rival assassinates the lovers. As with Romeo and Juliet, the lovers must die because they refuse to yield to the rules of their respective families.

Flamenco plays an important role as an 'exotic' operetta, providing a constant background to the action. Authentic Roma can be seen in roles that caricature their actual lives (Carmen Amaya, star of the flamenco scene, plays the part of Rafael's mother). The young protagonists meet at a wedding party and fall in love during playful *bulerías*. Afterward, Rafael's mother, who fiercely refuses to accept their union, ultimately succumbs to the virtuosity of Juana's dancing; and she, in turn, dances so as to show that she will accept their marriage.

As in the majority of films before the 1960s, the poverty here is not presented in a realistic manner; the director contents himself with an approximate version of the truth and sentimentalises his vision of Roma life with folkloric images. Several sequences evoke Roma poverty as their natural or original state. When Juana discovers the shantytown where her lover resides, for example, she is filled with wonder, recalling that as a child she had seen swallows landing there. The ambiance of the town suggests a magical refuge. Time passes peacefully and freedom can be felt everywhere. The tone is bucolic: from afar, we hear the bleating of sheep, the trotting of a horse, a song accompanied by a guitar. The dirt floors of the squalid dwellings appear to sparkle while laundry hangs to dry in the sunlight. Sepia hues bathe everything in a soft nostalgic tonality.

Socially, too, the town feels idyllic. Everyone goes about their peaceful business. A barber, working busily, smiles at the amorous couple; a group helps prepare the meal around a campfire; a man repairs a broken pan; women draw water from the well; a small troupe dances to guitar music. Everything contributes to an atmosphere of innocence. After having presented Juana to his family, Rafael runs with her along a beach of white sand and kisses her amongst the waves; the scene comes to a close, evoking the communion of man with nature.

The story is thus that of the confrontation of two types of Roma. The horse-dealer families, considered urban, well off and civilised, are revealed in fact as calculating and corrupt. In contrast, Roma from the shantytowns are spontaneous and generous, dancing and singing more skilfully than the horse-dealers, living in contact with a nature uncontaminated by the vicissitudes of the city. With its light-hearted, playful attitude, the film is permeated by moral convictions: only poverty can ensure a true Gypsy ethic. The film borrows a leitmotif from Romantic literature: poverty lends the Gypsies their insouciance and nobility.

One finds another variation of the ‘noble savage’ myth in a documentary by Edgar Neville, *Duende y misterio del flamenco* (*The Charm and Mystery of the Flamenco*, Spain, 1952) produced in the midst of the Franco period. Its goal was to reveal the great variety of flamenco styles displayed to the public in Andalusia and Castille. The dancers present themselves in folkloric costumes (low necklines, polka-dot dresses), in a countryside full of forests and waterfalls, with villages filled with the monuments of baroque churches and palaces, decorative sculptures, fountains, and so on. The film moves from *martinetes* (blacksmith songs), with their slow, sad rhythm, to *bulerías* and *fandangos*, songs of a lighter mood meant to accompany dancers, all leading to a performance by the exalted Madrid Spanish Ballet.

Transmitted from generation to generation, the *martinete* blacksmith songs are believed to have originated in the forge, where they were first sung, accompanied by nothing more than the sound of a hammer striking an anvil. Regarded as the oldest and purest songs of the Roma repertoire, these songs evoke the hardship of their trade and the sacrifices they have undergone in order to feed their children. Accompanied by the clapping of hands or fists striking a table, *martinetes* are sung exclusively in a low register. Like everything related to working in a forge, they impose respect. As his fresco unfolds, Neville portrays the *martinete* as a primitive song, in contrast to the music played during the performance by the Spanish Ballet; it is the quintessence of flamenco, aiming to express the perfect combination of national sensitivity and classical dance. *Martinetes* play a central role in the film. To support his viewpoint, the director presents the Roma as survivors of a kind of prehistory of flamenco. At the beginning of the film, they have bare chests or are dressed in tattered rags to sustain the image of the pure savage. As the film progresses, the settings become more refined, the actors are dressed in folkloric costumes and appear in settings that reflect an increasingly typical Spanish style.

This typecasting of the poor hero, living in symbiosis with wholesome nature, has dominated many more films. Amalgamating poverty and archaism, this attitude has helped enhance the image of frustrated Roma.

### **THE CORRUPTING CITY**

Emir Kusturica, who studied at the Prague film school, is heir to such prominent Czech directors as Miloš Forman, Ivan Passer and Evald Schorm. Filled with fantasy, the atmosphere in his films at times approaches surrealism. Mixing humour and tragedy, combining a kind of supernatural world with commonplace images of outsiders, its style has been described as ‘magical realism’.

Kusturica, who has lived near Roma on the outskirts of Sarajevo, remains fascinated by their music and marginal way of life. Haunted by the reality of the Roma, he situates them somewhere between sky and earth. His main ambition is to record a way of life that ranges from the sublime to the degrading. His vision is passionate but not indulgent. Reintroducing the legend of the child-snatching Gypsies, his *Dom za vešanje* (*Time of the Gypsies*, Yugoslavia/UK, 1989) presents an

adolescent protagonist who is gradually trained by beggars and thieves to help them with their trade of child trafficking and prostitution. In the first part of the film, Perhan, a young Rom surrounded by others like him, plays the accordion for his adored grandmother and sister. From their dilapidated dwelling in earth-floored alleys on the outskirts of Skopje, these Roma eke out a meagre but happy existence. Some forget their idleness by playing cards; others transport a newly wedded husband, dead drunk, on a cart. Community life is agreeable, further brightened by many impromptu festivities.

The second part of film is much darker. To accompany his sick sister to the hospital, Perhan is forced to work for a criminal who drags him to the suburbs of Milan where he compels him to steal and gets him involved in a trafficking ring and a prostitute recruitment operation. The atmosphere gradually grows so black, tragic and absurd that it takes a phantasmagorical turn, mixing dream and nightmare. The protagonists are confronted with a range of 'Gadje' (non-Gypsy) demons. The intimate tone that marks the film's early sequences, full of images of dignified poverty, gradually shifts until, by the end of the film, everything is overtaken by a dominant 'Gadje' point of view which intrinsically links Roma misery to vice and crime. Without realising it, Kusturica recycles the view that Roma are positive characters only while they live in poverty back in the ghetto and can enjoy the gregarious, spontaneous and festive way of life they are known for. However, as soon as they fall away from the 'original' Eden and engage in a more urban existence, they grow dishonest. The usual moralistic attitude lurks behind Kusturica's poetic images: better a genuine, impoverished Gypsy than one who is wealthy but corrupt.

Film director Tony Gatlif belongs to a new generation of filmmakers who, unlike their predecessors, seek to bear witness to the ostracism suffered by different European communities. 'In all my films', he declares:

... my camera is authentic because the people I am filming are authentic. I don't play tricks with them; I don't manipulate them. I don't make them feel uncomfortable. The camera is my eye. I am the one behind it, the one they're looking at, not the camera. My way of looking at them is not hypocritical, it's direct.<sup>10</sup>

Though he aims for an objective assessment of the facts claiming that he tries 'not to look but to see, not to listen but to hear', his staging remains subjective. Inspired by documentary film-making, Gatlif's films employ non-professional Roma actors. In his ambitious epic *Latcho Drom* (*Safe Journey*, France, 1993), he portrays the saga of Roma migrations from India to Spain, via Egypt, Turkey, Romania, Germany and France, and explores Roma identity by revealing their common cultural and musical origins.

Another film by Gatlif, *Vengo* (France/Spain/Germany/Japan, 2000), about the famous Gitano singer La Paquera, lies somewhere between 'ethnographic authenticity' and a work of fiction. The story deals with a vendetta that destroys an Andalusian *gitano* family. The characters move in a world without borders and, in a sense, outside time. A sense of reality is regained only after the protagonist's death. In order to show the idiosyncrasy of Roma culture, the filmmaker devises a metaphorical record of their way of living and thinking.

10 From a round-table discussion with Tony Gatlif at Espace Rencontres in the FNAC St-Lazare, Paris, 31 October 2000. Quoted in Julien Radenez, *La représentation de la communauté tzigane au cinéma* (*The Representation of the Gypsy Community in Cinema*), doctoral thesis under the direction of Serge Le Peron, Université Paris 8, Etudes cinématographiques et visuelles, Paris, 2002, p 38.

One of Gatlif's first films, *Les Princes* (*The Princes*, France, 1983) is characterised by a strong desire for realism. The story is that of a Rom who feels dishonoured by his wife: while she makes him believe that they can no longer have children, she is actually taking birth-control pills, following the advice of welfare officers. When her husband finds out, he kicks her out, starts drinking and falls into depression; later, he becomes involved in turbulent relationships with other women, forbids his daughter to attend school or see her mother, and finally ends up falling out with his own mother. First as squatters, then in a Gypsy camp, he drags his family to precarious limits. Along with his mother and daughter, he takes to the open road, embarking on a kind of journey of initiation that ends up in desperate poverty in a public rubbish-dump. His mother dies on the way, although he is finally reconciled with his wife who, we learn, never stopped following him.

This film marks a turning point in the myth that prevailed in other films, namely, the origins of the Gypsy as 'noble savage'. In *The Princes*, Roma no longer come from Eden. Tony Gatlif reveals new realities: an inescapable sedentary lifestyle, children's schooling and women's emancipation. Poverty, which features in all these films, hangs over the protagonists like the sword of Damocles. But here the aim is not to return to the origins of a community searching for a lost paradise. The myth has been transformed; it no longer refers to an unadulterated community living in delightful harmony with nature. Nonetheless, behind all this, Gatlif's fiction conveys many of the same old ideas. His protagonists suffer a tragic destiny. Along the way, as if damned, they plunge deeper and deeper into misery, finding themselves in increasingly sordid and repugnant surroundings. This descent into Hell purifies them. Life's essential meaning is revealed to them only after they have lived through their ultimate suffering and destitution. By revising the traditional theme, Gatlif once again recycles the idea of the connection between extreme poverty and the Gypsy's true nature.

### A GADJE ETHIC

In the films discussed in this article, Gadjes project their fantasies onto Gypsies whom they perceive as instinctive, dark, nomadic beings. Roma are portrayed either as primitive creatures living in an Eden cut off from civilised society (as in *The Tarantos* or *The Princes*), or as the incarnation of libertarian ideals, free of social constraints (*Latcho Drom*). In either case, the authenticity of their way of life can be measured by the extent of their poverty.

A fiction film entitled *Kriss Romani*, released in France in 1963 and directed by Jean Schmidt, draws attention to the ideology of abnegation underlying the theme of Roma poverty. The plot deals with Roma settled along the edges of Paris. A father wants to impose a forced marriage upon his daughter. She refuses. The case must then be decided in the *kriss* (in court). Today, nearly half a century later, the film can be seen as a quasi-documentary, thanks to the music composed by Matelot Ferret in collaboration with musicologist Andre Hajdu, as well as to the presence of numerous Roma in the cast and to the filmmaker's desire to denounce the situation of Roma populations in shantytowns. But despite his

determination to bear witness to the true conditions of Roma life, the film proposes a typically Gadge ethic: a renunciation of the world's riches.

The film takes place within a context of 'happy poverty'. In the encampment, barefoot children, dressed in rags, run joyously and play near a dump. As if justifying their state of grace, an elderly woman speaks to an attentive audience, explaining that the Gypsies' misfortune originates in 'the roots of Christ's cross' and compares their misery to Christ's suffering.

This comparison, linking poverty to a state of original purity, is deeply anchored in Western morality. In Greek philosophy, poverty for the wise man is a condition that bears no negative connotations. It is related to notions of virtue, justice and philosophy. For Socrates, being poor did not contradict satisfying one's desires. Aristotle, who notes that 'the nature of desire is to be without limit', affirms that happiness comes not from obtaining material riches but from mastering one's desires. The 'activity of the heart according to virtue' brings plenitude and self-sufficiency. Autonomy is a divine gift.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, Christian theology seems to justify the fate of the Roma. According to the evangelists, Roma enjoy their impoverished state. Not burdened by possessions, they are more capable of understanding and spreading God's word. The Bible gives titles of nobility to voluntary poverty, while the accumulation of riches must be accompanied by compassion towards the less fortunate. However, only poverty makes it possible to appreciate abundance. To reach the Kingdom of Heaven, to be pure of heart, it is necessary to have the soul of a pauper. For the early Christian apologist Clement of Alexandria, he who possesses no riches is wealthy. According to the theologian St John Chrysostom, alms are the 'queen of the virtues'. The monks in the first centuries of Christendom, in both Oriental and Occidental cultures, praised the bliss of the poor, while they prayed to save the wealthy from their cursed fate. Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of the possession of material goods as an obstacle to attaining perfection.

This understanding expands beyond the Western world. Sufis believe their needs enslave them: human beings must liberate themselves from all material slavery, and true wealth is achieved through poverty. The appeal to vows of poverty is transferred, in secular form, to the modern world. From Arthur Rimbaud's praise of vagrants to Jack Kerouac's heavenly Beatnik tramp, the fascination with poverty is replayed all over again as a triumph of internal riches and is compared to freedom. For Rainer Maria Rilke, one carries poverty 'like a great light deep in the heart'.<sup>12</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini's understanding is similar. In his search for the origins of Christianity in the fiction-documentary *Appunti per un'Orestide africana* (*Notes Towards an African Orestes*, Italy, 1970) he combines Christian sources and modern inspiration. Setting off for Black Africa to film impoverished populations, he ascribes to them, in a voiceover, the roles the Bible had granted to the poor who were Christ's companions.

11 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Harvard University Press, Heinemann, Cambridge, 1975

12 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Le livre de la pauvreté et de la mort* (*Book of Poverty and Death*), Actes Sud, Arles, 1989, p 27

## A TENACIOUS MYTH

Until around 1960, cinematic representations of Roma consisted of a succession of folkloric or caricatured roles. The men were often shown

as ‘clans of bohemians’ and unreliable musicians, while their wives or daughters were depicted as *femmes fatales*. In the 1970s, filmmakers began to show this marginalisation and occasionally depict the Roma as heroes struggling against a hostile society. Today, Roma are compared to oppressed minorities such as other immigrants, American Indians or homosexuals, and some films seem to testify to their political conscience.<sup>13</sup> Yet poverty, along with showcasing their talents as singers and dancers, remains the most salient feature of the way they are depicted in cinema; it is validated as a specific means of protection from the vices of a consumerist society. The over-endorsement of poverty, however, does not help. Exalting the Roma’s supposedly untainted nobility tends to insinuate that the new urban generation is decadent and corrupt. As Leonardo Piasere states:

If the ideal image of the ‘traditional Gypsy’ meant he was a countryside wanderer, the image of the sedentary, city-dwelling Rom, who has only certain differences from other citizens, became the prototype of the corrupt Gypsy. However, research carried out in various European countries over the last ten or fifteen years has shown that there is no such thing as ‘true Gypsies’.<sup>14</sup>

The myth of poverty as happiness endures and outlives eras and ideologies. From the early days of cinema until today, Roma on the big screen appear to scorn material wealth and happily adopt a philosophy of abnegation. They may be poor but are happy to be so. The manner of this representation has evolved, in particular since the 1960s, in the sense that today poverty is filmed in a much more credible fashion. The perpetuation of distorted images over more than a century, however, still raises questions. From the frugal Gypsy and the noble savage living in harmony with nature to the poor but proud Rom with his irrepressible spontaneity and authenticity, the myth has lived through modifications, yet it has survived and has been transformed into a legend to which ‘Gadje’ culture still sticks with an astonishing tenacity.

Translated from the French by Laurie Hurwitz

13 Gérard-Louis Gautier, ‘L’image du Gitan dans le cinéma’ (‘The Gypsy Image in Cinema’), *La Revue du cinéma*, 1984, no 393, p 82, p 91

14 Leonardo Piasere, *Popoli delle discariche: Saggi di antropologia zingara* (People of the Rubbish Dumps: Texts in Gypsy Anthropology), Cisu, Roma, 1991

Copyright of Third Text is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.