

# I'VE EVEN MET ROMA GYPSIES

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Tentative guidelines for a new Romani cinematography

By Boris Mitić



*I've Even Met Happy Gypsies aka The Feather Gatherers*, dir. Aleksandar Petrović (Cannes Jury Prize, 1967)

What's the last time you were a Gypsy?

Or acted gypsy?

And why do you think that this would be such a strange question?

We all have opinions about what “gypsy” means, and we use them around in many gypsy ways. I for example use ‘gypsy’ in a compassionate way to refer the Roma population, since I find the word ‘Roma’ too new and too bureaucratic. My mother uses the word ‘gypsy’ as a fashion commentary. My teenage neighbors use it as an antagonistic nickname for their rival gang. My NGO acquaintances use ‘Roma’ as a keyword in all their projects. Politicians use it too, to be politically correct when they are commenting about the involuntary displacement of Roma. Local police use it as an alibi for all social misery. The Roma themselves do the same.

As a matter of fact, none of these semantics matter.

The bottom line is: it is used a generic term, with generic consequences.

And whenever this happens, we're a long way out.

As we are now.

So what can we do to change it?

Even if we transcend the know-it-all misanthropy, the standard media clichés, the slightly more empathic columns and blogs, the sharp but impotent critical analysis – we're still hitting the fan of realpolitik: Only an assimilated Roma is a good Roma. Period.

Perhaps, every once in awhile, we'd perpetuate the romantic mythology and give them some space in the realm of art. Gorki, Mérimée, Marquez, Koudelka, Reindhart, Petrović, Kusturica, Gatlif, but we're still there. Only assimilated Roma are good Roma. The others are outcasts, or exotic dramaturgical devices.

Is there any space, then, for those 'other' Roma? The ones that don't beg, fly, dance, voodoo, steal, stare at the camera, parasite on social welfare, spend in debauchery and have XVIIIc life expectancy? The ones that, perhaps, have virtues and faults that are so similar to ours, but just different enough so that we can both learn from it?

There is, there should be, and there could be, not the least in the realm of documentary cinema, or cinema in general. In that very cinema which is the literature, the research material and the cultural scoreboard of the future.

So what kind of films should we make about the Roma today?  
None, we've had our shots. Let's give them a chance.

So what kind of films should Gypsy filmmakers do today?

Films about themselves, in which they are trying to right the wrongs about their image in society?  
Not, because that would imply legitimizing all those faulty premises.

Even more critical films about themselves, as a necessary introspection that would make them transcend their constant self-victimization? Perhaps, but that won't help their overall public image, at least not in the short term.

Radical protest films, because enough is enough? Maybe, but only if those protests are more inclusive.

Stories about the human condition in general, but from their unique point of view? Yes please.

In either case, their films will always be seen through the prism of them being Gypsy/Roma first, and filmmakers second. Until we figure this out, we'll still be a long way out.

Maybe they should use artistic avatars. Maybe we should abolish film credits altogether. But first, we should abolish the very ease with which we are absolving our prejudice.

Until we do this, we'll be a long way out.

For the Gypsies I am not worried, they are used to long ways, both in, out and around.

But this text is about the rest of 'us', isn't it?

*Boris Mitić is a self-taught documentary filmmaker and lecturer. His first film "Pretty Dyana" featured Roma refugees from Kosovo transforming Citroen 2CVs into Mad-Max-like recycling vehicles in his suburb of Belgrade. The film was featured worldwide at visual anthropology PhD courses, alterglobalist events, youth motivation centers, museums of modern art, reconciliation seminars, kindergartens, mental asylums and the MIT Space Research Film Club. It was broadcasted in over 80 countries and shown at 100+ festivals, winning 12 awards. But most importantly, it was 'the most pirated documentary in the Balkans' and one of the rare documentaries that the Gypsies themselves truly appreciate. [www.dribblingpictures.com](http://www.dribblingpictures.com)*

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