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Roma Filmic Representation as Postcolonial Object

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Manon Van De Water

0:04

I am very happy to introduce Dr. Sunnie Rucker-Chang. She is an Assistant Professor of Slavic and East European Studies and Director of European Studies at the University of Cincinnati in the Department of German that has many other kinds of studies (it's even worse than the GNS, I would say).

1:01

Her primary interests, however, lie in cultural and racial formations in the Balkans. She is a co-editor of and contributor to the *Book of Chinese Migrants in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe*. That was in 2011. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *Critical Romani Studies*, the *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, and *Interventions in the International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. She has co-authored a book, *Roma Rights and U.S. Civil Rights: A Transatlantic Approach*, which is currently in press with Cambridge University, and her co-edited volume *Balkan Migrants: to, from, and in the Balkans: Identity, Alterity, and Culture* is under contract already with Liverpool University Press. And for the 2020 academic year, Sunnie will work on a monograph focusing on racial formations and blackness in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav space for which has been awarded an American Association of University Women Postdoctoral Research Leave Fellowship. Two research leaves in a row, right, so very productive! And we are just very happy that during her research leave, Dr. Sunnie Rucker-Chang is able to give her talk "Roma Filmic Representation as Postcolonial Object."

Sunnie Rucker-Chang

2:34

Thank you for that lovely introduction, Manon, and thank you to everyone at the Center for Russia, East Europe and Central Asia for making this possible. I would especially like to thank Maria Vishnevsky and Sarah Linkert for taking care of the logistics, as well as just being incredibly helpful in the organizing process. And finally, I would like to thank you all in attendance for taking time out of your busy schedules to come to my talk today.

3:06

Before I begin my talk, though, I really, I'd like to acknowledge that my application of postcolonial theory and the attendant concepts of race and blackness remain a minimally applied approach in the field of Slavic and East European Studies. Therefore, I enter this discussion, however, with the belief that we can

and should discuss post-socialist Yugoslav space through the frames of the colonial and therefore postcolonial, knowing that the idea is still up for debate. In fact, the comparison still surfaces in scholarship about the region in the form of a question, which sort of marks that there's some tentativeness in talking about it this way. Some examples include the 2012 article, "Postsocialist Does Not Equal Postcolonial?" on post-Soviet imaginary and global coloniality by Madina Tlostanova, the 2015 volume *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Dobrota Pucherova and Robert Gafrik, and the 2018 book *Race and the Yugoslav region: Postsocialist, post-conflict, postcolonial?* by historian Catherine Baker. And I should say that I suspect this tentative position will remain.

4:17

However, as I have moved into the field of critical Romani studies, the common language there lies in theoretical frameworks of critical race studies, postcolonial theory and intersectionality. All theoretical frames that center on dialogues of difference, especially those related to race, and are, moreover, articulated from the point of view of those who are themselves inflected in their own societies. It is from this point of view that I seek to analyze Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema with significant Romani, and I should also say people acting as Roma, in the cast. What I'm presenting today is part of my new project, "The Uses of Blackness in Yugoslavia," in which I investigate racial formations in the former Yugoslav space. I embrace, then, the assertion posited by media scholar Anikó Imre, that "It no longer seems necessary to argue that the post-socialist region is post-colonial. Rather, it is our task to highlight the rich possibilities that such an exploration can afford." It is from this position that I anchor my research and look forward to a rich conversation about possible outcomes of such a position.

5:28

Finally, before I really get into the content, I want to state that in instances where I use the offensive term Gypsy, it is solely in historical and situated context, aware of no alternatives given. So, with that I will begin.

5:42

In the 1967 film *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* directed by Aleksandar Petrović, the Roma predictably reside in a pastoral landscape. In this case, it is the town of Sombor, located in the Autonomous Region of Vojvodina in northern Serbia, which is presented as remote, muddy, chaotic, vulgar, and plagued by criminality. This film is an example of Yugoslav black wave cinema, an experimental cinematic movement that emerged in Yugoslavia during the 1960s and 70s, and explored, among other things, according to Greg DeCuir, "the means of alienation and socialist society that were hidden in the discussions of Yugoslav progress and movement toward a better future." Roma are positioned in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* as the victims, not victors, of socialism, left behind in the construction of new Yugoslav systems in a new country, and that they are able to serve as a symbol of failure. This early example illustrates how Roma on screen present as a stable signifier of inveterate, internal outsiders. The failures are not directly articulated, but that is unnecessary given the expected position of Roma in these films. It is also unnecessary to state this role because, really, who else but Roma could easily evoke difference and recall the inadequacies of Yugoslav society? Particularly when they are themselves readily positioned as relational to those failures.

7:07

The height of black wave cinema emerged at nearly the same time that Yugoslavia was in the throes of geopolitical realignment, beginning to create a wedge position between the capitalist West and Soviet East. What emerged from this repositioning was the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, at its first conference, and its goal was to create pathways for the denouncement of the colonial in favor of equality and egalitarian frameworks. The movement was inherently anti-colonial, buttressed by the idea that, so

long as neocolonialism dominated relationships between the former colonial powers and the new nations, then genuine independence and non-alignment was impossible. In order to create new points of convergence for those countries wishing to be outside the dominant pools of east to west, Yugoslavia and 23 black and brown leaders of postcolonial nations created a middle way through the Non-Aligned Movement. While race was never given much attention as a rallying point for Josip Broz Tito, the leader of Yugoslavia until his death, "there was a performance," to quote my colleagues Srdjan Vucetic and Jelena Subotic, "There was performance of racial solidarity, by way of Tito's travels around the global south and the relationships he forged with the leaders of those nations, as well as an official rhetoric of Yugoslavia."

8:20

(I just have some images here. There's the composite from the first summit. Then above the composite are those individuals considered to be the founders of the movement. And then there's a picture of Tito with Haile Selasije, and next to the picture of Tito with Haile Selasije is a picture of children awaiting the arrival of Tito in Sudan. And these are just a few pictures. There are many, many, many pictures. And actually, it's sort of a sidebar, there was an exhibit that has been going around on performing solidarity and Tito's travels around African countries.)

8:54

Through the establishment of Yugoslavia, Yugoslavs came to believe in the idea of brotherhood and unity, or at least they acted on this idea of brotherhood and unity. Whether or not they believed it is up for debate and based on the individual. And with the establishment of the Non-Aligned Movement its applicability became global. Encoded, then, in this idea was a belief in universal humanity, and a shared brotherhood with those who look different, especially with black brothers in dark Africa. Through the creation of other Yugoslav myths, most of which stemmed from World War II, Tito was able to effectively suppress ethnic difference for decades among the majority Slavic populations, and some minority groups as well. However, the suppression of ethnic differences did not directly address the firmly entrenched, internalized, and I would say European racialized hierarchy in Yugoslavia, that positioned Roma, their cultures, and origins as different from the majority and therefore inferior.

9:49

The racial contract is a way that I like to think about the way that race is, within not just Europe, but globally, as articulated by philosopher Charles Mills, is effectively a global political system. That transforms human populations into white and non-white groups, whose positions in society are "clearly demarcated by law or by custom." Because Western thought occupies a primary and aspirational place of prominence in the world, race plays a significant role in constructing societies, irrespective of empire and geography. And I stress there the idea of empire, the irrelevance of empire and geography, because a lot of times when I have these conversations with people, they say that because we were not the heads of empire, that these ideas do not apply to us. But I like to stress that I don't believe that that's the case. So though understandings of race and racialization may differ based on local formulations, the structures differentiating white and non-white persist, not always based on the physical foundations of such a system, but in relation to or difference from an understood and accepted norm, which is created and dictated by the majority, causing racialized minorities to be pushed aside because of their inability or lack of desire to conform or assimilate to the wills and mandates of the majority.

11:01

So, because of the persuasive nature of this contract, it is not only possible to map local manifestations of it onto spaces without traditional forms of race, or that were never the heads of empires, I believe it's necessary. Only in situating the global structures of power and dominance in these unlikely spaces can we

truly understand the impact and broad reach of racialization and the global formations of race, and the attendant constructs of whiteness and even blackness. In recognizing, then, that localized systems of race, particularly the local demarcation of white and black among majorities and Romani groups in Eastern Europe, can we understand why Tito's lack of engagement with race and insistence on racial similarities among non-aligned members, without adequately addressing the struggles of racialized groups, particularly Roma in Yugoslavia? Can we understand the disconnect inherent to global brotherhood and unity, and the perpetuation of Romani dislocation in Yugoslav space?

11:55

So in understanding that racial hierarchies are deeply entrenched, it becomes clear that the language of empire, coloniality, neocoloniality, and postcoloniality as theoretical frames are useful to confront and understand how these systems persist, even in spaces that have been categorized as outside of them. For as Romani scholar activists Angela Kocze reminds us, "The application of the term colonialism can be understood in a broader sense, not just a specific conquest or event in the past, but as an ongoing exercise of economic, military and political power by stronger states and groups over weaker ones. The colony, as such, is internal to the state, comprising subaltern classes and those human subjects perceived to be inhuman." So as German scholar Fatima El-Tayeb reminds us, "Discourses around black Roma, or Roma as black rather, neither replace nor are similar to the racialization of people of African descent within the same societies. Nevertheless, the discourses overlap." The Roma as Eastern Europe's native quote unquote, "black populations," ascribes characteristics directly imported from the racist discourse around the black race. That this persists, illustrates the power of the racial contract, which maintains a racial hierarchy and positions global whiteness is akin to civilization, and mechanisms of power, whereas blackness or racialized difference inferior. Therefore, those inflected by blackness become relegated to an object, something to be studied, or observed as inferior, and therefore offered in position to some understood cultural, racial, and social norm. Roma are defined by this role in the former Yugoslav space, particularly in the films that I will talk about here in a bit, and I include the idea of postcolonial as commentary on both their colonial subjectivity, as well as the postcolonial scholar whose work I borrow from in adopting the term.

13:51

This, I argue, is the backdrop in forming the position of the Roma characters in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* and their inclusion into the film in these inferior frames recalls their overwhelmingly disadvantaged position as an attribute of their object status. And all of the elements that help to define that position including their blackness, their ostracism, and their constructed inability to persist in spaces of modernity. And so, I have a few film clips that are relatively short that I want to show here. The one on the bottom is just to show you the frames around which Romani culture is frequently articulated and this is the passionate Gypsy or Roma.

...

17:44

So, you can get the point there, of just an overly romanticized image. And so, the next two very short film clips that I'd like to show you... One is establishing the spaces in which Roma are presented in film and the next one I want to show the contrast between Sombor, as its presented in the film, to Belgrade as a space of modernity and progress and how, as it's framed in this film, the Roma reside necessarily outside of these frames where modernity is given an opportunity to thrive.

21:25

So, the filmic image of Roma is created largely by non-Roma. And in these portrayals it is important to highlight how their representation on screen is mired in difference, either from the majority, as in the case in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*, or in the unarticulated coded images that mark their difference from a settled norm of the majority. As such, I believe that illustrative to articulate the dislocated position of Roma, as it appears on screen at least, by way of race and racialization, as it provides us cues to understand their difference in these films that employ a colonial or even neocolonial gaze. Skin color, unfamiliar environment, and communities that live on the margins of what would be considered normalcy render them unassimilable, despite centuries of coexistence with majority populations, which is an aspect of their blackness, I believe. And I should state here that blackness here, by the way that I defined it, anyhow, is an extension of the racial contract that I mentioned earlier. And I have defined this type of blackness elsewhere as surfacing in three ways in former Yugoslav space, including physical or epidermalization (to give a nod to Fanon and his discussion of epidermal blackness), situational (in reference to Maria Todorova and Milica Bakić-Hayden's ideas of Balkanism), and as revolt, which really emerges in Serbia in the early 2000s, but is a nod back to 1960s and 1970s revolutionary forms of blackness.

22:50

So, each type, in my opinion, responds to a particular space-time, and provides context in its embodiment on screen. Blackness is related to portrayal of Roma in the films here as manifest in the physical and plays a significant role in highlighting their marginalization. Even without placing Romani characters into disadvantaged surroundings, which is actually very rarely the case, they are associated with poverty and a host of other stereotypes such that they themselves become a sign of despair and distance from what is considered a social-cultural norm. This becomes particularly marked in filmic portrayals from non-Roma, as Roma are framed not in reference to their own communities or expectations, but by the gaze of the dominant culture and position of the majority, rendering, I believe, their experiences akin to double consciousness (to reference Dubois, Frantz Fanon, and then also Paul Gilroy), where their physical selves and images are mediated through outside norms and expectations. Namely, they're not allowed to exist in their own frames.

23:51

Roma are framed, then, as outsiders in two regards. One that is symbolic, by way of imposing an obvious difference from the majority and exposes existing outside acceptable frames, and the other relates to what Dina Iordanova expresses a rejection of Balkan as, "marginal and poorly adapted, but likeable for their vigor and non-traditional exuberant attitude," which we saw a bit of in the bar scene that I showed you. Both frames are really neocolonial, in that this position is imposed from the outside, as majority cultures reject Romani populations and place them and their various lifestyles as unacceptable. So, the neocolonial construct then recalls Aimé Césaire, who recounted in his 1950 work, *Discourses of Colonialism*, that "Colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a discourse in which everything that is advanced, good and civilized is defined and measured in European terms." Given that Césaire was, in fact, discussing Western Europe in his discussion of colonial powers, and given that Europe's east and therefore East Europeans have regularly been held to unequal standards, as well as seen as inferior to Western Europe and West Europeans, postcolonial critique, I believe, illuminates the analysis of the relationship of Southeast Europe to Western Europe, as the flows of information, intellectual movements and racial hierarchies have left imprints throughout Europe. It is also useful to analyze how this unbalanced relationship between East and West in Europe gets internalized and informs the relationship of a majority populations to the marginalized Romani communities and their borders. The internalized racial hierarchies affect outside perceptions and therefore filmic representations, rendering them

affected by their object status, if we return to Fanon, or their "thingification" if we borrow language from Césaire.

25:42

Moving on to the next film...

25:51

In the work *European Others* by Fatima El-Tayeb, she explains how Roma are defined by migration narratives that render them outsiders in European landscapes in places they have lived for generations. Aidan McGarry in his 2017 work expresses very similar sentiment. So that Roma are cast as internal others helps to explain the relational difference to other minorities in Southeast Europe and how the story that is retold in the 2013 film directed by Danis Tanović is defined by Dino Murtić as, "a genre which fuses together experimental, documentary and feature filmmaking." The film features a Romani family acting out an actual episode from their lives. When the matriarch, Senada, was in desperate need of an operation to remove a fetus that had died inside of her, but was unable to obtain the operation because of lack of insurance and a lack of funds. The film simultaneously recounts how the patriarch of the family, Nazif, who in this case is the iron picker, attempts to collect enough scrap metal to pay for his wife's surgery. He is unsuccessful. And even though Senada is ultimately able to get the surgery she needs by using her sister-in-law's insurance card, the family can barely afford to pay for the post-operation medication she needs. And complicating the situation, when they come back from her surgery the electricity is also cut off because they cannot afford to pay for that either. The film is bleak, and set in a staggeringly harsh, hilly Bosnian landscape, where regularly falling snow complicates Nazif's work. Also insinuated in the film is that the family resides near a power plant and is affected by environmental racism – a predictable landscape for a marginalized minority community.

27:36

And I'll just show you very briefly here, Nazif at work, gathering metal...

29:41

So in the film, the family is situated in narratives of dislocation and difference, illustrating how Roma represent frames of marginalization, again, and they fail to realize neocolonial expectations of not just the West, but arguably the society in which they live in. However, in this film in particular, we can think about Bosnia and how it remains outside of the frames of cultural Europe, and instead is viewed from the outside by way of its relationship to Balkan, and all of its negative connotations. In fact, this film, similar to others that take place in Bosnia – including *Our Everyday Life* by Ines Tanović in 2015, *Children of Sarajevo* by Aida Begić in 2008, *Grbavica: Land of my Dreams* by Jasmila Žbanić in 2005, and also *On the Path* by Jasmila Žbanić from 2010 – directly address the ironic notion that things were better off during the Bosnian War, reflecting the complicated position of contemporary Bosnia. This film, again, also relates well, I believe, to the double consciousness of Roma, and in Bosnia, and in some ways the region as a whole.

30:41

What uniquely situates Roma in this film is that their reliance on various NGOs, including those specifically tasked with helping only Roma, speaks to the stereotype held about them that interrogates their presumed insufficiency and inability to provide for themselves. As I have discussed elsewhere, the idea that there are organizations whose goal is to help one individual ethnic – and I would assert racial group – is not unusual within former Yugoslav space, but quite uncommon within a West European context, which further distances Bosnia from established European sensibilities. That these organizations operate

in Bosnia speaks to their 25-plus years beyond the war, which directly relates to the need for outside help for Bosnia in general.

An episode, however, there is no explanation for why Senada and Nazif need help except that they are poor. However, that they are allowed to receive help from organizations that only support Roma, even if Senada does not actually receive any help from them, can easily be viewed as undeserved and unfair because it is not available to all. If positioned into broader frames, Senada and Nazif could be viewed as having outside perceptions of the Balkans projected on them, and could be seen as offering a critique of the NGOization of Bosnia and civil society. If the position of Nazif and Senada is read as internal colonization of Roma, or outside projections of others being imprinted upon them, Senada and Nazif exist, again, by way of their double consciousness. And that their story has been immortalized by outside representation positions it outside and beyond their control.

32:20

Given these distant representations, the viewer, who can only read their difference, could not be taken simply by their harsh environments or unfriendly, even rude, reception that they get from doctors and nurses, but rather their experiences, which are framed, again, by way of their different from the majority. Their experiences, rather than highlighting the struggles of a marginalized people, expose Roma, again, as outsiders within, rendering them objects of a local, and probably even broader European neocolonial gaze.

And this last clip here that I want to show you is just when Nazif goes to the NGOs, looking for help for his wife...

34:49

Okay, we'll move on to the final film which is the 2016 documentary film called *Revolution Eternal* by American artist and filmmaker Megan Daalder, who documents her experience during her first trip to Serbia in 2010, where she unearths the history of Yugoslavia to find what and who has been left behind as a result of its dismantling. So, the connection between space and history, places this film in the director's mind in a country that she says does not exist anymore, failing to recognize contemporary Serbia outside of Yugoslav frames. By connecting the space to a bygone era, country, and culture Daalder presents Serbia as akin to a non-place, as most people there do not seem significant enough to be defined individually. The general disregard shown towards Serbia reifies its placeholder as Balkan. And this position is odd, given that the film is supposed to draw attention to Romani dislocation and distance from the mainstream of society, and highlight how the revolution, unlike the contemporary setting, sought to bring together Romani groups with the majority co-nationals based on cohabitation and not assimilation.

36:04

The overarching Romani difference is cast into a young Rom named Stanisha, with whom the director says she has fallen in love. The film takes place in Belgrade, on the site of what was supposed to be the home of the Museum of the Revolution, but was never realized, as a revolution had outlived its usefulness in constructing a collective memorialization of Yugoslavia. The film begins with narration from an architect commissioned to construct the museum (his name is Slobodan Maldini), who serves as our guide through the history of Yugoslavia, its leader, foundational principles, and goals. Stanisha and Daalder become fast friends, but cannot communicate with one another because of a language barrier. Through the help of a translator and their nonverbal communication, we learned some things about Stanisha, including that he is unemployed, but is looking for work. So Daalder hires him to give her a haircut. Stanisha cuts Daalder's hair and asks her to cut his own return – and that's an image of them cutting each other's hair.

36:59

Through their interactions, Daalder becomes interested to learn more about Stanisha and what her new and mostly nameless acquaintance terms quote unquote "the real Serbia." So she sets off with Stanisha, to his hometown in Leskovac, a small town situated 275 kilometers southeast of Belgrade. Upon arrival in Stanisha's majority Roma community, Daalder says the landscape began to change. And with that change the filming style also shifts to choppy scene cuts, alternating between one short scene to another, with short black screens in between. These transitions between scenes help, I believe, to mystify Roma and their surroundings. Who they are and what they do is woven into the film by way of their distance from familiarity.

37:39

And I'd like to play that short scene that's set up when they're arriving to Leskovac and the clip is cut off a little bit in the beginning, but what she says is, "I lost my wallet on the way to Leskovac."

39:00

So, in Leskovac, Megan learns that Stanisha is Rom and learns that the term is preferable to Gypsy because of its romantic connotations, and I would include its overt racism. The Roma are one of the most marginalized people in Europe, Daalder explains, which then she follows up with the notion that she was guided by something bigger. Of course, this something is unknown and unknowable, as it is seemingly, unintentionally, a romantic notion connecting Stanisha and Roma back to distant frames of the majority that Daalder suggests she is moving away from. Following their return to Belgrade, Stanisha seems to just disappear, like Tito and the revolution. And Daalder looks for him, asks others about Stanisha's whereabouts, but as unable to find Stanisha and the film concludes here with the cloud filled blue sky filling the entire frame with Maldini narrating, "the revolution does not always have to be the thing you think it is."

39:58

The film could be superficially read as challenging the status quo and notions of Romani difference, and that they were irrelevant during the existence of Yugoslavia, thus providing a tension with the post-Yugoslav reality. However, as Roma become conflated with narratives of difference in myth that Maldini uses to describe Yugoslavia, they too become interwoven with the revolution, which is not a revolution rendering war as necessary, but rather a social and cultural revolution to reignite the spark that once moved the people of a previous generation. This sentiment illustrates how, in positioning Stanisha as a symbol for all Roma across Yugoslav space, and by subjecting the Romani characters as objects to be studied, possibly understood, but framed through the outside gaze, again, the social justice aspect of this film is lacking, I believe. Instead, Roma are framed by an outsider as examples of otherness. As a result of the entrenched nature of Roma being rendered postcolonial objects, this gaze reifies the position that Roma inhabit in the collective imaginary of the majority

41:00

So, in this conclusion, I will say that it's a very short analysis, but I analyze three former Yugoslav, or post-Yugoslav countries, Southeast European films to illustrate how the postcolonial emerges in the post-socialist South European filmic context, such that tropes typically associated with postcoloniality are projected onto the populations that live in these spaces. The majority population is impacted by the gaze of the West and the EU, which in turn is mapped onto Roma who are racialized by way of their difference and distance from the majority. That they are familiar, yet unassimilable, encodes onto filmic representations of Roma a reference point of difference, familiar to most if not all in the region, such that

their mere presence and film connotes alterity. This imprinted difference assigned to Roma renders them not subjects, but objects, as I said in the Fanonian sense of the term, in that their experiences, culture and mere presence is mediated by and filtered through projections of the majority. Reading these films in this way, I believe, provides new potential paths to link the various "posts," to recall a very important article that links post-socialism and postcolonialism. And these "posts," I believe, include postcolonial, post-socialist, post-communist, post-civil rights, and even post-racial, in that Romani communities are frequently referenced by way of their difference, their position, both historical and contemporary, which could provide productive paths for future research, which is precisely why I'm engaged in this project.

42:32

Thank you.