**The Roma on Screen: Voicing the Counter-Hegemonic**

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Abstract

Since the new millennium, approximately thirty Italian documentaries have focused on the Roma, Sinti and other more tendentially nomadic groups. Drawing on writings by theorists including Spivak and Parati, this article contends that many documentaries have successfully articulated counter-hegemonic representations of the Roma, elucidated the counter-histories of second and third generation Italian Roma, and denounced the dual subalternity of Roma women, a condition caused by their own patriarchal communities and by the social marginalization of the Roma within Italian society. However, because of limited resources and access, directors have been unable to depict disturbing phenomena affecting the Roma such as forced adoptions and their exposure to health hazards. While cinema’s effectiveness as an informational tool within society’s changing public sphere is increasingly limited, the article outlines ways in which an emancipatory impetus can be developed – via film projects – to reverse the subaltern position of Italian and European Roma.

Keywords

documentaries

counter-hegemonic

Roma

Sinti

Spivak

nomadism

subalternity

marginalization

Biography

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With a population of ten to twelve million across Europe (European Commission, 2010: 8), around 180,000 of whom reside in Italy – constituting the country’s third largest ethnic group (Associazione 21 luglio/21 July Association 2013b: 3) – the Roma, Sinti and other more tendentially nomadic groups represent, in Vaclav Havel’s words, a ‘litmus test’ for any society’s commitment to civil and human rights (Acton, Ryder, Rostas 2013: 11). Since approximately 70,000 of Italy’s Roma population have lived in the peninsula since the Middle Ages (ERRC 2013: 7), the number increasing through migration from Eastern Europe since the 1970s and accelerating after the Balkan wars and the accession to the European Union (EU) of countries such as Romania in 2007, the Roma constitute a unique socio-political phenomenon. They problematize traditional notions of, and reactions to, migration; given that their communities have resided in Italy for centuries and that the arrivals of other Roma groups are rarely marked by the dramatic sea landings that characterize recent African migration, media rhetoric has instead emphasized the Roma’s socio-economic ‘otherness’, linking them with poverty and crime. Such perceptions were fuelled by the Berlusconi administration’s ‘Nomad Emergency’ in May 2008, an opportunist initiative based on the collection of biometric data, the clearance of Roma camps, and tightened security; the ‘Nomad Emergency’ was duly ruled to be unconstitutional by the Council of Statein November 2011 (ERRC 2013: 11) for its targeting of a specific ethnic group.

Since the new millennium, Italian film-makers have given the Roma increasing visibility, featuring them as protagonists or in subsidiary roles within approximately forty documentaries and fiction films. Film-makers have been sensitive to the increasing anti-Roma hostility within Italy’s socio-political climate, the dozen documentaries that had been released up to the ‘Nomad Emergency’ in 2008 increasing to eighteen in the six subsequent years. This article focuses on new millennium documentaries that depict the Roma, assessing the extent to which this body of work might be categorized as counter-hegemonic and politically progressive. How successfully do recent documentaries practice ideology critique, ‘exposing the way antagonisms generated by the dominant social interests of a capitalist society (capital and state) are concealed, displaced and rationalized’? (Wayne 2008: 89). In the light of writings by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Graziella Parati concerning the problematic cohesion, agency and self-representation within subaltern groups, what progress has documentary cinema made in outlining more progressive societal configurations – both in Italy and transnationally – with the Roma at their heart? How effectively have film-makers subverted reductive institutional perspectives on subaltern groups such as the Roma, emphasizing instead the notion of ‘whoness’, ‘the unrepeatable individuality of a self that has little place in philosophy and finds its ideal location in narratives, in the process of telling a story’ (Parati 2005: 18)? As a secondary theoretical strand of the article’s evaluation of the effectiveness of twenty-first century Roma documentaries as politicized art, it also assesses how creatively and systematically films have assimilated the findings of a corpus of recent and sometimes controversial sociological writings, anthropological fieldwork, and investigative reports by charities that examine the impact of institutional determinants upon the Roma.

It will be suggested that many recent documentaries have successfully articulated counter-hegemonic representations of the Roma; they generate an emancipatory momentum by highlighting the stark, binary oppositions that occur as their aspirations for constructive, long-term, sedentary integration within Italian society clash with the deleterious emphasis on ‘nomadism’, spatial marginalization, and short-termist emergency action espoused by the Italian State and regional politicians. Documentaries adeptly elucidate the individual counter-histories of second and third generation Italian Roma and of recent Eastern European Roma migrants, while a vein of films beginning with *Io? Maschio*/‘Me? Male’ [[1]](#endnote-1) (Careri and Tripodi, 2001) – a thoughtful, interview-based short film depicting the aspirations of female Roma in Gioia Tauro – has sensitively explored the dual subalternity of Roma women caused by their own patriarchal communities and by the Roma’s marginalization within Italian society in general. At times, however, the aesthetics and structures of documentaries unwittingly consolidate the reductive emphasis on socio-economic poverty and marginalization prevalent in media reports on the Roma. Documentaries have also fallen short, through limited resources and access, in investigating particularly disturbing socio-environmental phenomena affecting the Roma – such as forced adoptions and exposure to health hazards – which remain relatively unarticulated in cinematic terms. While the article shares Mauro Sassi’s reservations regarding the effectiveness of cinema (and particularly documentaries) in channelling information within society’s changing public sphere (2014: 117-118), it nevertheless outlines how filmic projects might generate a progressive impetus to reverse the subaltern positions of Italian and European Roma.

**‘Nomad’ Camps: Denunciation Entrapped by Realism**

Gaetano Di Lorenzo’s *I gitani della mia città*/‘The gypsies of my city’(2000) portrayed the critical living conditions of Roma refugees from Kosovo who settled in the Favoritadistrict of Palermo, the film reflecting new millennium Italian cinema’s initial emphasis on ‘informal’ or unofficial Roma camps. Within the taxonomy delineated by the European Roma Rights Centre,[[2]](#endnote-2) unofficial camps are often located near rubbish tips, the inhabitants living in shacks or caravans without electricity or running water. With metropolitan models of urbanization privileging exchange value over use value (Paone 2008: 145) and with local councils’ policies towards the Roma being influenced by the priorities of their electoral constituencies (Revelli 1999: 12-13), the areas where a Roma presence is at best tolerated are invariably isolated, marginal and invisible within the urban fabric of cities, and of negligible economic value. The approach of Italian film-makers towards capturing the conditions within unofficial camps has generally reflected the observational mode of filming outlined by John Corner, where the ‘raw visibility of the political’ (2009: 115) and its resonances are sufficient in themselves, without any on/off-screen narration, to document the immense difficulties encountered by the Roma. This is exemplified in *Via San Dionigi, 93: Storia di un campo rom*/‘Via San Dionigi, 93: Story of a Roma camp’(Curagi and Gorio, 2007), by an early, desolate, handheld tracking shot that emphasizes the tight spaces between the community’s improvised shacks, before silently depicting a large blackened area where a fire had destroyed part of the settlement.

As well as absorbing the aftershocks of such occurrences, the sub-genre of Italian documentaries that focuses on camp life derives visual and rhetorical impact by capturing the traumatic transitions of the Roma from one category of the ERRC camp taxonomy to another, notably in *Dalla baracca al container, vita in un campo attrezzato*/‘From the shack to the container, life in an equipped camp’(Micalizio, 2009) which depicts the forced transfer of one community to the ‘equipped camp’ in Via Salone, Rome. However, several works also document the abrupt clearances of informal camps by regional institutions, with filming that reflects Corner’s criteria for effective political documentaries, namely a skilful handling of ‘contingency, the incidental and the casual as well as the pursuit of a tight “informational” agenda’ (2009: 114). The loose narrative structure of *Japigia Gagì – Storie di Roma*/*Japigia Gagì – Roma Stories* (Giovanni Princigalli, 2003) concludes with a camp clearance in the Japigia area of Bari, Princigalli’s camera attracting the hostility of several police officers evidently frustrated at being unable to act with the unfettered illegality for which the authorities are regularly denounced in their dealings with the Roma.[[3]](#endnote-3) Similarly, *Via San Dionigi* illustrates how the painstaking mediation between charities and Roma communities can be abruptly destroyed, its closing sequence depicting the Milanese authorities suddenly clearing the camp for reasons of ‘hygiene’, and making a community homeless. The filmic capturing of events such as the expulsion of Roma communities and of the social disadvantages caused by rehousing them in remote locations has an important role in the advocacy work carried out by organizations such as the 21 July Association (personal communication) in their interactions with Italian institutions.

Filming on location in the so-called ‘equipped camps’ also enables directors to critique the rationale behind the notion of improving the Roma’s quality of life by transferring them to fenced-off areas such as the Via Salone camp on Rome’s outskirts. This camp has over 30 surveillance cameras (ERRC 2013: 17), is located 4.2 km from the nearest chemist’s, and 3.1 km from the nearest food store (Associazione 21 luglio, 2014: 36). The prefabricated constructions that house the Roma provide a façade of hygienic decorum while being utterly disposable if necessary; they are the logical solution for local councils such as that of Rome for which – mindful of their electorate and of the waiting list for council housing – it would be ‘unthinkable’ to provide permanent accommodation for the Roma (Clough Marinaro 2003: 212). Camps like Salone are constructed entirely according to institutional criteria, mirroring the minimal ‘value’ of the Roma in electoral and economic terms, and are predicated on principles of delimitation and control. They reterritorialize the displaced, housing a surplus humanity in conditions whose intrinsic temporariness is short-circuited by the increasing permanence of such solutions on a global scale (Rahola 2003: 19).

Micalizio’s *Dalla baracca* was followed by two films, *Campososta*/‘Transit camp’and *Container 158* (Liberti and Parenti, 2013), that were produced in conjunction with the 21 July Association and which vividly articulate the issues highlighted in the organization’s publications. Of the three films, *Dalla baracca* is perhaps the least effective; its status as an instant movie made after the first Roma communities arrived at the Via Salone camp leads to potential ambiguities. Politically progressive documentaries must guard against the epistemological ‘flexibility’ of images that become detached from their referents: as Stella Bruzzi observes (2006: 16-17), the gap between images and referents is potentially manipulable if there is insufficient contextualization to anchor images to the filmic discourse. Imagery in *Dalla baracca* of neat rows of prefabricated homes, and of Roma youths standing nonchalantly nearby, is not attached to a cogent, unequivocal filmic discourse. It lends itself to subjective interpretations and potentially to exercises such as the different voiceovers added by Chris Marker to the same sequence of *Lettre de Sibérie*/*Letter from Siberia* (1957) to elicit interpretations ranging from pro- to anti-Soviet propaganda. The imagery in *Dalla baracca* elicits potential interpretations including: an anti-hegemonic perspective condemning the marginalization and regimentation of a penalized minority; a Rome city council viewpoint defending the camp as an orderly, secure and hygienic solution to the unauthorized camps; a far-right perspective condemning indolent minority groups that contribute little to the ‘Italian nation’ but receive council-funded amenities. When *Campososta* and *Container 158* were released four years later, the scale of the Via Salone camp’s marginalization was clearer. In *Container 158* the camera tracks several Roma teenagers into the Salone railway station, capturing its pristine yet disconcerting emptiness, given that trains never stop there. Also, by anchoring the film to the testimony of Miriana Halilovic and her family which, though expanding, is obliged to live in a 22.5² prefabricated unit which cannot be legally extended, *Container 158* deconstructs the ideological basis of the equipped campsas solutions to the issue of Roma housing.

The default aesthetic linking documentary representations of Roma camps is that of realism, invariably deployed for political work targeting ‘a socially and culturally active segment of the public’ which interprets cinema ‘as an instrument for political and cultural action’ (Capussotti 2009: 58). However, this aesthetic risks confining the Roma within a trope of abjection, given the growing body of work that depicts Roma communities within monodimensional socio-economic poverty. This is exacerbated by films that internalize hegemonic/subaltern positions within their visual and narrative structures, such as the opening sequences of *Me sem rom*/‘I am Roma’(Coccia, Cottini and Falcioni, 2010) as two male non-Roma, in voiceover, resolve to visit a camp to understand more about the Roma inhabitants, the us/them dichotomy being reinforced by a tracking shot that follows them towards the settlement. *E questa è casa mia* /‘And this is my house’ (Moro, 2011), although presenting an innovative female perspective of a semi-formal camp near Milan and of the phenomenon of absent fathers within family units, is vitiated by the almost ethnographic approach of the two non-Roma women – the film-maker and Gisela Lazzari, a local teacher – whose dialogue accompanies images of the camp; the inhabitants remain marginal, objectified apart from brief soundbite interviews, and ultimately evaluated by their visitors.

Similarly, although filmed with laudable intentions, the Roma community in *Container 158* almost appears trapped between the abstract, institutional power that confines them to rows of prefabricated homes, and the emphatic long shots of the Salone camp used for rhetorical effect by the directors, an approach that recalls Tony Dowmunt’s observations about the ‘symptomatic silence’ of the empowered white male presence behind the documentary camera, his authority to represent an objectified Other being a ‘birthright’ (2013: 267). The eschewing of realism within documentaries therefore constitutes a valid counter-hegemonic move, and enables the Roma to transcend the socio-economic limitations of their contemporary living conditions. Significantly, however, the only post-2000 Roma documentary successfully predicated on an alternative aesthetic – painterly in essence – is *Adisa o la storia dei mille anni*/*Adisa or a Thousand Year Story* (D’orzi, 2004), which was filmed in Bosnia. Its long takes of mountainous landscapes and stylized, domestic sequences of Roma families – their faces illuminated by firelight in the style of Van Gogh – visually inscribe the Roma within one of their original socio-geographical habitats.

The soundtrack, alternating diegetic and non-diegetic accordion pieces and verbal testimony from Roma elders regarding their cultural traditions and skills, also structures the film around the consciousness of its subjects before a gradual, revelatory momentum is developed through the reflections of the film’s youngest interviewee, Adisa, concerning questions of Roma identity and the difficulties of interacting with non-Roma. By deliberately deciding not to railroad the documentary’s subjects into preconceived socio-political theses, or film the ‘few miserable shacks, an inexpressible poverty’ (D’orzi 2012: 23) that he witnessed near Mostar – a move that would have visually perpetuated the collective perception of impoverished Roma communities relegated to the peripheries of metropolitan capitalism – the director’s structural and aesthetic approach enables the Bosnian Roma’s archaic sense of community, depicted as if outside clock time, to emerge.

**Nomadic Myths: The Roma, Education and Employment**

The recurrent term of ‘nomads’ with which the Roma, Sinti and related groups are labelled – despite 97 per cent of the Roma within Italy being sedentary (ERRC 2014: 3) – is motivated by a clear politico-economic agenda. Nando Sigona notes that the media’s use of the term during the exodus of Roma from Kosovo in 1999 effectively denied them refugee status (2002: 32-34); this, together with an institutional dissemination of the misleading notion that the Roma desire an itinerant camp-based lifestyle (Sigona 2002: 36), has enabled the Italian authorities to avoid any electorally damaging socio-economic commitment towards the integration of Roma communities. While the nomadic myth has been attributed – charitably – to an institutional misreading of the cultural heritage of Yugoslavian Roma who arrived from the 1980s onwards (ERRC 2013: 17), and to mutual incomprehension between the Roma and local authorities (Saitta 2010: 37), the issue of ideology, in terms of dominant hegemonies creating strategically reductive generalizations, rematerializes. Through their visual articulation of research by academics and pro-Roma associations, post-2000 Italian documentaries have attempted to deconstruct the pernicious, institutionally-sponsored short-termism that penalizes the Roma in areas including employment, education and health.

Many documentaries exploring the Roma’s difficult access to social services use interviews as research tools, particularly qualitative interviewing (Wayne 2008: 84-85) to elicit individual perspectives and analyse community values. This approach, rather than using narration, archival footage or dramatic reconstruction, is necessitated by limited budgets and by many film-makers wanting to readjust the status differential between marginalized interviewees and the privileged interviewer. The technique creates what Capussotti terms ‘a space for subjectivity’ (2009: 61) – a distillation of Parati’s notion of ‘whoness’ – which accentuates the interviewees’ individuality and aspirations in another valid counter-hegemonic initiative against political and journalistic tendencies to reduce the Roma to a faceless semi-parasitic mass sidelined from late-capitalist society. The noble simplicity of the interviewees’ long-term aspirations, such as Constantin Suliman’s desire for employment and a secure future for his children in *Mandiamoli a casa 2 – I luoghi comuni*/‘Let’s send them home 2 – Commonplaces’ (Marconi and Mele, 2011) contrasts with the film’s depiction of vulnerable individuals reluctantly postponing strategic preparation for the future in favour of expedients to achieve temporary security in the present – a legacy of Southern Europe’s defective welfare systems (Costi 2010: 130).

There is a resonant disjunction between the intrinsic normality of the Roma’s first world aspirations and the third world conditions of the informal camps represented in films such as *Via San Dionigi*. This also develops from a cumulative use of ‘the prioritisation of the mundane occurrence over the monumental event’ (Bruzzi 2006: 79), a technique illustrated in several understated sequences of *Container 158* that gradually disclose the bureaucratic mire thwarting young Brenda Salkanovic’s application for Italian citizenship and Remi Salkanovic’s desire to work as a mechanic. *Miracolo alla Scala*/‘Miracle at the Scala’(Bernieri, 2011) and *Mamma rom*/‘Mother Rom’ (Cristofaro and Valentino, 2012) use a format that Silvio Carta (2011: 409) classes as ‘revelatory’ rather than ‘expository’; they depict chronological progressions of events and privilege the ‘emotional affinities’ that evolve between the film-makers and subjects.

With the affective charge of a docusoap, *Miracolo alla Scala* unashamedly aligns viewers visually and cognitively with the aims of young Loredana Badeanu. When her family is invited to perform a remunerated concert, meaning that their musical skills – previously acquired in Romania and honed in the present on Milan’s underground trains – might be channelled into a future livelihood, a politically progressive linearity is created. The documentary configures a vision of the Roma’s long-term integration, distancing them from the economic as a key determinant in their constitution as subjects (Spivak 1994: 75) and endowing them with greater agency through culture. Other films, including *La canzone di Rebecca*/‘Rebecca’s Song’(Malini, 2012) which portrays the young Roma artist Rebecca Covaciu, and the transnational perspectives of *Immaginario rom – artisti contro*/*Imaginary Roma, Artists Against* (Distilo, 2011) and *Interferenze rom*/‘Roma interference’ (Cupisti, 2013), also evidence how the Roma’s artistic creativity counterpoints political discrimination against them and offers an outlet beyond subalternity, ‘where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognisable basis of action’ (Spivak 2005: 476).

Documentaries that explore the education of Roma youngsters also untangle the ideological contradictions that compromise the notional benefits of scolarization asserted by the institutions. Taking Rome as an example, after a census identified over half the Roma community as being under eighteen, ‘schooling was presented as one of the cornerstones of the council’s integration policy’ (Clough Marinaro 2003: 208), and the council also threatened to evict the parents of children who failed to attend. Marco Solimeni’s fieldwork (2013: 163) analyses the Roma’s scepticism towards any supposed ‘instruments of emancipation’ offered by the institutions. This stems from the incompatibility between the short-term subsistence existences lived by the poorer Roma – the input of youngsters in learning trades and supporting their families being vital – and the speculative, market driven, institutional agenda predicated on equipping young Roma with skills to acquire jobs which, in a saturated employment market notorious for anti-Roma discrimination,[[4]](#endnote-4) will not materialize.

The 21 July Association has co-ordinated *Da Barbiana al campo nomadi: I bambini rom e la scuola*/‘From Barbiana to the nomad camp: Roma children and school’(Coccia, Cottini and Falcioni, 2011) and *I bambini rom, la scuola e il piano nomadi di Roma*/‘Roma children, school and Rome’s nomad plan’(Associazione 21 luglio, Coccia, Cottini and Falcioni 2012), which integrate the organization’s research within short films to be used as activist resources. *Da Barbiana* deploys positivist and interpretative approaches (Wayne 2008: 84) and uses a quantitative analysis of data regarding Roma underachievement at school, the statistics being articulated visually and also via Doriana Chierici’s sardonic voiceover; its qualitative approach is integrated through a case study of young Aisha who lives at Rome’s Via Salone camp. The documentary dissects the institutional branding of Aisha as ‘aggressive’, tracing the impact of issues including the education that is missed because the council-funded bus delivers her to school late and collects her early, and the difficulty of completing homework within a cramped camp home. While it should be acknowledged that the expository non-Roma voiceover excludes Roma input from the film’s soundtrack, *Da Barbiana*, as an effective political documentary, links what could be construed as reassuring images (Aisha’s domestic routine and school journey) firmly to her marginalized reality to minimize any slippage between image and referent in a notoriously depoliticized and manipulative mediascape.

The Roma’s employment prospects remain precarious; employers who consciously or inadvertently hire undocumented workers are heavily penalized and regular employment consequently eludes many Roma. They remain marginalized from the neoliberal labour market, their activities centring on artisanship, mechanical repair work, musicianship and small scale drug dealing (Saitta 2010: 24). Recent documentaries have generated political impetus by investigating the Roma’s employment situation, dismantling the box-ticking futility of institutional initiatives and revealing – through on-screen interviews – the Roma’s strategies for securing jobs. *Zingarò, una sartoria rom a Carbonia*/‘*Zingarò*, a Roma dressmakers’ shop in Carbonia’ (Contini, Nesler and Piga, 2011) follows several Roma women who enrol on a training project focusing on dressmaking. *Zingarò* contrasts its visual refrain of close-ups of the women’s manual dexterity which ranges from kneading bread and intricate needlework to constructing homes, with their increasingly abstract and economically precarious work experience project. The camera captures politically salient moments such as the terse questioning of a NGO co-ordinator about the project’s future, the film-makers critiquing the ideology of neoliberal entrepreneurship when applied, absurdly, to the marginalized in Italy’s poorest regions during a capitalism-induced economic crisis. Predictably, at the project’s conclusion, the women are unable to take on the dressmaking business and its financial overheads, and return to their former ‘occupations’.

Other documentaries that explore Roma integration in the employment sector are predicated on personal testimony via on-screen interviews, notably *Racav lavor*/‘I’m looking for work’ (Carraro et al., 2001). Antonia Stepich acknowledges that the concealment of her Roma origins during job interviews led to her employment as a health visitor in Milan; a conversation with 20-year-old Luigi Ciarella features a significant *mise-en-scène* in which the elegant youth recounts his unsuccessful job interviews against a darkened background. This visual approach privileges Luigi’s qualities, momentarily decontextualizing him from the reductive ethnic, social and economic value systems that underpin dominant ideologies. It is more effective than the *mise-en-scène* used in several short films sharing the collective title *Rom, cittadini dell’Italia che verrà*/‘The Roma, citizens of tomorrow’s Italy’ (Associazione 21 luglio, 2012). Despite its progressive intentions, work such as *La storia di Kemo*/‘Kemo’s Story’promotes an assimilationist agenda, initially concealing Kemo Hamidovic’s identity as he is filmed preparing perfect cappuccinos in a bar, then subsequently in locations ranging from his modern apartment to a nightclub dancefloor. Such approaches evoke Spivak’s notion of ‘recognition by assimilation’, where an irreducible European ethnocentricism subtends the constitution of the Other (1994: 89-90), this perception being reinforced as Kemo equates his Roma heritage with socio-economic poverty. Assimilation is essentially a fragmented, individualistic approach to secure one’s own future rather than that of one’s community. Sigona (2002: 25) cites the Roma’s attempts to merge with the dominant ethnic groups in Kosovo, the strategy only bringing short-term economic benefits because they were never fully accepted, and the possibility of collective socio-political action was lost. Therefore, while the duration and modes of address of such films are strategically valid as regards sensitizing ‘unconverted’ viewers (Corner 2009: 125), shorts like *La storia di Kemo* betray intrinsic, unresolved tensions between the emancipation of the individual and that of the group.

**Voicing the Female Roma**

The Roma endure manifold forms of subalternity. Historically, theirs is the ‘forgotten’ holocaust, and their presence in mainstream, hegemonic historical accounts is minimal. Economically, they remain marginalized from capitalist society and consumerism. Socially, their close clan ties problematize interaction and cross-community solidarity with Italians. Politically, Roma scepticism towards collective organization and class alliances with the Italian proletariat vitiates their resistance to reactionary forces. Demographically, they are an outsider minority in any ‘nation state’. Geopolitically, the absence of a national territory – even of Palestinian dimensions – deprives them of a voice on the international stage and of a hereditary reference point. For female Roma, these disadvantages are compounded by the notorious patriarchal relations that structure Roma communities: fieldwork access is sometimes negotiated with male Roma to avoid ‘inappropriate’ interaction with women (Levinson and Sparkes 2004: 708); young brides are effectively commodified and exchanged for dowries (Tesăr 2012: 113-115); a woman’s socio-symbolic role in community gatherings is marginal and subservient (Tesăr 2012: 136); patriarchal influences can discourage public education for girls, their mothers being more constructive interlocutors with Italian schools (Associazione 21 luglio 2011: 35); Roma communities can ostracize women who denounce domestic violence (Associazione 21 luglio 2011: 37). The European Commission has identified Roma women as a lead target group – operating as mediators for projects ranging from education to healthcare (2010: 47) – but female Roma activists face the delicate task of furthering their own rights while defending the Roma culture from hegemonic ideologies which imply that they are ‘an inferior race, performing pre-modern/primitive practices’ (Vincze 2013: 37).

New millennium Italian documentaries attempt to disclose the structures of oppression restricting the emancipation of Roma women, although many sequences are also characterized by ‘structuring absences’ (Chanan 2008: 124) centring on potent patriarchal influences implied by female interviewees or on the disappearance of male Roma from family environments. In *Racav lavor*, an early twenty-first century documentary (2001),Romanì Cirelli refers to male Roma discouraging the education of girls and pressuring them into begging for money, but no counter-response is solicited from male community members in this or any documentary that features the patriarchy issue. While Italian film-makers are justifiably rigorous in denouncing institutional failings that affect the education of Roma children (*Da Barbiana* and *I bambini rom*), it is perhaps comprehensible that these projects’ socio-political remit does not extend to questioning the internal dynamics of Roma communities. The result, however, is that a key intra-group antagonism is left unexplored in cinematic terms.

Sometimes patriarchal values are unquestioningly internalized and reproposed by matriarchal figures, exemplified in Laura Halilovic’s *Io, la mia famiglia rom e Woody Allen*/*Me, My Gipsy Family and Woody Allen* (2009) as Halilovic’s mother and grandmother harangue her on camera regarding the importance of marrying young. Even the recent film *Gitanistan – lo stato immaginario dei rom salentini*/‘Gitanistan – the imaginary state of Roma from the Salento area’ (De Donno and Giagnotti, 2014), which voices the perspectives of economically prosperous second and third generation Roma, illustrates the extent to which female subalternity remains engrained. Giagnotti evocatively distils the professional expertise of his male relatives into the *mise-en-scène* of interviews, featuring them as they trade horses and work in their flourishing businesses. However, female interviewees are visually confined to domestic tropes – cooking, sewing, or sitting in peripheral positions during staged group interviews. Consequently, a greater emancipatory impetus emerges in films that articulate research on Roma women as mediators between their communities and Italian society, and in work where – through figures like the film-maker Laura Halilovic – an organic, female Roma voice (albeit with the assistance of progressive, non-Roma organizations) secures an outlet.

*Racav lavor* and *Sastipe – star bene*/‘Feeling well’(Carraro et al., 2001) document the work of Romanì Cirelli and other female Roma community health workers, highlighting the Roma’s difficult access to healthcare in Italy’s metropolises and also delineating a blueprint for intergroup collaboration that countries including Ireland subsequently assimilated (EC 2010: 33). *Sastipe* generates an informative dialectic by counterpointing on-screen interviews both with the Roma mediatorswho discuss their outreach work, and with non-Roma intermediaries such as social workers who describe their illuminating interaction with the mediators.[[5]](#endnote-5) The formula of emancipatory micro-level collaborations between professionally and culturally gifted Roma women and progressive individuals within public and private sector organizations recurs at a European level in *Imaginary Roma, Artists Against* (set in Budapest) and *Interferenze rom* (whose scope extends from Italy to Macedonia and Spain), and is also traceable in films with a purely Italian focus including *Miracolo alla Scala* and *La canzone di Rebecca*. But a particularly interesting case is that of Laura Halilovic, whose documentary *Me, My Gipsy Family and Woody Allen*, a collaboration with the Turin company Zenit Arti Audiovisive, was followed by the feature-length comedy *Io, rom romantica*/‘I’m a Romantic Roma’(2014). These projects begin to transcend the problematic power relations and status differentials within film work about the Roma, an issue that generates tensions within the filmic space because projects animated by the imperatives and aesthetics of Italian producers – ranging from commercial companies to charities – do not necessarily converge with the epistemological truths and subjective priorities of the Roma as subjects and authors.

The case of Laura Halilovic, in the context of Roma subalternity, offers a potentially emancipatory solution to Spivak’s concern about ‘the first world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves’ (1994: 87), or, to use her incendiary phrase, the scenario of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ (2005: 478). As an established intellectual, Spivak envisaged ‘synecdochising’ herself by sidelining her privileges and status and re-immersing herself within Indian subalternity to form a collective and generate a progressive momentum (2005: 481). However, the Roma community – particularly in Italy – has no established figures to galvanize such a project. Halilovic, though organic to Roma culture, her gender-sensitive agency emerging from the Roma community and bypassing its patriarchal structures, is not an intellectual in Gramscian terms; this is advantageous given the Roma’s scepticism towards mass, cross-community political projects. Instead, her work is a cultural focal point for a progressive, multi-faceted and sometimes elusive twenty-first century Roma identity which transcends the remit of certain films by Italian directors that collapse the cultural, historical and generational differences of the Roma, Sinti and other groups into a generic anti-institutional discourse predicated on the socio-economic marginalization of the poorest Roma.

*Me, My Gipsy Family*, Halilovic’s meditation on her upbringing within a Roma community in Turin and on her growing passion for film-making, incorporates significant quantities of external footage ranging from ‘found footage’ from her father’s home movies to historical archive film. Video images of a young Halilovic performing traditional Roma dances and playing amidst her community function as a cultural signifier, an unmanipulable document of key moments in her identity formation that become a personal archive ‘where social memory is constructed’ (Cuevas 2013: 18). As Cuevas adds, embedded home movies offer ‘valuable traces for the identity search of the film-makers, who return to their origins as a necessary framework for understanding themselves, especially when those roots arise from the crossing of diverse ethnic, religious or national identities’ (2013: 18). Halilovic’s construction of her identity through the prism of the family unit – as invariably occurs when home movie footage is incorporated into filmic texts – constitutes a conscious politico-cultural counter-move; the harmonious sequences of community solidarity contrast the hyperbolic media coverage of Roma questions during the ‘Nomad Emergency’, footage of which is also included.

But Halilovic’s family/clan-based identity formation triggers micro-level tensions as her emerging cinematic aspirations collide with her family’s patriarchal values that propel her towards marriage. Michael Renov observes that ‘the familial other helps to flesh out the very contours of the enunciating self, offering itself as a precursor, alter ego, double, instigator, spiritual guide and perpetrator of trauma’ (2004: 228). In films like *Gitanistan*, Claudio Giagnotti’s elders are pioneering precursors who uphold Roma culture, having consolidated their community as entrepreneurs in the Apulia region. By contrast, *Me, My Gipsy Family* emphasizes the scale of the emancipatory challenge facing Roma women both from within and beyond their communities. While cultural creativity gradually enables Laura Halilovic to wrest control of the filmic image from her father, his home movies being superseded by Halilovic’s footage as she imposes her world-view and aspirations on the text, this self-realization is overshadowed by the macro-level socio-political battle faced by the Roma, an issue absorbed structurally by the film as a key narrative strand – the impending eviction of Halilovic’s relatives from an encampment – remains suspended and unresolved.

The increased access of second and third generation Roma to the cinematic medium has engendered more authentic and nuanced representations of twenty-first century Roma subjectivities. These documentary perspectives sometimes reveal a cultural hybridization of the Roma self-image within Italian contexts, but, by creating a greater convergence between the ‘speaker’, ‘seer’ and ‘seen’ within the film text (Dowmunt 2013: 264), the viewer’s emotional and cognitive engagement is sutured to that of the film-maker. *Gitanistan*’s soundtrack is structured byGiagnotti’s music (blending traditional Roma melodies and modern dance rhythms) his voiceover reflections and by family interviews, while semi-animated sequences featuring the director’s family tree visually bind the documentary to his historical roots. Giagnotti also becomes the ‘seen’ in several sequences to camera in which he acknowledges Roma culture’s influence on him and regrets his inability to speak Romani fluently. By contrast Laura Halilovic remains relatively concealed as a film-maker, her presence indicated but obscured by signifiers such as close-ups of a hand caressing what appears to be an ornate wedding dress, and reaction shots from the family members whom she films. Visually, apart from several coy, fragmented shots of her eyes – mirroring the stylized photos used on social media such as Facebook by Halilovic and her generation – she remains elusive. She foregrounds her subjectivity instead through forthright voiceovers and provocative montages of archive, media and home movie footage which link her identity to ‘the social and historical conditions of existence’ (Wayne 2008: 94) of her people.

*Gitanistan* and *Me, My Gipsy Family* also possess a profound socio-historical awareness of the existential trajectories of Roma communities, their former social stability and security in countries like Romania and in the Balkans frequently ignored by media-driven agendas that dwell on the contemporary plight of migrant Roma in Italian metropolises, agendas which disproportionally influence films by Italian directors. As Spivak asserts, subaltern subjectivity can be voiced by establishing historiographies that ‘read the archives against the grain’ (2005: 478) – parallel narratives, oral and written, that resist ‘official’ histories driven by hegemonic geopolitical and economic imperatives. Roma historical perspectives continue to be marginalized because any institutional recognition of the Roma *porrajmos*, or Holocaust, or the refugee status of Roma who have fled persecution, would strengthen the rationale for durable, integrated and expensive solutions, requiring them to be accorded more rights. By contrast, certain films like Carlo Chiaramonte’s *Le donne vestivano gonne fiorite – le donne rom*/‘The women wore flowered skirts – Roma women’(2005) are punctuated by monochrome archive footage of Roma families interacting with Italian communities, embedding the Roma within the fabric of Italian society, and Laura Halilovic’s incorporation of concentration camp footage into *Me, My Gipsy Family* creates a counter-hegemonic dialectic with prevailing histories, combating postmodern amnesia by linking historical Roma persecution with the pernicious racism that still blights their existences.[[6]](#endnote-6)

**The Unrepresentable: Beyond the Horizons of Documentary**

Documentaries concerning the Roma communities across the Italian peninsula predominantly engage with the most visible, urgent socio-economic issues affecting them, leaving little opportunity to explore the intriguing encounters between the dominant society and minority ethnic groups occurring in interstitial spaces (Capussotti 2009: 66), encounters predicated on self-reflection within certain sensitized sections of the Italian community and on self-representation on the part of the Roma. The innovative docudrama *La palestra*/*The Gym* (Calandra and Liguori, 2012) satirizes traditionally insensitive non-Romaapproaches towards the Roma community, including those of well intentioned artists/academics who engage with social realities through their own agendas. With the premise of developing a film about a non-Roma male falling for a Roma female, Francesco Calandra – playing himself as a naïve film-maker – interacts with several second generation Roma families. His candid affability and self-awareness underlines the ‘performativity’ of certain strands of modern documentary that elicit truths via a stylized interplay with the camera (Bruzzi 2006: 252), thereby circumventing realism and its problematic claims to authenticity. *The Gym* explores the internal dynamics of twenty-first century Roma families, uncovers issues ranging from lingering patriarchy to diffidence between the Roma and minority Sinti groups in Pescara, and elicits reflections on how even benevolent non-Roma impose their ethnocentric world-views on the Roma when interacting with them.

Laura Halilovic’s work constitutes another progressive, anti-hegemonic impulse from the liminal space between the Italian and Roma communities, her self-representation marking a perspectival shift from Italian cinema’s dominant, autoctonous outlook on Roma communities. Halilovic’s feature film *Io, rom romantica* – a relatively mainstream product – is therefore important in terms of its implications for her role as a sociocultural reference point for the Roma and for her career in general. Spivak, citing Raymond Williams, argues that the dominant is ‘defined by its ceaseless appropriation of the emergent’ (2005: 479), and as Mike Wayne observes:

(T)he forging of hegemony is the process by which the dominated or subaltern groups are brought into the social, economic and cultural order, and that order is brought *into them*. This process of inclusion and internalization requires the dominant groups to […] co-opt the leaders and leading ideas of the subaltern where necessary as well as project their own agendas and values. (2005: 6)

Assuming that Halilovic’s career maintains its momentum, potential trajectories could resemble that of Ferzan Ozpetek, whose early work such as *Hamam: il bagno turco*/*Hamam: The Turkish Bath* (1997)questioned the fundamental tenets of Western consumer society before Otherness lost its socio-political resonance in Ozpetek’s films, becoming distilled into a micro-level exoticism adding colour to mainstream melodramas. What is missing, however, from the existing body of cinematic work on the Roma – another direction that Halilovic could take – is a more politically confrontational approach. In documentary terms this would constitute an abrasive propositional stance, mirroring that of Sabina Guzzanti, to investigate issues identified by academic fieldwork and charity reports, but which have remained beyond the parameters of cinematic projects.

Questions that compromise the Roma’s lives and which – at best – are only alluded to in films, include the disturbingly high adoption rate of Roma children; the insidious influence of Roma ‘leaders’ purporting to represent given camps; the lucrative opportunities linked to the building of ‘equipped camps’ and to the work of supposedly pro-Roma organizations; and the health risks caused by the proximity of camps (sometimes authorized by councils) to environmental hazards. The 21 July Association (2014: 22) has examined the case of the Villaggio della Solidarietà/Solidarity Village in Via della Cesarina to the north east of Rome, which opened in 2003. Ten years later, its Roma communities were moved elsewhere, and asbestos contamination was detected in the area of the former camp. The proximity of a waste incinerator to the Via Salone camp is also well documented (ERRC 2014: 4), but apart from several images of children handling refuse and discarded objects in *Container 158*, and the unexpected encounter between the film-makers of *Biùtiful cauntri*/*Beautiful Country* (Calabria, D’Ambrosio and Ruggieri, 2008)and the occupants of a camp near a refuse tip in Giugliano, there has been negligible cinematic coverage of this issue. Motivations for this include the somewhat ghettoized cinematic status of eco-movies which complicates possible synergies with marginalized subjects like the Roma, the difficulties of establishing adequate project durations and budgets, and the medical/legal complexities facing documentaries that analyse how environmental factors condition Roma communities.

The question of imposed adoptions within Italy’s vulnerable minority groups is attaining visibility within research, particularly in the context of Roma communities. The problem emerged in late twentieth-century writing (Revelli 1999: 63-65) and was investigated further in reports including *Mia madre era rom: le adozioni dei minori rom in emergenza abitativa nella regione Lazio (2006-2012)*/‘My mother was a Roma: the adoptions of Roma children in critical living conditions in the Lazio Region (2006-2012)’. This publication outlines the exponential adoption threat for Roma children, the Italian authorities categorizing 6 per cent of them as ‘at risk’ and potentially adoptable, as opposed to 0.1 per cent of non-Roma children (Associazione 21 luglio 2013a: 117-118). The absence of documentaries investigating this delicate issue will only be remedied by intra-group Roma initiatives that manage to access such scarred family environments.

Another unrepresented problem concerns self-appointed Roma leaders who dominate certain communities, controlling community interaction with the local authorities, monopolizing the resources provided (Solimene 2013: 167), and creating ‘circles of redistributive dependency’ (ERRC 2013: 39-40) due to the spatial isolation of many such communities. The European Commission has condemned the lack of transparency and gender balance in the selection of the Roma interlocutors who negotiate with local authorities (2010: 23), and the issue flared up when threats were made by a self-styled Roma ‘leader’ who objected to the discussion of certain aspects of ‘his’ camp during a public meeting (Di Cesare and Episcopo 2014). Documentaries occasionally feature brief footage of male-only Roma camp committees; one sequence in *Via San Dionigi* is interrupted by an elderly Roma woman who criticizes the other women for not maintaining camp hygiene, but filmic access to the meetings between the mafia-esque cliques that run certain camps and their institutional equivalents is naturally off-limits.

Similarly, there has been minimal documentary analysis of the lucrative contracts to build and provide security for the ‘equipped camps’ – an economic absurdity when their construction contradicts national and European strategies for Roma inclusion (ERRC 2013: 9) and costs considerably more than renovating existing buildings (Associazione 21 luglio 2014: 68-70). This process has been termed ‘an uncontrolled and unregulated stream of public money that flows into the “camp system” in Rome’ (2014: 81), and it demands the investigative verve of a Guzzanti or Moore. Existing work can only linger meaningfully on moments of social antagonism, exemplified by a sequence in *I bambini rom* where an interviewee speaks contemptuously of the ‘profiteering’ of one co-operative that receives funding from Rome’s local authorities; the scale of hegemonic power and self-enrichment remains beyond the confines of the film text.

Documentary cinema, however, plays an important role of socio-political sensitization within an Italian media environment marked by anti-Roma prejudice, the 21 July Association (2013b: 10) identifying, in 2013, over 850 cases of misinformation including incitement to hatred and lazy journalism based on stereotypical assumptions. While Mauro Sassi expresses reservations regarding the effectiveness of documentaries as informative counter-hegemonic tools in a public sphere vastly different from that outlined by Habermas (2014: 117-118), many films about the Roma provide an important visual dissemination of the investigative research carried out by charities, humanitarian groups and academics. While some documentaries inadvertently reinforce the hyperbolic visual tropes established by Italy’s media, many others embrace the Roma’s transnational essence. They displace ‘the economic and psychic nation and the national imaginary, rejecting the notion of the nation as an essentialist given’ (Hess and Zimmermann 1997: 80) in favour of a vision – as in De Donno and Giagnotti’s *Gitanistan* and Halilovic’s *Me, My Gipsy Family* – of a Roma cultural identity embedded in contemporary Italy but also intimately connected to other areas of Europe and Asia. The most politically progressive examples of 21st century Italian cinema analysed in this article also envisage an emancipatory impetus that endows the Roma with individual and collective voices to articulate their ethnic history and connect it to stable, non-nomadic, long-term projects. The centripetal momentum of these films guides the Roma towards a more central societal role and to greater interaction with the progressive elements of the dominant culture in countries where the Roma reside, a micro-level solidarity with the potential to develop into something more politically substantial.

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**Endnotes**

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian are mine. I would like to thank Francesco Calandra, Carlo Chiaramonte, Nicola Contini and Maria Grazia Liguori for their valuable collaboration during the development of this article. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The European Roma Rights Centre (2013: 8) distinguishes between: informal/unauthorized camps which receive no institutional assistance; ‘semi-formal’ camps created by the Roma and subsequently recognized by local authorities; ‘formal’/equipped camps (‘campi attrezzati’) where the Roma live in pre-fabricated containers and receive services such as water and electricity, while also being monitored. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The ERRC (2013: 18) has denounced police officers for alleged aggression during a camp clearance in Pisa in 2012; the 21 July Association (2013b: 9) reports that Elviz Salkanovic received compensation after his biometric data was illegally collected during the ‘Nomad Emergency’. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The highest levels of anti-Roma discrimination in employment contexts occur in the Czech Republic and Italy (ERRC 2013: 10). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Lovte* (Camuffo and Spada, 2003) and *Caminante* (Di Martino et al., 2013) highlight other (male) Roma intermediary roles within sport and local political contexts. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Porrajmos – una persecuzione dimenticata*/‘Porrajmos – a forgotten persecution’(Poce and Scarpelli, 2004) elucidates similar parallels. Roma holocaust survivors are interviewed and *Porrajmos* concludes with an unscripted incursion of the present into the film’s meditation on the past, the film-makers discovering that the offices of the Opera Nomadi organization in Milan have been destroyed overnight. *Mi sun romanes*/‘I am a Roma’(Poce and Cantarella, 2002) also references the forgotten role of the Roma within Italy’s wartime Resistance. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)