

## **“The Roma Do Not Exist”: The Roma as an Object of Cinematic Representation and the Question of Authenticity**

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Representations of the Roma are ubiquitous in the history of Balkan cinema. These films have tended to be by non-Roma directors, with the Roma as the object of representation. Consequently, the critical reception of the films has focused on the issue of verisimilitude. In recent scholarship critics have utilized the psychoanalytic concept of “projective identification” to account for the persistent interest in Gypsy culture and life. In this paper I draw on an alternative tradition of Lacanian psychoanalysis to argue that Tony Gatlif’s *Gadjo dilo*, rather than presenting an authentic picture of Roma culture, foregrounds the impossibility of representation ever truthfully capturing the object. Deploying the Lacanian concepts of *das Ding* and “The Woman does not exist,” the paper demonstrates how Gatlif problematizes the very notion of *the* Roma as a homogenized culture and identity.

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Representations of the Roma are ubiquitous in the history of Balkan cinema. The first Balkan film distributed abroad was about the Roma, *In Serbia: A Gypsy Marriage* (1911), and the first entry of a Gypsy film into a major film festival also originated from the former Yugoslavia. Aleksander Petrović’s *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* won the *Grand Prix Spécial* at Cannes Film festival in 1967 (Gocić 99). The majority of these films, however, have tended to be by non-Roma directors with the Roma as the object of representation. As Dina Iordanova puts it in her introduction to a special issue of *Framework* dedicated to “Cinematic Images of Romanies”:

Rather than being given the chance to portray themselves, the Romani people have routinely been depicted by others. The persistent cine-

matic interest in “Gypsies” has repeatedly raised questions of authenticity versus stylization, and of patronization and exoticization, in a context marked by overwhelming ignorance of the true nature of Romani culture and heritage. (Introduction 6)

And as she writes elsewhere, “[e]ven when genuinely concerned with the Romani predicament, film-makers have exploited the visual richness of their excitingly non-conventional lifestyles. Often allowing for spectacularly beautiful magical-realist visuals, the films featuring Romani have used recurring narrative tropes” (*Cinema of the Other Europe* 107).

Films “about” the Roma have frequently raised, as Iordanova puts it, questions of “authenticity” and the “truth” of representation. The former Bosnian, now Serbian, film director Emir Kusturica is a case in point. His two major Gypsy films *Time of the Gypsies* (1989) and *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998) have presented overwhelmingly positive representations of Gypsy life and culture while employing conventional narrative tropes. The narrative of *Time of the Gypsies* concerns the illegal trafficking by Roma gangsters of Roma children across the Italian border to work as beggars and prostitutes, while the rather thin and perfunctory plot of *Black Cat, White Cat* again focuses on the Roma as criminals and the theft of a train load of oil. At the same time, these films have provided the representational space for Kusturica to develop the “spectacularly beautiful magical-realist visuals” that have now become his cinematic signature and facilitate the projection of some of his most profoundly romanticized images (the St. George’s day scene in *Time of the Gypsies* for instance). This romanticism is even more pronounced in *Black Cat, White Cat*, where Romani life is presented as one endless “feel-good roller-coaster adventure” (Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica* 87), with very little attempt to represent the harshness and reality of Roma life. The critical reception of Kusturica’s Roma films has, therefore, been markedly divergent. *Time of the Gypsies* in particular has been eulogized for its ethnic “authenticity” (Gocić 98) and, at the same time, criticized by the Roma themselves for perpetuating negative stereotypes and for its romanticism (Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica* 69). Goran Gocić argues for the film’s authenticity on the grounds that *Time of the Gypsies* was shot almost exclusively in the vernacular Romani language and needed subtitles in every country it was exhibited. Kusturica also used non-professional Romani actors and represented Roma life and culture in all its contradictory messiness (that is, Gypsies as resourceful and industrious as well as criminal and dissolute), or, as he puts it, from an “insider’s” view (93-106). Although he is

not Roma himself, we are assured of the "authenticity" of Kusturica's representation through his proximity to the object of study. The narrative for *Time of the Gypsies* is drawn from conversations Kusturica had with Gypsies in a Skopje prison (Iordanova, *Emir Kusturica* 61) and also from time he spent hanging-out with the local Roma population of Sarajevo in his youth (Gocić 93, 102).

This question of authenticity and truth becomes even more marked when the director is Roma himself.<sup>1</sup> Tony Gatlif is undoubtedly the most well-known and widely distributed Roma film-maker working today. Indeed, he is the only Roma filmmaker most of us are familiar with, although a few lesser known Roma directors have received some attention. In the 1990s the Russian Roma director Dufunya Vishnevskiy had significant, albeit on the alternative "marginal" cinema circuit, domestic success with his two Gypsy productions *It's My Fault* (1993) and *The Sinful Apostles of Love* (1995). Once again, though, the central concern of critics with Vishnevskiy's work is how it strives for "authenticity and spontaneity" (Chiline 39) as a truthful presentation of "Roma experience" and "self-representation" (40) rather than, say, technical virtuosity or narrative complexity.<sup>2</sup> It is as if the director's ethnicity and life history guarantee the authenticity and truth of the representation, in a cinematic version of the old biographical fallacy (Barthes).<sup>3</sup> We do not, however, ask these questions - Is this an ethnographically accurate portrait of contemporary North American society? What experience does the director have which allows them to represent North American culture in such a way? - every time we watch a Hollywood movie, so why should we ask them when we watch films about the Roma? Or, rather, my question is why should issues such as these be almost the sole criterion on which we judge films about the Roma?

It is this issue of the "authenticity" and "truth" of representation, that is,

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1. I say "himself" here as I am not aware of any women Roma directors. I would be more than happy to be corrected on this point.
  2. Unfortunately, we will not know how his directorial career might have developed as Vishnevskiy died on 7 March 2003, aged 55.
  3. Two recent films by Želimir Žilnik, *Kenedi Goes Back Home* (2003) and *Kenedi, Lost and Found* (2005), may serve to complicate this picture as Žilnik is not Roma himself but his two productions give unconstrained voice to his central protagonist Kenedi to discuss the plight of the Gypsies in the former Yugoslavia and allow him to motivate the narrative rather than subjecting him to the director's own narrative demands. Žilnik's films, however, are documentaries and my concern here is with feature films.

the full equivalence or identity between the representation itself and the object of representation that I wish to take up in this paper. Contrary to the prevailing critical reception of Roma films, that wants to read all feature films as ethnographic documents, I will argue that Tony Gatlif's *Gadjo dilo* (*Crazy Stranger*) (1997) explicitly undermines such a reading. Far from representing an authentic view of Gypsy life and culture, *Gadjo dilo* problematizes the whole notion of verisimilitude. The psychoanalytic concept of projective identification has been utilized to account for both the pervasiveness of Roma films in Balkan cinema and their appeal to Western European audiences. On one level I find this argument persuasive but I also think it leaves open a series of questions regarding, first, the presumed spectator or subject in this relationship, and second, the implications of structuring the Roma as the object of representation. Therefore, I will draw on an alternative school of psychoanalysis to argue that what is at stake in *Gadjo dilo* is not so much what we project into the object but the very status of the object itself, that is to say, *the Roma*, or Roma culture as a homogenized and identifiable *Thing*.<sup>4</sup>

### Narrative Strategies

One of the defining features of Balkan cinematic aesthetics has been identified by Iordanova as that of the travelogue or quest narrative (*Cinema of Flames* 55-70). The travelogue is characteristic of Balkan plots and, as Todorova has convincingly shown, of the construction of the Balkans as a space in the Western European imaginary. For our purposes here we need only to note the very basic underlying narrative structure. A traveler, usually a Western European, visits an exotic location, in this case the Balkans, to discover something. This could be knowledge of other cultures and ways of life but it usually involves something that is missing, or lacking, from the protagonist's life. In this sense the traveler hopes or believes they can experience situations and cultures that are more genuine and "real" than is to be found in our modern anemic Western European social reality. From this perspective the travelogue frequently becomes a quest narrative, a quest for authenticity and truth. What is important here in relation to the travelogue's

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4. As I explain below, I am referring to *the Thing* here in a specifically Lacanian sense and this should not be confused with the actual "existence" of Roma people or culture. I want to argue that *Gadjo dilo* is dealing with issues of fantasy, desire and representation and not only with the harsh social reality of contemporary Roma existence.

narrative structure is that the plot is driven by the presence of the Westerner, and local characters exist only insofar as they relate to the foreigner as objects of study or exemplars of that more genuine, "real" way of life. The genre of the Gypsy film is often a variation on this narrative structure, as the very unconventionality of Roma life is seen to offer something more real, genuine and visceral than our own alienated existence. However, the question of which set of norms this "unconventionality" is set against is not usually addressed and is assumed to be given. The typical "Gypsy" film, writes Iordanova, "is a melodrama, with a plot line usually evolving along inter-racial romance" (*Cinematic Images* 8). This romance "usually revolves around a pure and spontaneous liaison between a Romani girl and a man from the main ('white') ethnic group" (8). This plotline presupposes a number of significant assumptions: "Gypsy love can be nothing but all-consuming passion; Gypsies are in possession of love secrets that are out of reach, yet perpetually desirable for the dominant ('white') ethnicity" (8). This may be a stereotype, and a rather worn one at that, but as films such as *Chocolat* (2000) and the whole acting persona of Johnny Depp testifies, it is a stereotype with persistent cultural appeal.

In terms of its narrative construction, *Gadjo dilo* is a very conventional "Gypsy" film. It recounts the story of a young Frenchman, Stéphane (Romain Duris), who travels from Paris to Romania in search of an old Gypsy singer, Nora Luca. He arrives in a small Romanian village in the middle of a freezing night and nobody will open their doors to him. In contrast to the indifference shown towards him by the local population, he is "adopted" by an old Roma man (Isidor) who is drowning his sorrows in vodka in the village square (his son has just been arrested and imprisoned). He is subsequently taken by Isidor to a small Romani community on the outskirts of the village. Isidor insists that he knows Nora Luca and that he will take Stéphane to her the following day, but first he parades his new French friend through the Romani camp and local village. Gatlif reverses the usual stereotypes in the sense that it is Stéphane who is suspected by the Roma community of being a chicken thief, a scrounger and a bum who will steal the community's women and children (he has holes in his shoes and very few possessions). The civilized Western habits of this crazy stranger (he is very polite, does not initially like to drink or gamble and cleans the house where he is staying) are estranged through the eyes of the Gypsy community, as he slowly and inevitably "goes native," becoming acculturated into the Roma community. He also meets and falls in love with the "beautiful," "passionate," "sensuous" (to use just a few of the usual orientalist adjectives) Sabi-

na (Rona Hartner). Isidor's son, Adriani, is released from prison but almost immediately provokes a fight in the local café, inciting retribution from the villagers against the Romani community as a whole. As Sabina and Stéphane make love and run naked through the woods, the villagers burn the Roma camp and incinerate Adriani in his own home. The film ends where it began, on the roadside by a milestone. Stéphane destroys and buries the tapes of Gypsy music he has so carefully made and catalogued, drinking vodka and ritually dancing over the grave. The camera pans across to the car, where we see Sabina wake up. As she watches Stéphane dance, her expression turns to a smile and the credits begin to roll.

The critical reception of *Gadjo dilo* reads it as a film about self-discovery and truth:

Stéphane's is a process of acculturation - he moves fully in the direction of Romani society and emulates its habits in order to gain access. In this sense his experience fused with the camera's eye purports to be an intimate discovery of the people behind the wall of stereotypes so robustly constructed around Romani culture. Gatlif's pedigree - half Roma himself - assures us that this is a true picture. (Thompson 3)<sup>5</sup>

The verisimilitude of the text is underscored by Gatlif's background as a documentary filmmaker, in particular his unobtrusive cinematography (long takes) and simple editing (no special effects or dramatic edits), the use of non-professional actors and his *mise-en-scène* (the background to his shots are either static or empty). I want to read this film slightly differently though. If it is indeed a film about discovery, then it is not the discovery of the truth hidden behind the wall of stereotypes, but the revelation that there is *nothing* to discover behind the wall and there is *no truth* in terms of personal or cultural identity that can give us the "true picture," whether the director is Roma or not.

### Objectifying the Other

I will take as my starting point for this reading another quotation from Jordanova. The real issue with this film, as she puts it, "is not the authenticity of the ethnographic representation, but the fact that [its] very interest in

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5. It seems to be generally accepted that after he destroys his tapes, Stéphane "decides not to return to France" (Imre 20). I see no textual evidence for this; as I will argue below, the ending of the film appears to be much more open and ambiguous.

the Roma is defined and driven by projective identification needs" (*Cinema of Flames* 223). Very briefly, projective identification designates the psychological process whereby an attribute of the self is projected into an object (which in this sense designates another person). For Melanie Klein, projective identification was the proto-type for all kinds of aggressive object relations, insofar as the bad or destructive part of the self, one's anger, frustration etc., is projected into another and this allows for the feelings to be denied (Hinschelwood 178-208). This process takes place in phantasy, that is, the Kleinian designation for unconscious fantasy. In extreme forms this process may take on a pathological character, when the object into which the expelled part of the self is projected comes to resemble the self. Thus, the "hatred with which the object is attacked" (Hinschelwood 163) makes the self feel that its own ego is in danger and this increases the self's feelings of persecution and anxiety. As a result of this fragmentation of the ego, the self feels itself to be weakened and under threat. For Klein, then, projective identification has a very precise meaning and is quite distinct from ordinary forms of projection, as an inter-subjective phenomenon, but this precision is often obfuscated when the term is employed in social or cultural analysis. However, I do not wish to pursue the technicalities of such distinctions here but rather to look at the way in which the concept has productively been used in the analysis of Roma films as well as raise certain questions about this usage.

In projective identification, I have suggested, we unconsciously project an unwanted part of the self into another, and then deny these feelings. The representation of Gypsies in Balkan cinema, however, is overwhelmingly positive and sympathetic, rather than negative and destructive. What we can see taking place, therefore, is the projection of our spontaneous, unruly and passionate side which we have tamed, domesticated and disowned in Western European culture onto the Roma. We then exoticize these traits precisely because we no longer possess them.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the projective identification at work in Gypsy films is an extension of the consensual self-exoticization of the region, or what Balkan scholars have identified as "nesting-orientalism" (Bakic-Hayden).<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, we can see a more

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6. As one critic tellingly writes: "In Stéphane, we recognise our own 'orientalist' fascinations" (Thompson 2). As we watch him "have sex in a tepee, drink moonshine in the snow and plod around in mud-dominated landscape without actually having to do it ourselves (really, pretty unhygienic) [sic]" (2).

7. Slavoj Žižek has also written about this process from the Lacanian perspective of the theft of enjoyment. See *Tarrying with the Negative* 200- 37 but especially 204.

negative form of projective identification taking place, whereby the Roma operate as a metaphor for the region as a whole. That is to say, the Balkans *are* the Gypsies of Europe, marginalized on the European periphery, both geographically and in terms of cultural and economic development. As Iordanova argues, therefore, the ubiquitous representation of the Roma in Balkan cinema in fact provides a surrogate means for the self-representation of dominant ethnic groups and their own concerns of marginality and ethnic identity (*Cinema of Flames* 213-32). Although the idea of projective identification, then, is highly suggestive and has been developed further by other film critics (Imre), there are I believe a number of problems with using the concept. One such difficulty is that we need to clarify who the subject actually is in this instance. Are we discussing the unconscious fantasy of the director, a character within the film or the audience? Is the projection diegetic or extra-diegetic? Or, to put it another way, who is projecting what onto whom? I do not want to address these problems here but to tackle the issue from an alternative psychoanalytic perspective, that is, Lacanianism and in particular through the Lacanian formulations of the *objet petit a* and “The Woman does not exist.”

### **The Roma as *objet a***

Projective identification works on the idea that in phantasy something is lost to the subject, that part of the self that is projected into the object. But what if we never had it in the first place? According to Lacan, this was Freud’s insight when, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he suggested that there was a hard impenetrable core of the dream - what he called the “navel” of the dream - that is beyond interpretation. For Lacan, this hard impenetrable core is the real that is always missing from the symbolic. Representations, images and signifiers are no more than attempts to fill this constitutive gap. In *Seminar VII* Lacan identified this repressed element as *the representative of the representation*, or, *das Ding* (the Thing). The Thing is the beyond-of-the-signified, that which is unknowable in-itself. The Thing is a lost object that must be continually re-found. This is the important point for Lacan. The Thing is a lost object that, paradoxically, was never there in the first place to be lost (57-70). The Thing is “the cause of the most fundamental human passion” (97), the object-cause of desire and can only be constituted retrospectively. The Thing, then, is not an actual object that we desire but our desire constitutes this object and we can only recognize it as such once it is gone. The Thing is “objectively” speaking *no-thing*, it is



only something in relation to the desire that constitutes it. After the seminar of 1959-60 the concept of *das Ding* disappeared from Lacan's work and was replaced in 1964 by the idea of the *objet petit a*. Stéphane, I want to propose, is in search of *the Thing*, or what he believes to be the object of *his father's* desire.

Stéphane's search is ostensibly a search for a singer, Nora Luca, and this slowly develops into the recording and cataloguing of the music that he comes across. When he first meets Isidor in the village square and plays him a recording of Nora Luca, Isidor is confused. "It's a beautiful song," he remarks, but "There are songs like that everywhere around here." It is only when Stéphane understands the import of Isidor's remarks that he will abandon his attempt to transcribe and fix the Thing, the object of his desire, the *objet a*.

From a Lacanian perspective, a subject's desire is founded through the desire of the Other and the subject's attempt to locate their place in the desire of the Other. As Bruce Fink puts it, "[i]n the child's attempt to grasp what remains essentially indecipherable in the Other's desire . . . the child's own desire is founded; the Other's desire begins to function as the cause of the child's desire" (59). In this process of trying to fathom the unfathomable the child is forced to recognize its status as a subject of lack and more importantly that the Other is also lacking. This overlapping or conjunction of two lacks Lacan calls separation and it is at this point that the subject can differentiate his or her own desire from the desire of the Other. For the purposes of our discussion, what is important to keep in mind is that, while the desire of the Other always exceeds or escapes the subject, there nevertheless remains something that the subject can retain and this something sustains him or her as desiring subject. This something is the *objet a*, the object cause of desire.

Nora Luca was Stéphane's father's favorite singer and this was the song that he repeatedly listened to on his deathbed. His father was an ethnologist<sup>8</sup> who spent his life traveling around the world recording traditional songs. He died in Syria on one of his many trips and far from his wife and child. Stéphane tells Sabina that he did not really know his father, that he was away a lot and he did not see very much of him. His father, then, was an

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8. His father's profession is crucial, I think, as the whole debate around Roma films is whether or not they provide us with an ethnologically accurate picture of Roma life and culture. Gatlif is foregrounding once again the way in which the Roma are "objects of study" for Western academic discourse rather than subjects in their own right.

enigma; what motivated him to be away from his mother and himself remains a mystery to him. In this sense, the search for Nora Luca is a search for meaning, the meaning of his father's absence. What is it about an old Gypsy singer that so infatuated his father that he would leave his wife and son? Stéphane sees in Nora Luca his father's object of desire and this is then constituted as his *objet a*, as he seeks to fill the absence left by his father's death. By finding Nora Luca he will be able to retrospectively give meaning to his life and his father's absence; he will, he mistakenly thinks, be able to fill the hole left by his father's death. Mistakenly, I suggest, because he does not yet understand that the *objet a* is *both* the hole and that which comes to fill it.

### **“The Roma Do Not Exist”**

Stéphane thinks he can fill the lack because he believes the object can be captured, that the object can be fixed and represented, but, as Lacan says, the signifier is the death of the thing. As Stéphane's relationship to Sabina develops, she mediates between him and the local community, taking him around the villages so that he can record different songs. In one recording session Sabina begins to dance and sing as the song starts up. The sound of her feet stamping on the wooden floor of the café and her singing interrupt Stéphane's recording and he asks her to stop so that he can begin the recording again. What Stéphane wishes to capture through these recordings is the authentic voice of Gypsy song, presumably before they disappear, but it is the very authenticity of the moment that is eclipsed through its transcription. When songs are sung throughout the film, some traditional and others composed and played by Gatlif himself, they are inevitably accompanied by the “audience” singing, dancing and clapping or smashing plates. There is no clear distinction between audience and performers; it is the very lifeblood of the songs that they are “owned” collectively and performed by everyone. It is this very vitality that Stéphane erases through the gesture of capturing the object. In short, he erases the very thing that he desires in the object in the first place - its vitality, its life, that which drew his father to it as well. By inscribing it in the symbolic, Stéphane kills the thing itself. The object of desire always slips away, one can never possess it, it is always elsewhere. This is the lesson that Stéphane will learn in a taverna in Bucharest, that “Nora Luca does not exist,” that one can never possess the Thing.

In *Seminar VII* Lacan illustrates the notion of the Thing through the tradition of Courtly Love poetry. What interests Lacan in particular is the

idealization and unattainability of the woman, the Lady, in these poems. Courty Love, writes Lacan, is "a poetic exercise, a way of playing with a number of conventional, idealizing themes, which couldn't have any real concrete equivalent" (148). In short, the woman is an impossible idealized image for which no real equivalent exists. She is the *objet a*, the Thing, the impossible object cause of desire that inaugurates the movement of desire itself. The idea that "Woman does not exist" was developed further by Lacan in *Seminar XX* (7) and is often seen as one of his most offensive and misogynistic formulations - a reading, I believe, based on a fundamental misunderstanding of Lacan. Just as the infamous Lacanian phallus is an "empty" signifier - it is a signifier of lack and has no positive content - so the sign "woman" has no positive or empirical signified. There is no universal category of women to which the sign "woman" refers. In short, to appeal to the notion of women as a homogenous group is to appeal to an imaginary, and therefore illusory, identity. Similarly, to appeal to a notion of *the Roma* is an imaginary, and therefore illusory, construct. The act of designation homogenizes and idealizes the Roma as a group, thus erasing the diversity of Romani culture. When Lacan refers to existence, he is referring to something at the level of the symbolic. If the woman was to exist, she would have to exist at the level of the symbolic and this has a number of implications. First, as the symbolic is for Lacan phallic, it would subordinate femininity to the phallus in the same way that Freud saw femininity as defined by not having the penis. Second, it would mean that femininity is wholly a discursive construct and that sexual identity is completely socio-symbolic. To say that the woman is "not-whole" is not to say that she is in some way incomplete and lacking something that the man has, but rather, as Bruce Fink puts it, that she is "defined as not wholly hemmed in. A woman is not split in the same way as a man; though alienated, she is not altogether subject to the symbolic order" (107). Lacan puts this in a rather convoluted double negative, which has given rise to much of the misunderstanding about woman as "not-all": "[A]nd this is the whole point, she has different ways of approaching that phallus and of keeping it for herself. It's not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is not not at all there. She is there in full. But there is something more" (*Seminar XX* 74). From a Lacanian perspective, it is precisely because the woman does not exist, that she is "not-whole," that she has access to something more (*encore*) than men. It is this something more, in terms of *jouissance*, that Stéphane's father saw in "Nora Luca" and now Stéphane identifies in Sabina. It is also this "more," this excess, that is erased through the transcription

of the songs in the symbolic. Feminine *jouissance* is unrepresentable. Let me try to explain what I mean by this by tracing the fate of the song sung by Nora Luca throughout the film itself.

As I mentioned above, the first time we hear the song is in the opening scenes of the film, when Stéphane plays a tape of the song to Isidor. All that is written on the cassette tape, we later learn, is the name “Nora Luca.” The second time we hear the song is towards the end of the film. Late one night after a drunken evening in a taverna in Bucharest, the Gypsy band whom Stéphane had recorded in the scene I mentioned above shifts to a more melancholic tone and, as the band begins to play the song *Nora Luca*, Sabina also sings along. Slowly the voices of “Nora Luca” and Sabina are blended together in the score and Stéphane snuggles into the nape of Sabina’s neck murmuring the name of the “singer.” It is at this point, I think, that Stéphane recognizes the significance of Isidor’s words in the opening scenes - “It is a beautiful song. There are songs like that everywhere around here” - that is to say, that these songs are not the property of an individual but of a collective culture. Hence, Isidor’s confusion as he takes Stéphane around the village to meet one singer after another: they are never *the* singer that Stéphane wishes to find. To put it another way, “Nora Luca does not exist;”<sup>9</sup> the object of Stéphane’s search, his object of desire, only exists insofar as he has constructed it to give meaning to his father’s absence. What is important is not the singer but the fact that the songs are sung. At this point, Stéphane’s object of desire metonymically shifts from the singer “Nora Luca” (his *objet a*) to the song *Nora Luca* and, later, to Sabina herself.<sup>10</sup> For Lacan, of course, desire operates metonymically as it drives the process of symbolization, shifting from one signifier to another. What we can see taking place here, then, is the unfixing of the object and the inauguration of desire as

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9. Just as Lacan does not mean that there are no women in the world by his slogan “The Women does not exist,” I do not mean that there is no such singer but that it remains unclear what the status of this singer is in relation to the song. As the only words written on the tape are “Nora Luca,” Stéphane takes these signifiers to be the name of the singer but they could equally be the name of the song. The film credits attribute the “interpretation” of the song *Nora Luca* to Monika Juhasz-Miczur; the CD of the film’s music has two versions of the song, the first with instrumental backing attributed to Tony Gatlif and the second, voice only, sung by Nora Luca. Stéphane’s father’s recording that he first plays to Isidor is the voice-only version; all subsequent versions of the song we hear in the film have musical accompaniment.

10. I am grateful to Eugenie Georgaca for pointing out to me this final shift in the narrative.

metonymy, in the sense that, Stéphane's desire is freed from its fixation on *the* object (Nora Luca) to *an* object (the song, and later Sabina). This is not the end point of the process, though, as he still believes he can possess the *objet a*. Gatlif drives home the impossibility of this moment with one more rendition of the song that brutally strips away any residual sentimentality or romanticism.

After the burning of the Gypsy village and the incineration of Adriani, Sabina and Stéphane seek out Isidor to tell him that his son is dead. The musicians have been booked to play at a private party in a large country residence. As their village is burning, the Gypsies are entertaining the local bourgeoisie with traditional music and young Gypsy girls dancing on the table. As Sabina and Stéphane enter the house, we hear the mournful strains of *Nora Luca* playing and Stéphane is greeted by the sight of a group of complacently well-fed, middle-aged, middle-class Romanians singing the lament that has been so poignant and painful for him to listen to. The song which has driven him from Paris to a Gypsy camp in Romania is nothing but a sentimental cliché.<sup>11</sup> The camera holds on a close-up of Stéphane's still and bewildered face until the strains of *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* cut in and we hear Isidor's anguished wails for the earth to open up and swallow him. Just as Stéphane previously had to accept that there was nothing essentially there, intrinsic to the singer, he must now acknowledge that there is nothing intrinsic to the song either. There is no authentic or genuine essence intrinsic to the song to resist the banality of sentiment and cliché. There are only moments at which songs are sung. We can anticipate these moments and be within them but we can only recognize their status as *objet a* retrospectively, once they have passed. It is this, I think, that Stéphane recognizes at the end of the film and this is why he destroys his own collection of tapes.

## Conclusion

Let me return to the final scene of the film, where Stéphane drives back along the road that we saw him walking down in the opening scene, going back to where he originally came from, perhaps. He stops by the milestone and the camera holds on a close-up of his face through the car windscreen.

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11. As Iordanova notes, Goran Bregović's wonderful version of *Ederlezi* from the St George's day scene in *Time of the Gypsies* is now something of a national anthem played at weddings and other celebrations across the former Yugoslavia (*Emir Kusturica* 111). What seemed to be a wonderfully poignant and sad moment in the film is rendered sentimental through its incessant repetition.

It then cuts to a closer shot and holds, then cuts to a mid-shot as we see Stéphane get out of the car, light a cigarette and look back down the road in the direction of the village and the Roma camp. He mutters “Great mate,” an expression of intimacy he shared with Isidor, and turns to the car to take out his tapes and vodka. Does he stay in Romania with Sabina or take her to France? Does he return to France alone perhaps? I have no idea and think that the film deliberately leaves this open and ambiguous. What we see is that Stéphane destroys his tapes on the top of the milestone. A milestone marks a distance taken. But is this a distance *to* or *from* somewhere? *Gadjo dilo* does not answer this but rather circles around the *Thing*, or *objet a*, or *punctum*,<sup>12</sup> as Barthes calls it - that cannot be inscribed in the symbolic. *Gadjo dilo*, in other words, gives us not an authentic representation of Roma culture but the impossibility of ever capturing the real of our desire.

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### Filmography

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- Chocolat*. Dir. Lasse Hallström. Miramax, 2000.
- Crazy Stranger (Gadjo dilo)*. Dir. Tony Gatlif. Lions Gate Films, 1997.
- I Even Met Happy Gypsies (Skupljači perja)*. Dir. Aleksander Petrović. Prominent Films, 1967.
- In Serbia: A Gypsy Marriage (En Serbie: Un mariage chez les Tziganes)*. Dir. Unknown. Pathé, 1911.
- It's My Fault (Ja vinovat)*. Dir. Dufunya Vishnevskiy. Romale, 1993.
- Kenedi Goes Back Home (Kenedi se vraća kući)*. Dir. Želimir Žilnik. Terra Film, 2003.
- Kenedi, Lost and Found (Gde je bio Kenedi 2 godine)*. Dir. Želimir Žilnik. Terra Film, 2005.
- Sinful Apostles of Love, The (Greshnye apostoly lyubvi)*. Dir. Dufunya Vishnevskiy. Mosfilm, 1995.
- Time of the Gypsies (Dom za vesanje)*. Dir. Emir Kusturica. Columbia Pictures, 1989.

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12. Punctum is Latin for wound and Barthes uses the term to designate that little piece of the real that we somehow see but cannot describe or locate in representation but it makes certain images more poignant for us.

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