



## Capital, Commodities, Cinema: Shakespeare and the Eastern European 'Gypsy' Aesthetic

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CAPITAL, COMMODITIES, CINEMA:  
SHAKESPEARE AND THE EASTERN EUROPEAN 'GYPSY' AESTHETIC

BY

MARK THORNTON BURNETT

In this article, I discuss two recent Eastern European Shakespeare films, *Romani Kris* (dir. Bence Gyöngyössi, 1997), a Hungarian adaptation of *King Lear*, and *Hamlet* (dir. Aleksandar Rajković, 2007), a Serbian adaptation of Shakespeare's play. Traditionally, the focus of attention in Shakespeare on screen studies has been with the products of the US and / or UK film industries; by redirecting attention to *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet*, therefore, this essay attempts to widen the critical perspective and point the way towards more plural approaches. Both films, as will be seen, instance Shakespeare repeatedly, either via partial allusion, as in *Romani Kris*, or through mediated quotation, as in *Hamlet*, making them significant re-workings of the 'original' plays.

Distinctively, *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* constitute what might be termed 'gypsy' Shakespearean cinema, an identification borne out in both films' original folk scores and use of Hungarian dialect and Romani language respectively.<sup>1</sup> These works draw upon traditional features of Roma life in a shared project of Shakespearean reinvention. To this end, they utilize a particular aesthetic – they deploy Roma as protagonists and prioritize 'gypsy' camps, villages or settlements as settings. *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* translate Shakespearean royalty into a class of beggar kings, the most obvious instance being Lovér / Lear, who is chief of his clan, and Jova / Claudius, whose massive girth (out-of-place among the emaciated bodies of his cronies) establishes him as a "bloat King" (3.4.166), to use the Shakespearean expression, and figure of excess.<sup>2</sup> Comparable emphasis is placed on the

<sup>1</sup> The genre of 'gypsy' Shakespearean cinema is a relatively unexplored one, but salient examples, in addition to those introduced here, may include, at temporal extremes, *Los Tarantos* (dir. Francisco Rovira Beleta, 1963), a Spanish adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King of the Travellers* (dir. Mark O'Connor, 2012), an Irish film indebted to *Hamlet* in multiple respects.

Despite its negative connotations, "Gypsy", as Paloma Gay y Blasco notes, "remains a preferred mode of self-ascription for many individuals and communities across Europe" and may thus tentatively be deployed "to refer to exoticising and orientalisising representations". See her "Picturing 'Gypsies': Interdisciplinary Approaches to Roma Representation", *Third Text* 22:3 (2008), 297–298.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from *Hamlet* are taken from William Shakespeare, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

'gypsy' as an 'other' in our midst, a point made forcefully at the start of *Romani Kris* when a Roma child pops up from a manhole under a train that has just passed, grinning to camera. The image is symptomatic of the ways in which, as part of their economic analyses, both films highlight the plight of Roma groupings that are dispossessed, prioritizing motifs of depopulation and displacement, and foregrounding modes of human existence that function at extremes of poverty and deprivation. Most particularly, *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* focus on the fate that overtakes traditional communities and practices in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Accordingly, they spotlight money as a salient preoccupation, charting the difficulties of encountering capitalism in the wake of the break-up of communism, exposing the tensions inherent in competing modes of exchange and highlighting the place of alternative kinds of transaction. Such expressions of, and responses to, money illuminate not only, in Arjun Appadurai's words, the "growing disjunctures among ethnoscapings" that are a constituent component of modernity but also varying operations of power, as these reveal themselves in the pressures of diaspora and relations to the natural world.<sup>3</sup> *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* come together in deploying local contexts – such as state policies towards minorities and the Balkan crisis – to reflect upon the predicament of a disenfranchised constituency that is apprehended in terms of economic hardship and limited horizons of opportunity, as the films' thematic treatment of centres and peripheries indicates. In so doing, these films move beyond their immediate areas of consideration, revealing the uses of Shakespeare as a cinematic commodity and his uneven fortunes in the global media marketplace.

#### *Forms of Displacement*

Both *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* are animated by background stories that inform their development of central narrative metaphors. In *Romani Kris*, Lovér, the chief, is forced to leave his encampment when his kingdom is literally broken up – razed by government forces wishing forcibly to shift the 'gypsy' population into modern apartments. Granted resettlement monies from the government, Lovér decides to divide these between his three daughters. However, when the youngest, Sarolta / Cordelia, refuses to play her trumpet at his birthday celebrations, Lovér rejects her, dividing the material compensation between the two eldest and their spouses.<sup>4</sup> (In

<sup>3</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>4</sup> Sarolta / Cordelia's trumpet and Tamáska / Fool's fiddle are echoed in the same instruments played by the *Romanyi Rota* group as part of the score, lending a distinctively diegetic aspect to the film music.

this narrative arc, which foregrounds both ‘law’, or government policy, and ‘judgement’, or the treatment visited upon Sarolta, the meanings embodied in the film’s title, *Romani Kris*, or the law / judgement of the gypsies, are referenced). Subsequently – as refracted through the film’s non-linear arrangement, its frequent use of flashback and combinations of ‘real’ and past time – Lovér is discovered as haunted by his abandonment of kin. Memory is privileged throughout, as the central character and viewers alike engage in a piecing together of the shards of his history and an anticipation of his death. “My life comes to an end”, Lovér announces at the start, echoing Lear’s observation of Act 1, “we / Unburthened crawl toward death” (1.1.38–39), and the Shakespearean protagonist’s shedding of duties and cares.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Lovér’s travels across the countryside to find Sarolta, acts of mobility that he simultaneously narrates as character and chorus, become the means to effect a reversal. (*Romani Kris* privileges brilliantly lit deep focus shots of the lush landscape and invests in a magic-realist reliance on a form of ravishing pastoral). Naturally enough, then, the central metaphor of *Romani Kris* is that of, in Sean Homer’s formulation, the “travelogue or quest narrative [...] for authenticity and truth”.<sup>6</sup> A sequence that shows Lovér and Tamáska / Fool sheltering at an abandoned railway station is typical. Here, as elsewhere, the enforced condition of the Roma and a situation of perpetual embarkation are hinted at. Also characteristic is the extent to which the film limns Lovér telling stories on a train of a ‘gypsy’ king and his three daughters in a moving expiation of his own derelictions. For, in the film’s conceptualization of *King Lear*, the entirety of Hungary’s landscape stands in for the ‘heath’ and the ‘gypsy’ monarch’s will to make amends.

If *Romani Kris* references marginality via travel and mobility, *Hamlet* illustrates the same theme through a displacement that has pushed existence onto the edges of the cityscape. Unfolding on a rubbish site on the outskirts of Belgrade, the film makes a symbolic virtue of piles of debris: mountains of waste approximate Elsinore’s battlements, while stacked tyres suggest a graveyard. This is a soulless, enervated and monstrously impoverished world where acts of surveillance serve to accentuate uncomfortable proximities of habitation and living conditions grimly lacking in privacy. For example, Jova spies on his stepson Hamlet through a hole in the cloth partition of their shared hut in a scene that is echoed when the Ghost, distinctively attired in a ‘ceremonial’ white suit, looks on in the ‘closet scene’. Such a melancholic situation is also registered in the film’s *mise-en-scène* and

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from the play are taken from the ‘Conflated Text’ of *King Lear* in *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Sean Homer, “‘The Roma Do Not Exist’: The Roma as an Object of Cinematic Representation”, *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 14 (2006), 186.

tense, irreverent atmosphere. The oscillating light thrown by guttering fires, combined with the flicker of shadows, impart an eerie glow to the proceedings, while encroaching darkness hints at as yet undiscovered black deeds. Daytime shots of swarms of gulls flocking about the dump operate as apt expressions of the Shakespearean Hamlet's cynical references to the "region kites", "fatted [...] / With [...] offal" (2.2.556–557), even as they also communicate the merciless codes of a universe in which one either scavenges or is scavenged in turn. In 'gypsy' folklore, birds are invariably coloured with ominous associations, and it is entirely in keeping with this idea that a crow features in the film at fraught emotional moments, particularly during episodes in which Jova plots his next move, emphasizing the extent to which this creature signals not only the waning of power but also future misfortune.<sup>7</sup> The setting, in fact, references the 'real-life' situation of some 100,000 Romani families who live in the area recycling plastic and metal, while, in the same moment, bringing to mind Shakespeare's play's prevailing metaphors and interests, as reflected in details of the "unweeded garden" possessed by what is "rank and gross" (1.2.135–136) and "something [that] is rotten in the state" (1.4.67).<sup>8</sup> Notably, rubbish in *Hamlet* works as an index of the 'problem' of the Roma peoples (as the madman figure in the film announces at the start, "Goddam gypsies! You're scumbags!"). But it also functions as a signifier of an 'upside-down' society in which a prevailing green conjures illness and decay and in which steaming methane vapours point up a sense of stagnation and aftermath.<sup>9</sup> This, then, is the new Shakespearean landscape where the dump is domain and kingdom and where metaphysical questions can be posed amidst dirt and detritus. Each conceptual element emerges naturally from the film's backstory, which centres on the conflict between rival gangs (orthodox Roma are posed against local Muslims) who wish to control the rubbish empire. For, far from being synonymous with inutility, the dump is discovered as a place where rubbish figures as a species of commodity around which the film's substitutes for Denmark and Norway conduct a deadly trade.

The kinds of squalor underpinning the film's representation of conflict are congruent with the effects of the collapse of state socialism across Eastern Europe and an "unfavorable starting point" for the Roma "at the outset of the transition

<sup>7</sup> See Raymond Buckland, *Gypsy Dream Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (St Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1998), 89.

<sup>8</sup> For the Roma and Belgrade, see "Severed Lives", *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 25 July 2010, 42–43.

<sup>9</sup> The director states that the madman talks about racial prejudices openly; the type is not unbalanced as such but a part of Serbian tradition where the insane are respected as God's people (interview between Mark Thornton Burnett and Aleksandar Rajković, 24 April 2013).

from planned to market economies".<sup>10</sup> In Hungary, for example, the opening of the border with Austria in 1989 hastened both the unravelling of the communist bloc and the establishment of a democratic republic. By contrast, in the wake of the Balkan crisis, Montenegro announced its independence in 2006 and Serbia emerged as a separate entity, marking the dismantlement of the former Yugoslavia. These developments have been accompanied by huge financial challenges, themselves exacerbated by world debts and budgetary imbalances, and it is inside these contexts that both films elect to represent the plight of the Roma at a time of rapid political and social change. It is perhaps *Hamlet* that is most responsive here, invoking the occluded cultures of an older Yugoslavia in the chief bear-tamer (the film's substitute for the travelling player) – his tambourine and tinkling bells, and his incantatory snatches of folk song, bring to mind a disappearing mode of representation. As Gane / Guildenstern notes of the bear-tamers' incongruous winter visit to the dump, "Everything changes, no one is interested in bears, and television has ruined everything", his comment working as a salient registration of the ways in which a global media industry has swamped localism and homogenized cultural diversity. At a deeper level, the fact that the bear-tamers are *travelling* brings to mind the kinds of displacement often forced upon the Roma, making them emblematic of an itinerant existence dictated by the pressures of inhabiting societies in flux. But, in common with another Serbian Shakespeare film, *Midwinter Night's Dream* (dir. Goran Paskaljević, 2004), it is in brutal, unforgiving landscapes that *Hamlet* most powerfully articulates the human costs of the transition from one system to another and, to use the director's own formulation, attendant hopelessness.<sup>11</sup> Inside such an environment, when Hamlet is reduced to defecating in the grass or breaking the ice on his pail of washing water, his question, "Is there any place worse than this?", an approximation if not visual rendering of the Shakespearean idea of a "stale, flat, and unprofitable [...] world" (1.2.133–134), takes on an awful appositeness. Frozen ground and a weary colour-scape suggest a dystopian revision to a 'gypsy' film aesthetic centred on, as Caterina Pasqualino puts it, "an unadulterated community living in delightful harmony with nature",<sup>12</sup> while, in this place in particular, putting on an "antic disposition"

<sup>10</sup> Dena Ringold / Mitchell A. Orenstein / Erika Wilkens, *Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle* (Washington: The World Bank, 2005), xiv. More specifically, Paul Lendvai notes of Hungary that "there is no doubt that the Roma have been the biggest losers of the change of system in 1989 and the collapse of the old heavy industries [...]. Two-thirds of Roma are estimated to be affected by segregation and oppressive poverty" (*Hungary: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism*, trans. by Keith Chester [London: C. Hurst & Co, 2012], 180).

<sup>11</sup> Interview between Mark Thornton Burnett and Aleksandar Rajković, 24 April 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Caterina Pasqualino, "The Gypsies, Poor but Happy: A Cinematic Myth", *Third Text* 22:3 (2008), 343.

(1.5.173) or false appearance, read in the adaptation as the donning of multiple layers of clothes, is a practical necessity.

By contrast, in *Romani Kris*, an audience's standard pastoral expectations are indulged (we see the 'gypsy' community living in an Edenic country environment), but the point is also made that this is a way of life that exists in memory only. For example, insets that suggest an untrammelled participation in the natural world (such as a loose-haired Sarolta running through the hills with an unbridled horse) are self-consciously constructed as nostalgic. The material reality is of a displaced, fractured assembly of individuals struggling to get by in economically breadline jobs. In addition, the government's decision to raze the 'gypsy' village not only highlights what has been termed the "coercive" imprint of "forced assimilation policies"<sup>13</sup> on the Roma population but also the ways in which profiteering is implicated in efforts at ethnic integration: the 'land', we learn, is to be turned into a fishery. So it is that the film identifies how land acquisition policy exacerbates, in a post-communist situation, the cycles of poverty characterizing Romani constituencies. More specifically, *Romani Kris* plots with some social and cultural exactitude the fates of minority peoples once removed from their land, with the Fool figure, in particular, being used to emphasize the spiral – seen throughout – of mobility followed by decline. Cut off from all that is familiar, Tamáska is first of all rejected and then embraced by the protagonist, only to find that his own learning difficulties are the cause of further degradation and a state of perpetual rootlessness. "Could I abandon him like the others did?", Lovér demands, adding, "I couldn't leave him behind". Tamáska's plight embodies a forceful critique of a state failure to deal with issues of mental health once a community structure is removed. Similarly, the 'gypsies' formerly part of Lovér's settlement are variously glimpsed over the course of the film in menial occupations that are, in more than one sense, instances of "houseless poverty" (3.4.27) – Shakespeare's "poor naked wretches" (3.4.29). As in *King Lear*, moral critique is levelled at the system that would deprive society's unfortunates. Dirty, dangerous work is poorly recompensed and psychically belittling, as suggested in the sequence at the mines where Lovér and Tamáska are temporarily employed. These scarred and starved environs are the perfect foil for Lovér's purgatorial condition, while the booming sounds of the industrial machines evoke the thunder of the storm. Simultaneously, as in the German, Hungarian and Romanian co-produced Shakespeare film *Bibliothèque Pascale* (dir. Szabolcs Hajdu, 2009), the situation of the displaced 'gypsy' is refracted in the representation of working in the sex industry: Julie, the daughter of

<sup>13</sup> See Ringold / Orenstein / Wilkens (2005), 16.



Rostas / Kent, reluctantly embraces such a fate in a seedy Budapest nightclub.<sup>14</sup> Via such linked scenarios, *Romani Kris* makes visible the impossibility for the Roma of continuing in traditional occupations and stresses the sullyng effects of unfamiliar commercial arrangements.

#### *Commerce and Consumption*

Commerce, in the form of money, is central to the films' relationships. Distinct from the play, Jova according to this *Hamlet* adaptation is given a precise financial motivation. Hence, as he discloses in confession, he murdered Djura / Old Hamlet "because of the money", with the equation between cash and crime being reflected in shots of wads of notes concealed in a makeshift outside toilet or in the corpulent contours of the 'gypsy' king himself. And the links between money and corruption are everywhere apparent. At the start, for example, a group of Roma men, to the delight of a child, switch empty match-boxes to instruct in sleight of hand, their accompanying commentary pointing to a milieu in which strategies for winning capital are passed on to the next generation. "The more your invest, the more you get: no lies, no deceit", the men intone. The game sets the scene for a cut to Jova sitting behind a glass door, arguing with one of his young henchmen and counting money; his aggressive question, "That's all?", points up his acquisitiveness and reinforces a sense of the hierarchies that undergird the film's illicit monetary practices. Notably, Jova is represented as adulterating commodities when dealing with Murat / Old Norway; despite denials to the contrary, he attempts in a sorry transaction to sell paper that is dampened so as to increase its weight and worth. People, too, in Jova's estimation, are commodities to be managed via his own brand of backhanders. "How much did he pay you?", Hamlet demands of Gane / Guildenstern and Mija / Rosencrantz, his immediate suspicion being that Jova pays people off and that the fawning pair are motivated by a common venality. Crucially, the bear-tamers, as well as being used to index the extra-theatrical sports of Shakespeare's London, operate in the film as forces that critically expose the

<sup>14</sup> *Bibliothèque Pascale* anatomizes the situation of Romanian prostitute forced to perform snatches of Shakespeare in a London brothel. An *exposé* of the plight of an *émigrée*, the film is particularly notable for suggesting how "the recent round of European 'enlargement'" has led to "Romanian and other Eastern European women" becoming "hot objects of exchange, packaged in a variety of wrappings" (Anca Parvulescu, "European Kinship: Eastern European Women Go to Market", *Critical Inquiry* 37:2 [2011], 189).



cultures of consumption over which Jova presides.<sup>15</sup> For instance, because the heavily padded Lucianus figure and the red-coated player queen closely resemble Jova and Yelena / Gertrude in appearance, we are invited to identify excess and sexuality as among the play-within-the-play's satirical targets. The delighted audience clearly recognizes the intended parallel, as a shot of a gleeful child's countenance demonstrates; the forms of the empire are acknowledged by the community as a whole. And, in that Lucianus is dressed in a cardboard crown and armour, and sports a wooden sword, the implication is not simply that the trappings of authority are insubstantial but that he is adorned in the jettisoned materials that Jova corruptly circulates.

But money does not bind everyone with the same force. Zoran / Laertes refuses Jova's offer of money in the wake of Dusko / Polonius' death, his angry exclamation testifying to an attempt to stand outside the cash-dependent nexus of the rubbish regime. Even more removed is Hamlet. There is only one occasion on which Hamlet handles cash: he asks the bear-tamer, "Listen: do you know how to perform?", and afterwards slyly passes him some notes. The action is, however, legitimated, the film suggests, in that Hamlet pays to support the traditional moral efficacy of the 'artist'. More broadly, the protagonist is revealed as indifferent to the 'business' being transacted around him; he also apprehends rubbish less as a commodity than as a collection of aesthetically arresting objects, such as in the scene where, in a reworking of the play's sexual concern with "treasure open" (1.3.31) and "memory locked" (1.3.85), he picks up a key, remarking to Zorica / Ophelia, "They never think about using the old stuff." This and similar exchanges mark out Hamlet's difference – his equitable relationship with Zorica, his eco-instincts, his unique notions of value. The idea is realized in a further set of distinctions. Whereas Jova forces himself on Yelena, who fears another pregnancy as a result (the reference to the "enseamed bed" [3.4.82] is graphically realized), the infantilized Hamlet is characterized by self-denial; his is not the realm of expenditure.

<sup>15</sup> The bear-tamers are arresting in other ways. Thus, when the bear performs for the tamer – "With her left hand she puts on powder", he explains – the protagonist is stimulated to suspect Zorica / Ophelia immediately afterwards. In this way, the juxtaposition of the two episodes both points up the ubiquity of a world of false appearances (a transposition of the Shakespearean idea of "paint[ing] an inch thick" [5.1.179]) and the situation of Zorica, forced to act and dissimulate for others' benefit. Significantly, the bear is called Cassandra, a name which evokes the classical heroine of Greek mythology, a figure associated, appropriately enough, with tragic genres, madness and the ability to see into the future.

Differences between Jova and Hamlet are encapsulated in their attitude towards animals – a traditional aspect of ‘gypsy’ culture serves a thematic purpose.<sup>16</sup> The white rabbit that the protagonist cradles, for example, hints at his solicitude while, in the same moment, suggesting an Alice-in-Wonderland type of distraction and an alliance with his white-suited ghostly father. In contradistinction, the pig that Jova fondly scratches pejoratively resembles, in its fleshy proportions, the form of its master, for not only does the creature tar the king with its significances, reinforcing the brute notion and explicit imagery of “making love / Over the nasty sty” (3.4.83–84), it also reveals the workings of a regime in which humanity itself is treated in animal-like ways. Thus, in the scene where the pig is disembowelled, the suggestion is that Hamlet, recently exiled to Vienna and death, is a further sacrifice: he will be dispatched at the hands of those fawning courtiers who will “pluck out the heart of [his] mystery” (3.2.336). Crucially, the pig is killed because it is deemed valuable (it is roasted and eaten), whereas the white rabbit, glimpsed later dead in its cage, is appreciated simply for its own sake. However, in a wry twist to the animal analogy, the film reveals how it is Gane and Mija who will suffer a fate that makes them the objects of sacrifice. Trussed up like pigs for slaughter, the roped pair is burned alive in a car which then, as befits the logic of the dump, ends up, with its conflagrated contents, just another piece of trash. They, too, have been consumed.

Like Hamlet, Lovér in *Romani Kris* is characterized in terms of lack in relation to a monetary society. Poverty, and his status as a ‘pagan king’, allows him to skirt around official structures of economic law; thus, he is represented as ignoring the fine of up to 20,000 *forint* for stopping a train as this would be to capitulate to systems of exchange he defines himself against. In this sense, Lovér is visited with a transgressive potential; he is distinguished by not following the accepted dictates of property and ownership. Elsewhere in *Romani Kris*, we see Lovér trading stories for coffee, collecting scrap metal and undertaking odd jobs for free tickets or payment in kind, participating, to adopt a formulation of Arjun Appadurai, in a process of “barter [...] *without* reference to money and *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political, or personal transaction costs”.<sup>17</sup> In a parodic version of this attitude to money, Tamáska distributes expensive stolen watches not realizing they have material value and throws back the coins he is given for playing his

<sup>16</sup> For gypsies’ traditional involvement in animal dealing and / or displaying, see Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 46–48, 124–125.

<sup>17</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9.

fiddle, suggesting not only his own incomprehension but a relation between the characters based on economic consanguinity. In part, Lovér is identified as he is because of his feelings about having accepted the cash payment from the state to facilitate the dismantlement of the 'gypsy' village and the relocation of its inhabitants. Tempted by the lure of actual lucre, he capitulates to temptation, only to find that the compensation received constitutes a type of 'blood money' which brings to its cursed possessors only ruination and disgrace. Lovér provides compensation with the inheritance that he bestows on his two eldest daughters, Ilka / Goneril and Kukunda / Regan, and their husbands – Janos / Albany states, "You took care of our debts", while Jozsó / Cornwall observes, "Old Lovér helped me with cash" – yet, as the narrative reveals, this allows for no recognizable improvement. For, where one family fails to pay off an additional loan, and is re-stigmatized as 'gypsy' as a result, the other is broken up when the police discover its trade in stolen goods. Money, in this sense, is portrayed as a treacherous phenomenon – corrosive and divisive in its effects.

A complex twist is given to *Romani Kris*' inheritance narrative when it emerges that Lovér originally accepted the settlement money out of a sense of guilt after a fatal altercation with a bureaucrat. An early flashback shows the bureaucrat trying to persuade the gypsies to move; as he states, "You'll get cash, land, water and electricity." In the mêlée that ensues, he is stabbed and falls to the ground; the authorities are not able to pinpoint a particular 'gypsy' as culprit, so there is no arrest. Later, it is established that Lovér was the one wielding the knife, making retrospective sense of his repeated efforts to absolve his conscience: as shots of a sable-hued raven indicate, the bird reminds the protagonist of an experience he wishes to exorcise. In the film's understanding of Lovér, then, there is a doubled effort at atonement focused on individuals representing family and state; as he says, "It's time I faced up to my guilt", in a formulation that encapsulates two burdens of responsibility (Sarolta and the murdered bureaucrat). According to Walter O. Weyrauch and Maureen Anne Bell, in the "embedded autonomous legal system" of the gypsies, "crimes of violence", such as murder, are considered "crimes against Romani society as a whole and therefore *marime*", a type of pollution but also a sentence of banishment that "stigmatizes [...] wrongdoers [...] and justifies their expulsion from the community".<sup>18</sup> Here, the title of *Romani Kris*

<sup>18</sup> Walter O. Weyrauch / Maureen Anne Bell, "Autonomous Lawmaking: The Case of the 'Gypsies'", in Walter O. Weyrauch (ed.), *Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 21, 39, 47. Of course, *King Lear*, too, is primarily preoccupied with law-making and law-breaking, as in the mock-"trial" (3.6.32) of Goneril and Regan over which Lear presides, an episode that brings to mind a subsidiary meaning of 'kris' – the tribunal, hearing or court (see Ian Hancock, "Glossary", in Weyrauch [2001], 177).

comes into its own, for *kris* (or ‘law’ or ‘judgement’) refers to the unwritten moral code that Lovér feels he must honour so as to achieve redemption and effect a kind of return to a home that, as frequent shots of a setting sun intimate, no longer exists, lying forever out of reach.

So as to reverse his complicity with the state, and in an attempt to reaffirm his ‘gypsy’ integrity (which cannot be bought), Lovér not only bypasses money as a means of exchange but also privileges the notion of spiritual dues. Accumulating “symbolic capital [...] for the sake of [a] point of honour”, writes Pierre Bourdieu, allows *homo economicus* to acquire “credit” and “credence”,<sup>19</sup> and something approximating this process characterizes Lovér as he agitates to, in his words, “settle my account with God”. As he reflects, in a rumination on ethics derailed, “A gypsy will always be a gypsy: that is our true wealth! [...] I’m talking about more important debts.” According to Paloma Gay y Blasco, ‘gypsies’ are distinctive in that they “shore up and [...] challenge the hegemony of individualism [...]”. As enlightened refuseniks they reveal the shortcomings of a political economy which traps us as it enriches us.<sup>20</sup> So it is with Lovér and his refusal of monetary worth, which comes to function as a critique of the capitalist modalities of which we ourselves are representatives.

#### *Journeys / Endings*

The locations of capital are scattered in the films, but, certainly in *Romani Kris*, they are concatenated in city space. Culminating Lovér’s journey, Budapest, as the film understands it, is a city not only of “demons, monsters and scoundrels”, in Lovér’s phrase, but also of commerce gone morally astray. Here, amidst crowds, shops and fumes, and within the ambit of smoky bars and dimly illuminated backstreets where women’s bodies are bought and sold, is announced a capitalist bad dream, showing the obverse of a ‘gypsy’ world events have left behind. And it is here, in Budapest, when arrested for vagrancy, that Tamáska is led around a police station yard on a lead; the suggestion is that he is perceived as having slipped off the human register. The paradox, however, is that Budapest is also experienced as a place of enlightenment; in not discovering Sarolta within its corrupt counter-societies, Lovér is enabled to revise his estimation of how her life may have turned out. In contradistinction, in *Hamlet*, Belgrade, the equivalent city, is neither seen nor visited. “Do you know that people there do nothing? [...] They just walk the

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. by Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 119–120.

<sup>20</sup> Gay y Blasco (2008), 298.

streets", Hamlet tells Zorica, conjuring Belgrade as an unfamiliar metropolis where surplus value has resulted in a state of affairs in which only leisure prevails (as distinct from the dump, defined, as it is, by the most degrading kinds of work). From the example of Budapest in *Romani Kris*, one can speculate that a similar experience might await the 'gypsy' inhabitants of *Hamlet* in Belgrade, not least as this is intimated in the gendered pun on walking "the streets". In the terms of *Hamlet*, Belgrade appears as a shimmering, surreal confection apprehended just beyond the omnipresent smoke; it is somewhere about which characters fantasize or to which they will be taken, but, crucially, these remain no more than projections, planned displacements failing to materialize.

Anticipated displacement cedes place to material action at the end of *Hamlet*, however, for here, as captured in a widescreen shot that encompasses a comprehensive point of view, the madman leaves the dump in the company of the travelling bear-tamers, the implication being that they are moving on in a continuing trajectory. The madman and the bear-tamers find, in an albeit shifting association, a common agenda. The exodus comes hard upon the knife fight between Hamlet and Zoran which, echoing a playful fight between children at the start, shows the rival combatants participating, as in the play-within-the-play, in a dreadful entertainment. With Hamlet's death – his body is laid out on a pyre, and gulls congregate to try the remains – the 'money' at the heart of the action and the empire, like Derrida's spectre, a "revenant" which "begins by coming back",<sup>21</sup> returns, for, thanks to a deal the protagonist has done with Mesa / Fortinbras, the latter enters the frame to assume his dues; he is rubbish-as-commodity's elected heir.

The emphasis is different at the end of *Romani Kris*, for, although money is central to the horse market at which Lovér searches for his daughter, the resurfacing of 'gypsy' traditions points to an affirmative mode of cultural continuity, suggesting traces of the old in the new, a retention of the communally vibrant in the face of suffering. Interestingly, the market, which takes place in Dabas, serves as the occasion for a reaffirmation of the pastoral genre as well as for the expression of notions of authenticity, as reflected in a playful stave fight and celebratory dance. And it is also here that Lovér hears of his daughter's whereabouts at a neighbouring 'stud farm', in a revelation that paves the way for reunion and forgiveness. Despite – or because of – her lack of inheritance, Sarolta has pursued a life as a horse-breeder and horse-tamer; she is represented as able to make an established 'gypsy' occupation work in the modern world. In common with eighteenth-century adaptations of *King Lear*, including Nahum Tate's rewriting, this Cordelia survives happily and, in so doing, functions emblematically as a woman without means who

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 11.

is still able to find herself. But, having satisfied himself that Sarolta is content, thereby discharging one spiritual debt, Lovér is realized as wishing to honour the remaining obligation; “I have one more path to tread”, the ailing protagonist announces. Praying at the graveside of the Budapest bureaucrat, Lovér undertakes his final act of atonement, and in the identification of the man he has killed – viewers are aided by the photograph on the gravestone – a rapprochement between previously antithetical social spheres is implied. Now, in a confirmation of the opening declaration about a peaceful expiry, Lovér is ‘ready’ to embrace his destiny. This arrives when, attempting to scare away the “Bird of Death” that has accompanied their travels, Tamáska throws a stone, only accidentally to strike Lovér, who falls, fatally injured, to the ground. With the wheel having come full circle, a subsidiary meaning of *kris*, that of the ‘gypsy’ court or tribunal, comes to the fore, Tamáska having performed the role of Lovér’s executioner and judge.<sup>22</sup> More fundamentally, notwithstanding Lovér’s payment of dues – and his recovery, in Caterina Pasqualino’s words, of “purity” through “poverty” – his departure exposes once again the vulnerability of the ‘gypsy’ peoples in the aftermath of the dissolution of a community.<sup>23</sup> In particular, counterbalancing the self-discovery of Sarolta, the retention from *King Lear* of the fool works to accentuate a bleak prognosis. Bereft of his protector, Tamáska is shot centre frame at the close running down a hillside, the overriding impression being of a lost soul. There is no direction here, nor even of a survival that allows for the continuing transmission of Lovér’s ‘gypsy’ stories, for Tamáska is mute.

### Conclusions

Both *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* confront audiences with varying constructions of ‘gypsy’ peoples and in such a way as to raise consciousness about the forms of stigmatization visited upon particularized constituencies at a historical juncture marked by competing notions of what constitutes capital and how and why commodities circulate. If, as Fredric Jameson holds, “money” represents “the central novelty, the central mystery, at the heart of the transition to modernity, [...] [to a] capitalist society”,<sup>24</sup> then it is perhaps not surprising that both films should concentrate on money in the post-communist world as a material presence and symbolic agent that shapes the lives of the most marginalized of East European populations.

<sup>22</sup> Hancock (2001), 177.

<sup>23</sup> Pasqualino (2008), 344.

<sup>24</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Jameson Reader*, ed. by Michael Hardt / Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 261.

Critic Anikó Imre sees a 'gypsy' genre film such as *Romani Kris* as inherently kitsch, a romantic and "commercial attempt to market Hungarian cultural products",<sup>25</sup> but this, I think, is to miss a larger point about how a connection with Shakespeare serves a validating purpose in the progress to a new global community. One of the consequences of the collapse of communism was the resurgence of "venal brand[s] of ethno-religious nationalism",<sup>26</sup> not least in the Balkans, part of a broader effort, in Roger D. Petersen's words, to declare the "ideology of a unitary state and centralized governance".<sup>27</sup> Inside Europe, the challenge has been how to bypass such forms of nationalist self-assertion and embrace a system based around exchange, reciprocity, joint ownership, federalization and mutual responsibility. To a degree, the EU holds out the possibility of such a scenario, and it is one that a film such as *Hamlet* ironically contemplates, as when Jova is represented as feeding his pig out of a battered can bearing an EU logo. And it is here, perhaps, that we find the figurative dimensions of both films' Roma protagonists reinforcing a move away from a unitary place of origin. Or, to put the point more forcefully, in the 'gypsy' characters and aesthetic of *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* we see sketched the efforts of Eastern European countries to shake off the imputation of marginality and ostracism.<sup>28</sup> As Dina Iordanova states of "Balkan cinematic celebrations of free-wheeling Roma", the type is deployed to support "projective identification needs" and combat an internalized narrative of "international isolation".<sup>29</sup> An inherently transnational figure, Shakespeare offers a

<sup>25</sup> Anikó Imre, "Whiteness in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe: The Time of the Gypsies, the End of Race", in Alfred J. Lopez (ed.), *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader on Race and Empire* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 90. The point is developed in her companion piece, "Screen Gypsies", *Framework* 44:2 (2003), 15–33.

<sup>26</sup> Hamid Naficy, "Introduction: Framing Exile from Homeland to Homepage", in Hamid Naficy (ed.), *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (New York / London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 212–213.

<sup>28</sup> The EU, Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries write, "has been slow to integrate Eastern Europe into the mainstream of European development. [...] little Western support [has] been forthcoming" (*A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* [London: Routledge, 1998], 620, 622). The Roma would seem to have particularly suffered in this process; as a recent editorial notes, the EU, "in its accession procedures evaluating the minorities' rights, knowingly ignored racial discrimination and denial of education, thereby contributing to the erosion of Roma's ability to earn a living. This maladministration represents a corruption of the system of appraising new member states" (Reuben Bard-Rosenberg, "A Bad Deal for the Roma", *Evening Standard*, 25 April 2013, 61).

<sup>29</sup> Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London: BFI, 2001), 214, 220, 223.



means to effect that reversal and return; he embodies economic value in the same moment as he operates as a passport to a global dispensation. Yet, in the marketplace, this is, it might be suggested, only one of the ways in which the Bard operates. For, rather than endorsing in their effects Shakespeare's indivisible association with capital, *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* present a more nuanced picture. Both fared poorly on the festival circuit, failed to attract distributors, did not go on to vital commercial runs and, as a result, remain in a Shakespeare-on-film hinterland, having become largely invisible. They demonstrate, in fact, the contingencies and contradictions tied to Shakespeare's status as a commodity and brand-name power and point up, in their mixed fortunes, the discontinuous nature of his usage on the international stage. For the two examples I have discussed in this article, this is regrettable, for, like many other exemplars of Shakespeare and world cinema, *Romani Kris* and *Hamlet* are thematically cogent, ideologically timely and visually exciting statements that test perceptions and invite new ways of seeing. It is, perhaps, for us Shakespeareans now to attempt their rehabilitation and to work to ensure that their content and their vision achieve a greater currency.<sup>30</sup>

#### Zusammenfassung

Der Aufsatz diskutiert *Romani Kris* (Regie: Bence Gyöngyössi, 1997), eine ungarische Adaption von *King Lear*, und *Hamlet* (Regie: Aleksandar Rajković, 2007), eine serbische Bearbeitung von Shakespeares Tragödie, als Beispiele für das neue Genre eines 'gypsy' Shakespeare-Films, in dem das Leben der Roma als Shakespeare-Adaption erzählt wird. Die Filme fokussieren auf die Misere enteigneter Roma-Gemeinschaften; sie zeigen Entvölkerung, Verdrängung und Armut. Geld steht im Zentrum von *Romani Kris* und *Hamlet*, die den problematischen Übergang zum Kapitalismus nach dem Fall des Kommunismus kritisch reflektieren und gleichzeitig Shakespeare als Ware in der Filmindustrie identifizieren.

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