

The Roma image in the mainstream Turkish audiovisual media: Sixty years of stereotyping

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This article seeks to address one of the most problematic lacunae in Turkey's political and academic landscape by examining the mediated images of the Roma people in Turkey. This long-neglected sub-cultural group in the Turkish context is mostly regarded as the "others" of society, who cannot speak for themselves. Their public imagination is, therefore, based heavily on narratives that are exclusively produced by non-Roma people. In order to reveal the historical construction of the popular Roma image in Turkey, we cover audiovisual material from the 1960s onward. Through a descriptive–interpretive analysis, we seek to explore how cultural and artistic narratives have contributed to and/or mirrored, and thus reproduced, the prevailing knowledge and imagination about the Roma people in Turkish society.

Keywords: Roma people, Roma image, representation, stereotypes, Turkish mainstream audiovisual media

Introduction

This article focuses on the cinematic and televised portrayals of the Roma people and culture in the mainstream Turkish audiovisual media.¹ In order to expose the prevailing prejudicial discourse concerning the Roma people in

1. It should be noted here that this article constitutes the first part of a three-phased research project. Each phase should be considered individually and yet as complementary. The current article is the outcome of the initial phase of our research. In the second phase, we conducted a transformative action research project with a local Roma community in İzmir, Turkey. To this end, we organized a community filmmaking project in order to reveal whether an auto-ethnographic cinematic text created by the Roma themselves would differ from the hegemonic media discourse about them exclusively produced by non-Roma people. The last phase is designed as a reception study. We plan to screen the auto-ethnographic documentary particularly for non-Roma audiences, whereby the crew of the film will be present to answer questions. We will analyse the audience's reaction to the film via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in order to explore whether the presumed agency of the subaltern actually transpires into a positive change in the opinions and attitudes of the dominant "other" toward them.

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popular Turkish films and television series, we studied 22 films from the 1960s onward with Roma characters either in central or peripheral positions in the story, and four major TV shows that focus on fictional Roma communities. Through a descriptive–interpretive analysis, we explored how cultural and artistic narratives have contributed to and/or mirrored, and thus reproduced, the prevalent knowledge and imagination about the Roma people in Turkish society.

There has been some research regarding the Turkish Roma, particularly from the 2000s onwards, most of which is in the fields of sociology and anthropology, paying very little, if any, attention to the widely circulating mediated images about and of the Roma.² Only a very limited amount of work has focused on the representation of the Turkish Roma in the media. Among those some analyse either just one medium or one artistic/cultural work or, alternatively, they encompass a wide range of media and/or examples.³ However, their analysis does not go beyond mere documentation and superficial plot description, lacking critical engagement with pertinent theories or concepts.⁴ The contribution of this article is thus twofold: It brings together six decades of cinematic and televised narratives about the Turkish Roma; in other words, it provides a comprehensive contextual and historical overview of the Roma portrayal in Turkish popular culture. It also investigates this remarkably large corpus, in an unprecedented manner, through a specific conceptual framework derived from the work of Stuart Hall and bell hooks.

As Mikos rightfully points out, “film and TV shows have to be understood essentially as media of communication. Their analysis, therefore, should be a systematic investigation of the structures of the texts, their conditions of production and reception, and the societal contexts” (2013: 409). Accordingly, in what follows we first briefly explain the socio-political and economic conditions surrounding the Roma people in Turkey from a historical perspective. Then we present the conceptual framework that informs the following analysis. In the analysis section, the six decades of knowledge production about the Turkish Roma is examined by focusing on existing films and TV shows about the Roma. This section strives to achieve both a textual and a contextual analysis. The article is completed by inferring the main courses of shift in the representation of the Roma in Turkish popular culture.

2. See for instance Yılgür 2018; Koptekin 2017; Yılgür 2016; Avara and Mascitelli 2014; Özateşler 2014; Ünalı 2012; Gençoğlu-Onbaşı 2012; Akgül 2010; Marsh 2010 and 2008; Arayıcı 2009 and 2008; Kolukırık 2009; Uzpeder et al. 2008; Marushiakova and Popov 2001; Garnett 1900.

3. See Gün 2017 and Bayraktar 2013.

4. See Sal 2009 and Yürüktümen 2010.

Roma people in the Turkish context

The history of Roma people, or *çingene* (gypsy) as they are commonly addressed in Turkey, dates back to the eleventh century when İstanbul was under the Byzantine reign (Marsh 2010: 27).⁵ From then on, we trace various Roma communities and settlements scattered throughout Anatolia. The first official record mentioning the Roma people in the Ottoman period seems to be the 1477 census conducted in İstanbul (Karaman 2009: 309). According to the census, “the number of gypsies living in İstanbul at the time was estimated to be between 200 to 1,000. The more complete census of 1897 reported a total population of 19,050,307, of which 10,104,022 were men and 8,946,285 were women” (Arayıcı 2009: 529). The Ottoman Empire was essentially multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-lingual; Roma communities, therefore, were seen as part of this rich social fabric. Admittedly, religion had a big role to play in this since they were considered to be a part of the dominant Muslim population. However, “they were not entirely equal to other Ottoman subjects either – being taxed regardless of their religion⁶ – nor was their testimony always accepted as valuable as litigants or defendants” (Marsh 2008: 14–15). Still, as many scholars agree, they did not suffer from the discriminative or exclusionary practices that other Roma endured elsewhere in Europe at the time (Marushiakova and Popov 2001; Marsh 2008; Arayıcı 2009; Avara and Mascitelli 2014).⁷

Roma people continued to be treated on the basis of their religion rather than ethnicity or language during the foundation of the Turkish Republic. “For instance, in the 1923 population exchange agreement with Greece, following the Treaty of Lausanne, Muslims living in Greece, including Roma people, were admitted to Turkey. Religious faith was the only requirement for this exchange” (Kolukırık and Toktaş 2007: 762). Still, their disadvantaged position remained because even if they were seen as Muslims they were considered to be a “slightly lower rank of Muslims” (Kenrick 2007: 281). Furthermore, since “the minority and anti-discrimination policies in Turkey are based on the Treaty of Lausanne, and only non-Muslim minorities are granted protection according to this treaty, Roma people have been denied rights to minority protection” (Avara and Mascitelli 2014: 139). In 1934 the

5. *Çingene* is a rather pejorative term laden with negative connotations, indicating the under-privileged status of the Roma people in Turkey.

6. Religion was the main criteria for *cizye* tax in the Ottoman period since it was only collected from non-Muslims. Nonetheless, even though Roma communities were mostly Muslims, they still had to pay the *cizye* tax (Garnett 1900: 807–12).

7. Also see Altınöz 2013 and Çelik 2013 for the discussions of competing arguments concerning the Roma’s position in the Ottoman Empire.

situation was exacerbated with the enactment of the Settlement Law, whereby Roma people were identified, together with anarchists and deportees, as people who would not be granted immigrant status (T.C. Resmi Gazete 1934). Accordingly, problems regarding their social and cultural inclusion, housing, employment, education, and health have perpetuated.

The population of Roma people in contemporary Turkey is about 500,000 according to the official records; however, unofficial data reveals a much higher number, around 5,000,000 (Arayıcı 2009: 532). The groups subsumed under the category of Roma are Roms, Doms, Loms, and travellers (Marsh, 2010: 28–30). They are further categorized as nomads, semi-nomads, and settlers (Avara and Mascitelli 2014: 138). From an anthropological perspective, Egemen Yılıgür addresses them as “peripatetic,” a term that is not exclusive to Roma but encompasses those who are “endogamic in different levels, subsist on providing services and craft production, and have a high level of spatial mobility” (2017: 1).

Popular occupations among the Roma people in Turkey are fortune-tellers, musicians, belly dancers, flower-sellers, porters, solid-waste collectors, and seasonal agricultural workers. Roma people have been particularly influential in the entertainment business owing to their particular music style and the concomitant belly dancing.⁸ Thus, the main sources of income for them have been wedding ceremonies and street performances. Although low in numbers, “there have also been some Roma people who managed to study or even been recruited in the public sector. However, they tend to hide their ethnic identity as the perception of *çingene* by the mainstream society is very negative” (Arayıcı 2009: 532). This certainly is not particular to Turkey. “Across the globe, Roma have been the target of ethnic hatred. In many countries, they have few or no rights or even official status ... They are one of the most persecuted ethnic minority groups in Europe today” (Avara and Mascitelli 2014: 132).

“Accession to the EU accelerated the Romani movement in Turkey especially between 2002 and 2005” (Önen 2013: 608). Parallelling the attempts aimed at ending discrimination against the Roma across Europe, Turkey initiated a set of projects to promote social and cultural inclusion of the Roma. To this end, two non-governmental organizations in Turkey cooperated with the European Roma Rights Centre to conduct a project designed to improve the rights of the Roma people in Turkey from 2005 to 2008 (Uzpeder et al. 2008). These were the years when Romani studies and various research projects

8. Refer to Duygulu 2018 and Değirmenci 2011 for a detailed account of Roma music in Turkey. Also see Girgin-Tohumcu 2014 for a discussion of the controversial status of Romani dance in Turkey.

concerning the Roma people proliferated. For instance, the “Promoting Roma (Gypsy) Rights in Turkey” research project, encompassing cities such as İzmir, Bursa, Ankara and Kırıkkale as well as İstanbul, began in 2006” (Marsh 2010: 31). Moreover, the Settlement Law of 1934 was abolished in 2006, and instead, a new law regulating the Roma people’s settlement took effect (T.C. Resmi Gazete 2006).

These positive moves were followed by the much celebrated Roma Opening in 2009. “The organisation of two Roma Workshops in 2009, a government initiative, brought five confederations and about eighty associations from thirty-six provinces across Turkey to discuss their problems” (Gençoğlu-Onbaşı 2012: 603). In addition to this, the European Platform for Roma Inclusion was established in 2009 and main principles for the inclusion strategy were set out (Roman Vatandaşlara Yönelik Strateji Belgesi 2016–2021, 2016). The Roma Opening was the first high-level official attempt to address the problems of the Roma people, as the then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan himself announced it with wide media coverage. His historic speech in 2010 addressing thousands of Roma people from all over the country put the Roma issue at the centre of the socio-political agenda. The ultimate aims of the Opening were to enable Roma people’s social inclusion, eliminate discrimination, and improve their living and working conditions. Nonetheless, as Gençoğlu-Onbaşı stresses, “this fight against discrimination ... seems to have turned into another form of discrimination” since their “subaltern” status remained. This was the case because the government officials dictated what Roma means, how they ought to live and behave etc. Furthermore, the media coverage of the issue, albeit supportive of the Opening, served to reproduce existing stereotypes of the Roma in the public sphere (Gençoğlu-Onbaşı 2012: 604).

Despite criticism, endeavours within the scope of the Roma Opening have continued. With the support of the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (Çetin 2017: 99) a strategic action plan started in 2016. The plan identifies five main categories for improvement: education; recruitment; housing; health; and social services and social aids.⁹ The most recent event has been the Big Roma Meeting at the presidential palace in April 2018, where president Erdoğan addressed the Roma people, stating that he grew up among them and that they have the support of the state and of the president himself (Sözcü 11 April 2018; *Birgün* 11 April 2018).

Overall, this heterogeneous minority in Turkey consists of mostly settled groups now, and relatively recently – particularly from 2000 onwards – they

9. See Roman Vatandaşlara Yönelik Strateji Belgesi 2016–2021, 2016 for the details of the action plan.

have started organizing Roma associations at local and national levels. According to Çetin, Roma people's activism in Turkey is not aimed at minority rights and identity, instead they often fight for economic recovery and equal citizenship (2017: 97). This increasing political activism notwithstanding, they still suffer considerably from unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion.

Conceptual framework

Our analysis of the mediated images of the Roma people in Turkey has primarily been motivated and informed by Stuart Hall's work interlinking cultural identity–difference–representation, and bell hooks's thought-provoking discussion of the concept of "commodification of otherness."

Hall regards cultural identity as "constructed within representation" with a particular emphasis on difference (1989: 80). Representation operates, Hall argues, through meaning construction and exchange within language (1997: 1). "It is a signifying practice, and thus, any representational system can be thought as working according to the principles of representation through language" (1997: 5). In other words, films and TV shows, comprised of signs and symbols and being the staples of popular culture, can be considered among the key repositories in terms of meaning production. "Meaning is what gives [people their] sense of identity... and it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups" (Hall 1997: 3).

Discussing the connection between race and difference in contemporary mass culture, hooks argues that "within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks 1992: 34). This "exploitation of otherness" is further reinforced by the fact that various portrayals of "otherized" individuals or communities often serve to circulate widespread stereotypes about them to create easily comprehensible and enjoyable narratives. When the common perception of Roma as the ethnic and cultural "others" of Turkish society is taken into consideration, their representation in the mainstream audiovisual media, which has exclusively been produced by non-Roma people, *aka gaco*, ties in well with the conceptualizations of Hall and hooks.

Hall's essay *The Spectacle of the Other* focuses on the construction of the "other" on the basis of difference at linguistic, social, cultural, and psychic levels. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's and Franz Fanon's work, Hall underlines the most significant aspect of difference as "ambivalence." He argues that "it can be both positive and negative. It is both necessary for the production of meaning, the formation of language and culture ... and at the same time, it

is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings ... towards the 'other'" (Hall 1997: 238). This ambivalence is what feeds the encounter between the dominant white and the ethnic "other," and it shapes the images of the "other" especially in the mainstream media. These images are created via a hegemonic system of representation predicated on binary oppositions, inevitably creating stereotypes. This representation system works by "naturalising difference," meaning the difference is fixed and secured forever because "if they are natural they are beyond history, permanent and fixed" (Hall 1997: 245).

In line with Hall's understanding of ambivalence, hooks, too, argues that "encounters with Otherness are clearly marked as more exciting, more intense, and more threatening. The lure is the combination of pleasure and danger" (1992: 52). This ambivalence marks the nature of the relation between the dominant and the dominated according to hooks. The increasing desire of white people for intimate contact with the other might appear to mask or even disrupt the unequal and hierarchical relationship between the two, but in reality, it is fulfilled through exploitation and "commodification of otherness" by turning ethnic or cultural particulars into a consumable commodity. It is easily detectable in advertising, as hooks demonstrates, but such examples can also be found in abundance in cinematic and televised narratives.

In this context, who represents whom, who constructs whose image, who owns the gaze and who is the object of the gaze become important elements that should inform our understanding of the mediated narratives below. As the following encompassing analysis reveals, the mediated images of the Turkish Roma essentially demonstrate ambivalence since the non-Roma people's construction of the Roma image appears to fluctuate constantly between "desire" and "fear."

Sixty years of stereotyping

In order to address the historical construction of the Roma image in Turkey, it seems crucial to scrutinize the mediated narratives of the Roma. To this end, we cover a wide range of films from melodramas to comedies and popular TV series made over the last six decades. Such a wide scope should make it possible to historicize these audiovisual narratives, addressing the transformation the popular Roma image has gone through over time. We have included all the films made since the 1960s for the analysis. Only those which we could not get a copy of have been excluded: *Mihracenin Gözdesi* (Yavuz Figenli, 1969) and *Civan Ali: Çingenem* (Nuri Akıncı, 1970). In a similar manner, we have analysed all four of the TV shows about the Roma communities in Turkey.

It is possible to categorize three major periods regarding cinematic narratives about the Turkish Roma based on the thematic and aesthetic characteristics and narrative structures of the films. Such periodization is also reinforced by the socio-cultural and political atmosphere in the country: 1) From the late 1960s to the early 1970s; 2) the 1980s; and 3) from the 1990s onward.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that there were Turkish films about the Roma in the 1950s such as *Şaban Çingeneler Arasında* (Şaban is Among Gypsies) (Semih Evin 1952), *Tek Kollu Canavar* (One-armed Monster) (İhsan Nuyan 1954), *Papatya* (Daisy) (Mümtaz Yener 1956), and *Kırçiçeği Zeynep* (Zeynep, the Wild Flower) (Nejat Saydam 1958). However, they were not significant in number, nor did they form an easily categorizable corpus. A remarkable concentration on the topic is observable in the late 1960s and during the 1980s. From the 1990s onward, we detect a sporadic interest in the subject with films in variety of genres.

When it comes to the portrayal of the Turkish Roma on TV, the first and probably the most popular of its kind is the TV series *Cennet Mahallesi* (Heaven District) (Yaşar Seriner and Serdar Akar), which started airing in 2004 and ended in 2007. Focusing on the fluctuating relationship between two Roma families, *Cennet Mahallesi* is basically a TV adaptation of the famous comedy film *Gırgıriye* (Kartal Tibet 1981).¹¹ *Görgüsüzler* (Discourteous)¹² can be described as a spin-off from *Cennet Mahallesi*, including some of the same actors and actresses such as Melek Baykal, Zeki Alasya Çağla Şikel, and Aylin Kabasakal. Six episodes only aired in 2008, and this short-lived TV show attracted complaints from the Kırklareli Roma Association particularly for its pejorative title as well as its stereotypical representation of the Roma. The other TV series that is examined is *Roman Havası* (Roma Music) (Hakan Arslan 2014), which also is a remake of *Cennet Mahallesi*. It was a very controversial TV show, and stopped airing after six episodes, due to the official complaint the Ankara Roma Rights Association filed, claiming that the TV show reinforces the predominant bigotries and stereotypes about the Turkish Roma people. *Gönülçelen* in this corpus differs from the others since it is not a remake of *Cennet Mahallesi* or *Gırgıriye*, but based on Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, narrating a Romani girl's ascent to high society.

10. Please see Yürüktümen 2010 for a similar periodization.

11. *Gırgıriye* is a made-up word, derived from the word *gırgır*, which in the given context means fun, comedy, and entertainment.

12. The Turkish term "görgüsüz" can be translated to English as ill-mannered, ill-bred, disrespectful, uncivil, loud-mouthed, impolite, etc., indicating the derogatory nature of the word in the Turkish language.

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s

The 1960s in Turkish history is often considered as the most liberal period, both socio-culturally and ideologically. The 1961 constitution, following the military coup in 1960, was famous for its emancipating attitude, initiating democratic reforms concerning almost every aspect of daily life in Turkey.¹³ The films of the first period between the late 1960s and the early 1970s are mostly literary adaptations of Erich von Stroheim's novel *Paprika* (1935). Another important element regarding these films is the fact that they are the products of Yeşilçam, the prolific Turkish film industry, which is chiefly famous for its melodramas and for producing mainstream conventional narratives based on the star system. The 1960s in particular are regarded as the Golden Age of Yeşilçam in terms of popularity, proficiency, and box-office income.¹⁴ Pertinent films of this period are: *Çingene* (Gypsy) (Nuri Akıncı 1966); *Altın Küpeler* (Golden Earrings) (Orhan Aksoy 1966); *Çingene Güzeli* (Gypsy Beauty) (Oksal Pekmezoğlu, 1968); *Kadın Değil Başbelası* (Troublemaker, not a Woman) (Ülkü Erakalın 1968); *Paprika Çingene Aşkı* (Paprika, Love for Gypsy) (Mehmet Dinler 1969); *Karmen* (Carmen) (Semih Evin 1972), and *Paprika Gaddarın Aşkı* (Paprika, Love of the Cruel) (Ülkü Erakalın 1973).

All the films are traditional Yeşilçam melodramas with happy endings.¹⁵ Since the term “melodrama” literally means music and drama, music is frequently employed as a way of expression in these films. Corresponding with their subject matter, music is often accompanied by Romani dance/belly dance in the films. Characteristically, these narratives revolve around women and/or couples; depict a family or at least a family-like close-knit community; involve a love triangle; are mostly based on binary contradictions concerning moral values; protagonists are often victimized; and eventually conflicts are resolved to reach a happy end, especially crowned with the reunion of the couple even if it is not necessarily via marriage. To adopt Thomas Elsaesser's provoking conceptualization, melodrama is all “about the power of the victim, about the paradoxically active role of suffering” (2014: 32). Accordingly, the protagonists suffer in these films, both men and women. Intriguingly, women invite the suffering themselves as devastating femme-fatales who trick their desperate lovers. In the end, through suffering, men's

13. For a detailed discussion of the 1960 coup and its repercussions please refer to Savran 2016.

14. For detailed accounts of Yeşilçam, please see Şener 1970; Scognamillo 1998; Arslan 2005; Daldal 2005; Kirel 2005.

15. For various accounts of the concept of “melodrama” in general, please see Thomas Elsaesser's now classic text *Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama* (1985: 165–89); Nicholls 1985: 190–4; Brooks 1995; Gledhill 1992: 5–39, and Arslan 2005. For a detailed account of the melodrama in Turkish cinema, please refer to Akbulut 2011.

virtuousness and women's righteousness are approved, and thus, the couple deservedly reunites.

The representation of gender roles constitutes a striking aspect of the early films. The majority of these cinematic narratives portray a matriarchal community. Older women are represented as sorcerers or addressed as queens, indicating their powerful and respectful position within the community. Even though *çeribaşı* (the Roma chief) is almost always a man, the actual leader who makes the decisions is illustrated as a woman. Younger women are mostly portrayed as daring and seductive femme-fatales who do not refrain from expressing and satisfying their sexual desires. Promiscuity and extramarital relations are, therefore, common in the films. When compared to later examples, the depiction of gender roles in these early films can be regarded as rather progressive and emancipatory. Still, they are all mainstream narratives that enable and encourage visual pleasure by means of a fetishizing camera regime and the recurring *mise-en-scène* which portrays a beautiful and sexy "gypsy" woman dancing at the front whilst all-male "gypsy" musicians play in the background.

Another common feature among these films is the use of language. All the Roma characters speak pure Turkish, aka İstanbul Turkish, with no accent or dialect in the films, *Kadın Değil Başbelası* being an exception (still, only supporting characters speak slightly accented Turkish in the film, not the leads). This is simply because they were produced in the Yeşilçam era with its signature style whereby even the most ethnic characters were supposed to speak pure Turkish. Relatedly, although the films are laden with musical interludes, we do not hear any actual Roma music. Even when 9/8 beats, which are considered to be a characteristically Roma rhythmic pattern in Turkey, are heard, these are embedded in arabesque melodies, Turkish classical music, and pop music. This, at first sight, might be regarded as being in parallel with scholarly claims such as "Rom(a) music has no unique feature as it is basically an adaptation of the host culture's musical traditions and various musical forms" (Gazimihal 1998; Shapiro 2002). However, the fact that later films do include some popular Roma melodies and lyrics complicates the issue. The lack of Roma music in the films of the first period, therefore, can be interpreted as the influence of Yeşilçam, erasing ethnicity and all ethnic associations. This, together with the recruitment of Yeşilçam stars for leading roles such as Türkan Şoray, Ediz Hun, Ahmet Mekin, Mine Mutlu, Sevda Ferdağ, Kadir İnanır, and so on, eventually contributes to the films' approving tone of the Roma.

Yet, such approval is not unconditional for it comes at the expense of a realistic and multidimensional representation. Firstly, the Roma communities, nomadic or settled, in these films are portrayed as socio-cultural entities

predicated on pleasure and entertainment. Accordingly, no actual problems they experience on a regular basis such as poverty and unemployment are mentioned in the films. Similarly, the issue of class is only implied, not openly discussed, let alone profoundly elaborated upon. Even though the term “gypsy” is occasionally used as a derogatory term in some of the films, there is no allusion to cultural or social exclusion; in fact, the “gypsy” characters are likeable and accepted. Furthermore, the “others” of “gypsies,” the members of a typical Yeşilçam petit bourgeoisie in this case, are encouraged to integrate into the “gypsy” communities. These are mostly privileged white males who wish to “have” the “gypsy” female. Ultimately, “the gypsy,” almost always a female, in these films is constructed as the “exotic other,” that is unknown yet erotically recognizable, and thus, desirable, and needs to be explored, if not conquered. This lends itself well to the concept of “commodification of otherness”:

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (hooks 1992: 47)

Overall, it seems plausible to argue that these early examples of Roma films from the Yeşilçam era eventually construct a seemingly positive discourse of the Roma; however, they cannot help but reproduce certain binaries and stereotypes such as advanced–primitive, civilized–barbaric, and austere–hedonist, leading to consumable narratives by the mainstream Turkish society. These are certainly not auto-ethnographic texts since neither the screenwriters and directors nor the cast are Roma. They are the products of the “voyeuristic gaze” of white Turks who commodify this peculiar socio-cultural sub-group for narrative and visual pleasure.

The 1980s

The year 1980 marks a turning point in Turkish history for it is when the traumatic military coup took place. The coup and its repercussions (the following state of emergency, reign of a military government, the restrictive 1982 constitution, etc.) not only influenced social life in Turkey, but also had a big impact on the cultural domain too. Giovanni Scognamiglio and Zahit Atam discuss the economic and legislative aspects of the coup in terms of cinema in Turkey, addressing the issues such as the dramatic drop in the number of filmgoers as well as of movie theatres and the remarkable decrease in film production. Probably the biggest shift occurred in the ideological,

intellectual, and aesthetic levels (Scognamillo 1998; Atam 2011). In addition to the demise of Yeşilçam and the devastating effects of the porn film period (from the mid-1970s till the coup), the political climate in the aftermath of the coup left Turkish cinema in search of a new identity. With the worsened censorship practices, mainstream commercial cinema gravitated toward the so-called “safe” genres; arabesque and comedy. Accordingly, the films about the Roma from this period are either comedies or arabesque films: *Gırgiriye* (Kartal Tibet 1981), *Gırgiriye’de Şenlik Var* (Festival at Gırgiriye) (Kartal Tibet 1981), *Gırgiriye’de Cümbüş* (Revel at Gırgiriye) (Temel Gürsu 1983), *Gırgiriye’de Büyük Seçim* (Big Election at Gırgiriye) (Temel Gürsu 1984), *Bizimkiler – Of Of Emine* (Ours-ugh ugh Emine) (Savaş Eşici, Temel Gürsu 1984), *Çifte Nikah* (Double Wedding) (Zafer Par 1986), *Şen Sulukule* (Merry Sulukule) (Zafer Par 1987), and *Çingene* (Gypsy) (Zafer Par 1989).

Gırgiriye and its three sequels are probably the most popular and well-known films about Roma people in Turkish film history. Their significance in the knowledge production about the Turkish Roma lies in the fact that they have periodically been re-broadcast on television; not only by national channels but also through satellite and cable TV. As a result, the Roma image as constructed in the *Gırgiriye* series has served to establish the predominant imaginings in the Turkish public over generations.

All films are set in the famous Roma district of İstanbul; Sulukule.¹⁶ The titles alone elucidate the perspective of the narratives as well as their genre. The Roma in these films are portrayed as an apolitical, and thus a harmless, ethnic group, whose only concern seems to be to enjoy themselves with a happy-go-lucky attitude. These are the films that created the widely-circulating images of the Roma by the Turkish public as people “who stop everything and start dancing as soon as they hear a melody with a 9/8 beat.” Correspondingly, all the main characters in the films are in the music and entertainment business even though they have different day jobs as tinsmith, flower-seller, shoe-polisher, etc.

Differentiating from the examples in the first period, the Roma in the *Gırgiriye* series are completely settled, and they use a specific accent both in their speech and music, which can be addressed as a caricature of Roma’s way of speaking Turkish. Another interesting difference is in the representation of criminality. The issues with authority figures are caricatured, and thus, trivialized. The Roma characters in the *Gırgiriye* films

16. Sulukule, the historic location for the Roma communities in İstanbul, was subject to the first local government-led urban transformation and gentrification project in 2005, which resulted in the demolition of the entire neighbourhood and the displacement of the Roma community (for various academic accounts of the project and its repercussions, please refer to Kocabas and Gibson 2011; Somersan et al. 2011; Özcan 2015).

frequently wind up in a police station; nonetheless, the only reason for that is the bitter-sweet arguments between the two families unlike the stabbing and theft as seen in earlier examples. This can be interpreted as a positive intervention because it strives to change the common negative perception of Roma as petty criminals. However, they are still illustrated as “alcoholic” and “gambler.” The films appear to tackle another common perception concerning especially Roma women as being “unchaste.” Reinforced by the portrayals of the Roma during the sixties, promiscuity has been commonly associated with this specific ethnic group. The *Gırgıriye* series accentuates the decency and honour of Roma women in particular, whereas Roma men continue to be promiscuous in these narratives. This should also be viewed as a result of the shift in the social structure toward neo-conservatism during the 1980s as well as a reactionary response to the preceding porn film period.

All in all, the commodification of otherness persists. This fictional Roma community in Sulukule is portrayed through the lens of exotic romanticism.¹⁷ So much so that in *Gırgıriye*, the first film of the series, a Turkish National Radio and Television (TRT) correspondent describes this community as “an idiosyncratic people with peculiar attributes who live in a cute, adorable district.” This very scene is easy to overlook and yet so significant in the sense that it almost functions as a summary of the official discourse regarding Roma people in Turkey since the TRT in the Turkish context is considered to be one of the state’s mouthpieces. Suitably, any implication of discrimination against the Roma is erased from the narratives, and instead, community members are shown to insult each other through debating whether they are real Roma or ordinary “gypsies.” Likewise, unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy are not an issue at all.

Almost all the comedies in this period, including *Çifte Nikah* and *Şen Sulukule*, promote opportunism aligned with the zeitgeist of the time.¹⁸ In this respect, the Roma people in Turkey are not seen as disadvantaged or subjugated; instead, it is implied that as long as they can make the most of every situation, they can climb up the social strata like any other Turkish citizen. Accordingly, protagonists in these films become famous music stars over the course of the films.

17. For a detailed account of exoticism in Romanticism, please refer to Remak 1978; and for a discussion of exotic and romanticism in ethnographic texts, see Marvasti and Faircloth 2002.

18. “The 1980s in Turkish history is regarded as the Özal period due to his remarkable influence on various aspects of social and economic life. Özal single-handedly orchestrated Turkey’s transformation into a neo-liberal economy while at the same time paving the way for a neo-conservative society” (Tunç Cox 2019: 798). With his famous public declaration “my bureaucrats know how to make every situation beneficial,” he officially invited a Machiavellian mentality.

Çingene, as the only arabesque film in the corpus, constitutes the most intriguing example from this period since it appears to be the most political of them all. The popular culture of arabesque in the Turkish context began with music in the mid-1960s and soared in cinema in the 1980s. It is the artistic expression of suffering, poverty, and alienation. Even though it is heavily criticized in the scholarly domain, to a certain extent, it can also be addressed as a form of counter-culture developed by poor rural immigrants in the devouring metropolis; the culture of resistance against the cruelty of capitalist economy and elitist white Turks. It is the product of migration from rural to urban areas, industrialization and rapid, unplanned urbanization which led to slum-cities; it reflects the crisis of the “otherized” individual under the circumstances. Thus, it gives voice to the underdog of society.¹⁹ That is why *Çingene* is the first film that articulates some of the actual problems the Turkish Roma face with a critical tone; poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, prejudices, housing problems, and so on. However, it appears to be a missed opportunity since it fails to discuss these issues in detail. Furthermore, the populist approach epitomized via the embellishment of the film with arabesque music interludes and the discernible conservative attitude especially in terms of gender roles undermines the film’s critical and subversive capacity.

From the 1990s onward

As explained above, this period, especially from 2000 onward, is the time when Roma people have become more visible both in the public domain and in the media owing to the increased number of national and/or international projects aimed at fighting discrimination against the Roma. This is also the period which is often addressed as the age of New Turkish Cinema.²⁰ In a nutshell, it has been a prominent, dynamic, and heterogeneous film milieu, incorporating both commercial mainstream and independent art-house films. Accordingly, the films of this period should be located in this wide spectrum: *İmdat ile Zarife* (İmdat and Zarife) (Nesli Çölgeçen 1990), *Alev Gibi Bir Kız* (A Smoking-Hot Girl) (Hasan Kazankaya 1990), *Ağır Roman* (Cholera Street) (Mustafa Altıoklar 1996), *Organize İşler* (Magic Carpet Ride) (Yılmaz Erdoğan 2005), *Eyvah Eyvah* (Alas Alas) (Hakan Algül 2010), *Dansöz: Bir Çingene Masalı* (Belly Dancer: A Gypsy Tale) (Savaş Ay 2011), *Toprağın Çocukları* (Ali Adnan Özgür, 2012), *Niyazi Gül Dörtnala* (Hakan

19. For detailed explanations of the arabesque film period in Turkish cinema, please refer to Güçhan 1992; Özgüç 2005; Esen 2000; Yıldız 2008.

20. For a detailed analysis of the early new cinema in Turkey, please refer to Tunç 2005. For various accounts of the later period, see Suner 2010; Arslan 2011; Daldal 2014; Güngör 2014; Çiçek 2014; Akser and Bayrakdar 2014.

Algül, 2015) and *Limonata* (Lemonade) (Ali Atay 2015). Alongside these, we include four popular TV shows, *Cennet Mahallesi*, *Görgüsüzler*, *Roman Havası*, and *Gönülçelen* in the corpus.

Among the films, only *İmdat ile Zarife*, *Alev Gibi Bir Kız*, another *Paprika* adaptation, and *Dansöz: Bir Çingene Masalı* focus on Roma characters or Roma communities. The rest of the films locate them at peripheral positions, depicting them as part of a rich sub-culture and simply instrumentalizing them for plot development. The Roma in the latter are mostly portrayed within an accustomed repertoire of bigotries and stereotypes.

Of the three with Roma characters in central positions, *İmdat ile Zarife* stands out since it manifestly criticizes the commodification of otherness whilst the other two serve to reinforce it. *Alev Gibi Bir Kız* and *Dansöz* reproduce common imagery by particularly fetishizing the bodies of “gypsy” women. These films, therefore, can be interpreted as the products of the mass culture hooks describes as “the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference” (hooks 1992: 366); and also of ethnic and cultural difference as exemplified in these films. In contrast, *İmdat ile Zarife* presents a bear, which has heretofore been only a comedic element in pertinent films, as the main issue in the narrative. The bear and the protagonist in the film are represented in a metonymic relation. “The gypsy” in the film, and his way of life, is conventionally depicted as a resource for pleasure. The bear and “the gypsy” are the objects of the penetrating gaze in the film, both of the privileged mainstream society and of the audience of the film. They are there to be consumed, to be exploited for visual pleasure. And they obediently perform what is expected of them. The film, through its docu-realistic style, presents a critique of said unequal relationship.

A few of the latter films are worth mentioning for their differing attitude. The only Roma seen in *Ağır Roman*, apart from the well-known Roma musician, Balık Ayhan, are thieves. Yet, owing to its unprecedented use of the Roma music almost as a character and a complementary element in the narrative, it differentiates from the others. Through the use of music, *Ağır Roman* indicates the presumed assisting role the Roma play as entertainers in mainstream Turkish society. *Toprağın Çocukları* opens with a mob attack targeting a nomadic Roma community, which can even be described as small-scale genocide since all the community members are killed. Throughout the film, mainstream society’s attitude towards the Roma is criticized as bigoted and ill-conceived. Yet, this strong theme becomes a sub-story within the course of the film, instrumentalized to reinforce the cause of *Köy Enstitüleri* (Village Institutes), which is the chief focus

of the film.²¹ In *Limonata*, which is a road movie revolving around a man trying to find his long-lost brother, the Roma appear in one scene alone and are represented as “difference” based on their geographical location. Their identity is only presumed due to the use of music as a cultural signifier. The Roma in the film are not laden with negative connotations. Nor is there an attempt for their glorification.

When it comes to the representation of the Turkish Roma people on TV, a populist tone prevails. *Cennet Mahallesi*, as the first of its kind, employs old and new star figures from the fields of theatre, cinema, TV, and even the fashion business to achieve nationwide popularity. Beginning with the first episode, a formulaic narrative is formed based on common stereotypes, reproducing the image of the “gypsy” as “happy-go-lucky,” “devious,” “opportunist,” “petty criminal,” and “untrustworthy.” Maintaining its antecedent *Gırgiriye*’s storyline, the plot is developed over the frequent fights of the two rival families, predicating its comedy mainly on slapstick acts. Music, Roma melodies, and belly dance expectedly occupy significant screen time in every episode, enhancing the opportunities for visual pleasure.

As they are essentially remakes of *Cennet Mahallesi*, *Görgüsüzler*, and *Roman Havası* have similar qualities. Both shows have credit titles accompanied by images of musicians and dancers foregrounding the Roma primarily and essentially as an ethnic group associated with the entertainment business. Such production of meaning through weekly repeated images alone contributes to the dominant imagery about the Roma in Turkey. As Gonca Girgin rightfully points out, such imagery serves to the commodification of their cultural particularity in the form of music (2018: 352). This corresponds to how Hall explains the working of representation. He depicts two systems of representation; the system of signs and the system of concepts, which together create the meaning process in culture. “The relation between ‘things’, concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language” (Hall 1997: 19). *Görgüsüzler* reproduces the common conceptual repertoire regarding the Roma in the Turkish collective psyche as “the exotic other” that simultaneously invites curiosity through their colourful lifestyle and poses a threat due to their unreliability. Differing stylistically from its antecedents, *Roman Havası* occasionally deploys Brechtian alienation effects such as directly addressing the audience, which in this case does not seem to work against emotional manipulation or to reveal the crooked social

21. *Köy Enstitüleri* in the Turkish context was a revolutionary formation striving to increase literacy rates especially in rural Turkey as well as agricultural and industrial efficiency. They were started in the 1940s with the support of the Ministry of Education at the time, and were closed in 1954 by the Democrat Party because of their ideological orientation toward socialism, which was deemed threatening.

power relations. The show only creates disappointment since it was sued by the Ankara Roma Rights Association due to its contribution to the negative perception of the Roma as “immoral,” “criminal,” “devious,” “scurrilous,” and “opportunist.”

Among the four TV shows *Gönülçelen* appears to be more audacious in terms of manifestly depicting the class distinction by emphasizing the different urban spaces the Roma and the *gaco* occupy in the narrative. The cinematic space they inhabit is the metropolitan city İstanbul, and yet it is an ethnically and economically segregated city. This depiction is what led to the celebratory readings of the TV show compared to many popular mediated narratives about the Roma (Bayraktar 2013). Nevertheless, as Özlem Bayraktar herself ultimately argues, the show fails to provide a satisfactory political critique, because *Gönülçelen* eventually becomes a story of a bourgeois *gaco* seeking pleasure in transforming “the untamed/uncivilised other” into a “docile/acceptable other.” As hooks points out, “marginalised groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation” (hooks 1992: 51). Accordingly, the protagonist Hasret (Tuba Büyüküstün) as “the exotic fierce gypsy” willingly agrees to become a sophisticated lady owing to the efforts of Murat (Cansel Elçin) at the expense of a narrative that progressively drifts away from its Roma locus.

Conclusion

As our analysis reveals, Roma people’s portrayal in mainstream Turkish cinema and TV since the 1960s has indisputably produced prevailing stereotypes and a popular imaginary that has engraved itself in the Turkish viewers’ imagination. Yet the specifics of this stereotypical construction seem to change from one period to another. To sum up, we observe three major trajectories in the representation of the Roma in these audiovisual narratives: 1) A shift from mystified to familiar; 2) a shift from liberal to conservative; and 3) a shift from primitive nomadic to urban settler.

A twofold strategy is discernible in the early examples; Roma people are simultaneously de-ethnicized and mystified. They are mostly portrayed as a nomadic community with certain cultural particularities and yet they are often stripped of their ethnic signifiers such as the Roma language and dialect. Such depictions underscore their status as an exotic cultural group which is both unknown and familiar. This mystification and the concomitant exotic romanticism allow room for liberal gender constructions in these cinematic narratives.

Contrary to the early examples, the films from the 1980s underline ethnic nuances whilst demystifying the Roma as a more familiar sub-cultural entity. They are ethnically defined through their peculiar music and language, indicating their continual otherness which fundamentally serves to entertain the mainstream society. Yet, they also seem to be more visible in the Turkish social fabric, and thus, more accustomed, as settled communities, even if in their ghettoized neighbourhoods. Besides, we detect an unmistakable deterioration towards conservatism especially in terms of the representation of gender roles.

From the 1990s onward, Roma people appear to be treated as part of the rich and colourful social and cultural mosaic in big cities. Rapid urbanization, industrialization and migration from rural areas to cities render various ethnic/cultural subgroups essentially urban. This is reflected in the films. The neglected status of the Roma remains though as they are both visible and invisible in the narratives. They are visible as “exotic others” to be tamed and exploited by *gacı* for visual pleasure, and yet, they are invisible when it comes to a profound comprehension of the community that would address their actual problems such as housing, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and discrimination.

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