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Labor Pains:

The Affective Lives and Times of the Roma in (Post-)Yugoslav Film

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"I have been unfortunate since birth
I sing songs because of my sorrow
I wish, my dear mother
That all this was just a dream."
—The Roma singers in *Who's Singing Over There?*

Every time the two Roma travelers step from the background into the foreground of Slobodan Šijan's legendary Yugoslav comedy *Ko to tamo peva* (Who's Singing Over There?, 1980) in order to perform a song that breaks the fourth wall, they offer the viewer a respite from the film's torturous-yet-humorous road trip and a running commentary on the events at hand. Their song opens and closes the film, and they act as the de facto masters of the ceremony of the film itself.[1] Moreover, once the bus trip reaches its tragic destination and literal end (the bus arrives in Belgrade just as the obliterating German air assault on the city commences in 1941), the Roma musicians/raconteurs appear to miraculously be the only survivors. They yet again sing directly to the camera and offer concluding remarks on the story that has transpired while also eerily foreshadowing the suffering yet to come in the war that has just started. Throughout the film, their accordion-accompanied song—with a mixture of repeating and newly introduced lyrics—is prophetic, analytic, humorous, cynical, soulful, and absurd at once.

In the Yugoslav (and post-Yugoslav) dominant cultural imagination, the figure of the "Gypsy," or *Cigan* in the local language (as members of the Roma population

1 Vladislav Mijić (2003) has referred to them as witnesses and commentators.

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are still predominantly referred to in the region), has occupied a complex, multifold, and fluid position marked by representations that perpetually highlight seemingly contradictory forms of affect. On the one hand, the Roma are treated as a decidedly racialized ethnic group that is looked down upon and disproportionately discriminated against, a distinctly undesirable social presence. On the other hand, the Roma continue to be a mainstay of Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav popular culture, in music and film in particular, with iconic musicians such as Esma Redžepova or Šaban Bajramović and classic films such as Aleksandar Petrović's *Skupljači perja* (I Even Met Happy Gypsies, 1967) and Emir Kusturica's oeuvre.[2] It should be noted, too, that the Roma gained significant ground in emancipation during socialist Yugoslavia, mainly due to the systemic efforts to integrate them into the state's schooling and literacy programs. However, these gains did not entirely erase the prejudices held by the dominant groups, which arguably became even more pronounced after the end of socialism and the ensuing precarity of the post-socialist neoliberal transition. The Roma continue to be systematically socially discriminated against, often treated as the "untouchables" and as individuals and communities who are outside society's normative conceptions of temporality and spatiality. At the same time, they have traditionally been fetishized and exoticized in the cultural sphere and celebrated as carriers of a seemingly greater affective authenticity, soulfulness, pathos, and even supernatural transcendence. For instance, consider the above-mentioned miraculous survival of the Roma singers at the end of *Who's Singing Over There?* or Emir Kusturica's work, which I discuss in a later section of this chapter, and which perpetuates the trope of said supernatural transcendence by embracing the cinematic style and aesthetics of magical realism.

This essay explores how this simultaneous, contradictory, yet not mutually-exclusive existence of abjection and worship informs several prominent cinematic depictions of the Roma experience by prominent non-Roma, male Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav film directors and how these depictions also testify

2 Nevena Daković has suggested that the films about Roma, frequent and prominent in Yugoslav cultural production, could well constitute a genre onto itself, with Petrović's 1967 film being a key "ancestor" for the films that come after it (2003).

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to the changing lives and times of the region more broadly. In later parts, I focus on the Roma woman in particular, in the films such as Emir Kusturica's much-lauded *Dom za vešanje* (Time of the Gypsies, 1988) and more recently, Danis Tanović's internationally renowned docudrama, *Epizoda u životu berača željeza* (An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker, 2013). How do these male directors cast a privileged gaze onto the precarity of the Romani woman and suggest that the affective investment in her life is liquid, fleeting, if not altogether contingent upon her standing in for something other than herself? Thus her story is emptied of its specificity in order to become a metaphor for the late Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav collectivity, respectively. What is being eschewed is a specificity that is decidedly intersectional, because a Roma woman's lived experience of precarity is racialized, gendered, and classed in equal measure. Through the obfuscation of these intersecting causes of her oppression, the Roma woman becomes a conduit of affective transference—a stand-in for the broader populace and its discontents. As a result, the possibility of a Roma woman's agency as a social actor is eschewed altogether.

Nearly all the key elements of these broader and (only seemingly) contradictory tendencies in the treatment and representation of the Roma in Yugoslav popular cultural discourses are evident in *Who's Singing Over There?* (whose screenplay was written by the renowned playwright Dušan Kovačević). The comedy's inevitably humorous road trip is at the same time eerily volatile, its affective atmosphere liquid, always on the verge of spilling into chaos and violence. At the start of the bus ride, one passenger protests with indignation: "We are *actually* going to ride with Gypsies?" to which the conductor answers: "Anyone who pays for a ticket rides." Most of the bus passengers behave as if their (nameless) Romani co-travelers—a young man and a boy, perhaps brothers—do not exist, and in the film's final act, they are falsely accused of theft and violently assaulted (prompting the film's only female character to yell out "Stop hitting a child!"). That brutal assault is interrupted only by the air raid sirens and the subsequent bombing that historically marks the beginning of World War II in Yugoslavia.

Perhaps this was the film's inadvertent gesture, but it is worth remembering that the Roma were one of the groups systematically targeted during the Fascist

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genocidal terror of the ensuing war. In an ironic twist, the Nazi German bombs that kill everyone else miraculously spare the two Roma characters from the assault by other passengers, and to double the irony, they become the only survivors of the bombing itself. While snubbed or abused by most other passengers and sidelined mainly by the film's central narrative arc, the Roma singers also appear to be of pivotal importance as the film's framing narrators—or commentators—and, ultimately, its only survivors. It is of significant note here that they express themselves predominantly and most meaningfully through song. This trope frequently appears in the cultural discourses about the Roma in Yugoslav culture: their "musicality" is overdetermined, naturalized as inherent, and fetishized as something borderline supernatural in its soulfulness and affective impact (see Silverman 2011a). Moreover, the Romani supernatural transcendence is signaled in the film by their very survival in the bombing that kills all other bus passengers. The Roma, marked as carriers of affective profundity, are a contradictory, fluid, and also apparently indestructible presence. I describe them as having a fluid presence because they appear *simultaneously subhuman and superhuman*, and this is precisely the crux of their liquid affective appeal in Yugoslav popular culture.

I use the term "liquid" here to designate an affective process in constant flux and to avoid fixed categorizations to which the discussions of affect more generally need to be resistant. Affect is experienced as a perpetual movement rather than a stationary positioning, a verb rather than a noun, and subsequently must be theorized with fluidity rather than fixity. This is one reason why affect theorists such as Sara Ahmed prefer "affective economies" to demarcate the transactional, relational processes and exchanges that produce affective responses and acknowledge their political, social, and cultural implications (2004). Through affective economies, claims Ahmed, "emotions *do things*, and they align the individual with communities—or bodily space with social space" (2004, 119, emphasis in the text). She continues: "Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (2004, 119). In *Who's Singing Over There?*, the affective economy at play often renders the Roma deliberately "unseen" by their fellow passengers. However,

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while unseen, they are most definitely heard, and in that aural encounter, contradictory forms of affective economies emerge—disgust and enjoyment form a curious combination. This dynamic illustrates a clear demarcation between the refusal to acknowledge a subaltern group's physical presence while simultaneously making affective use of their artistry and cultural production. While affect always circulates within specific histories and regimes of knowledge/power, it defies fixity and finite categorizations. What is clear is that affect is not about fixities but about *becomings* and *unbecomings*, assemblages and processes which are in perpetual—alternatively predictable and unpredictable—flux.

At the end of *Who's Singing Over There?*, the Roma characters perform their song straight to the camera, breaking the fourth wall one last time. The refrain of their song, which is quoted at the beginning of this essay (and is also the only part of the song that stays the same throughout), now becomes emptied of its direct link to Romani precarity. It is instead co-opted into an expression of collective national sorrow and suffering of the people under the imminent Fascist invasion. In a nutshell, this is the process (or the cycle) seen time and again in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav film, whereby the affective expressions specific to Roma life and experience (most often conveyed through music) become co-opted by the dominant culture and turned into an experience of affective *jouissance* or catharsis of and for the dominant group, one which simultaneously systematically continues to otherwise discriminate against the Roma population. Nevertheless, I do not see this process as a discursively convenient channel for the general population to "embrace unreason," as van de Port (1998) stipulates in his frequently cited work on the region's dominant population's appropriation of the "Gypsies" and "unreason" during wars. To do so would be to assume/conceptualize an overly generalized, simplified Yugoslav collectivity that is acting "unreasonably" in unison, which could, in turn, become a way to discard the complex political histories of the region and replace them with a Balkanizing framework that relinquishes individual accountability and the surrounding geopolitical context grounded in lived experiences.

Moreover, in van de Port's study of the role of the Roma in the cultural and political discourses around the Yugoslav wars, the Roma are positioned as a

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homogenous group in their own right (1998). Needless to say, they are far from that, as any collectivity is. What if we introduce sexual difference, gender, and class into the mix, as I propose to do here? While the two Roma musicians in *Who's Singing Over There?* are male, significant portions of this essay are particularly interested in the cinematic representations of the Roma woman because she embodies an even more complicated circulation of affect and an intersectional form of precarity—both as a Roma person and as a woman. What additional affective layers and political, discursive implications circulate around and through the cinematic representations of the Roma woman in particular?

Regarding "Happy Gypsies:" Romani Woman's Double Erasure

One of the most influential filmmakers of the New Yugoslav Film (a movement often also referred to as *the Black Wave*), Aleksandar Petrović, wrote and directed one of his most lauded films, *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*, in 1967. He centered it around a Roma community in Vojvodina, an ethnically diverse region of Serbia. While the film's key protagonists/antagonists are men, female Roma characters are carriers of significant affective catharsis. Tisa (played by Gordana Jovanović in her screen debut) and Lenče (Olivera Katarina, credited here as Olivera Vučo) may at first appear to be the opposites of one another—the former is a virginal, inexperienced young woman, the latter an experienced performer.[3] Yet the film brings their stories together with an arc of

3 It should be noted that, in Yugoslav film, Roma characters are often played by non-Roma actors. In *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*, they include famed actors Bekim Fehmiu and Velimir Bata Živojinović playing Roma men and the film's central rivals. The film also switches back and forth between Serbo-Croatian and Romani languages. Emir Kusturica's typical approach has been to have Roma non-professional actors play supporting roles, while non-Roma actors play the lead Roma characters. In *Who's Singing Out There?*, the Roma characters are played by Romani performers who are non-professional actors.

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female solidarity in the face of precarity. The *kafana*,[4] which denotes the film's affectively central mise-en-scène, is traditionally coded as a site of significant social, cultural, political, and affective economies in the regional culture (van de Port 1998). Moreover, the female *kafana* singer is simultaneously marked as a carrier of low cultural capital and affective excesses—emotional, bodily, sexual—that sometimes precipitously border on violence and/or self-destruction.[5] In fact, the female *kafana* singer is perpetually tasked with performing affective labor that is often not even recognized as such due to the complicated gendered dynamics of what is considered labor to begin with (Hofman 2015). The first thing Lenče does when she appears on screen is down a drink and slam the empty glass on the table, shattering it into pieces. *Merak*, a word borrowed from Turkish into Serbo-Croatian,[6] designates enjoyment, pleasure, or food for the soul and is perhaps close to the French term *jouissance* because it also implies a level of affective excess that eludes finite definitions. *Meraklije* (persons who indulge in such pleasures) are evoked in Olivera Katarina's very first song, a version of the *kafana* classic "Niška banja," in which the lyrics are changed from "We, Nišlije (residents of the city of Niš)" to "We Gypsies, *meraklije*, can't live without *rakija* (fruit brandy)."[7] While the "we" in her lyrics is here specifically identified as the Roma population, this song and its exuberant affect have been endlessly re-appropriated by the dominant, non-Roma collectivity, especially in the *kafana* setting (the song is traditionally performed partially in Roma, partially in Serbo-Croatian).

As is the case in most scenes in the film, especially those filmed in interior spaces, and owing to Aleksandar Petrović's embrace of the *new wave* film aesthetics that defy the norms of classical film language, Olivera Katarina's opening song number is filmed entirely in a series of close-ups—of the singer and her

4 Serbian tavern. About this term, see the Introduction to this book.

5 For more on the figure of the female *kafana* singer, see Petrović and Hofman (2017).

6 In Turkish *merak* means interest or curiosity in terms of an intrinstic wish to explore, understand or comprehend the essence of something.

7 For the video of performance, see Aristandar (2010).

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meraklije male audience. This stylistic approach emphasizes not only an air of affective intensity but also of volatile tension and—as the film progresses—uneasy claustrophobia. There are no establishing shots of the *kafana* interior since it is cinematically coded as a space of intensely public-yet-intimate, liquid, and ever-increasing affective intensity. The film abruptly cuts from a close-up of a saint painted on a church wall in the previous scene to a close-up of the male protagonist who is now in the tavern—that abrupt switch is very telling, as it calls attention to the extreme juxtaposition of the two spaces (the church and the tavern) and the men presiding over each of them (the white Christian saint and the Roma petty criminal, respectively).

In another *kafana* scene, Lenče sings, in Romani, the song that contains the lyrics "I am a small, dark, black Gypsy girl of yours" while her audience exuberantly smashes glasses. Another iconic Romani song, "Đelem, đelem," may well be the film's affective epicenter. The song is a mournful response to the Nazi genocide against the Roma, who were systemically persecuted and killed in Fascist concentration camps in World War II in staggering numbers. It was initially composed by a Serbian Romani musician Žarko Jovanović, who wrote the song after surviving the concentration camps and having had most of his family in the Nazi genocide against the Roma people. The song's lyrics include lines that state, "I once had a great family/The Black Legion murdered them." It is a song about mourning and resilience: "For the Roma/Roads have opened/Now is the time/Rise up Roma now/We will rise high if we act" (Jovanović himself joined the Yugoslav partisans' anti-fascist fight after surviving the camps). The English language title of the film comes from a line in the song that states, "I *even* met happy Gypsies" while the original Serbo-Croatian title of the film *Skupljači perja* roughly translates to "The Feather Collectors." In this line from the song, which made it into the film's official English language title, the *possibility* of meeting *even happy* Gypsies is emphasized—signaling that this may be a rare occurrence to behold but not an implausible one. In her work in *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed describes happiness as an encounter, as "a happening, as involving affect (to be happy is to be affected by something)" (2010, 21). Furthermore, she explores how "happiness functions as a promise

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that directs us towards certain objects, which then circulate as social goods" (Ahmed 2010, 21). While elsewhere often depicted as *meraklije*, as excessively joyful, the Roma are here positioned as being rarely provided an encounter with something or someone that would produce a feeling of happiness. It speaks to the general tendency of perceiving Roma as conduits of extreme affective states: sheer *merak/jouissance* on the one hand, and sheer despair on the other. Rather than a contradiction, this appears to be the essence of how the notions about the Roma affectively circulate in the dominant culture.

The trope of the Roma's excessive joyfulness circulates in the dominant popular culture as a social good that brings about happiness for those who encounter the Roma through film and other forms of cultural expression, such as music. The Roma circulate as "happy objects" in mainstream cultural representation (film, music), as sources of a pleasurable affective encounter *for* the dominant culture. At the same time, their own suffering becomes co-opted as a stand-in, a conduit for the existential sorrows of the broader population. What is erased in the process is the fact that, in the materialist realities of their historicized experience, the Roma continue to be ostracized as undesirable social elements that are systemically discriminated against, which the Nazi genocide against them, about which the song "Đelem, đelem" is about, makes evident in the most harrowing way. We could view this erasure as a curious form of *dis*identification, where, as van de Port suggested with regards to the Serbs in particular, "Gypsies are strange and recognizable at the same time, [...] they are just like Serbs *and* not at all like Serbs" (1998, 171). Contradiction is at the very heart of the affective economies that circulate around the Roma and their role in popular culture.

In the same *kafana* scene in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*, Bora first asks the young Tisa to sing, and she replies that she "doesn't know how." He rejects this as utterly implausible—the implication being that a Roma who does not know how to sing is an impossibility—pours her a glass of wine, and after she takes a sip, she indeed starts to give a moving a cappella rendition of the song. This brief exchange reinforces the exoticized notion that transcendent musicality is somehow inherent to a Roma person, particularly a Roma woman, whether

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she knows it or not.[8] Tisa is abruptly interrupted by her stepfather Mirta, who orders her to go home, signaling that she is defiling herself by not only being in a *kafana* but also singing in it. His response again reinforces the low cultural capital—even shame—of being identified as a female *kafana* singer. Shortly after that, the song is picked up by the actual *kafana* singer, Lenče, and this scene perhaps most clearly highlights the affective excess of *merak* in the film. Bora reacts to the song by smashing his hands on the glass he had just broken and proceeding to laugh as his palms bleed. The woman is there for the men's visual and aural pleasure; she sings here *to and of their affect, not her own*. She is a pleasurable, even existentially needed presence, an encounter with whom evokes *merak* in the male *kafana* attendees.

In the film, violence against women is a regular, borderline routine spectacle. The film does not overtly cast a judgmental gaze against such violence as much as it treats it as an almost naturalized part of the Roma community's daily routine. The film's cold observational approach contributes to a problematic essentializing of a socially marginalized group frequently depicted as inferior by the dominant culture, apparently incapable of not descending into violent outbursts. The film does not explore the social, economic, and other sources of violent and antisocial behavior; one simply *is* violent rather than *becomes* violent. The film's spectators may understand the underlying causes of the violence through the contextual, extra-cinematic knowledge they bring to the film. However, the film does not appear interested in exploring the socioeconomic and ideological conditions that may trigger violence and other forms of antisocial and self-destructive behavior in groups subject to systemic discrimination. Nevertheless, violence towards women is omnipresent in the film, treated as if occurring in a vacuum, outside a specific time and place. It is timeless, and it is everywhere. After Bora's wife yells at him for losing their money on gambling, he takes a small child out of her arms and brutally assaults her (while

8 For more on the politics around the appropriations of traditional Romani music, see Silverman (2011b).

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the children cry and yell out "mama"). In fact, he is seen assaulting his wife often. Tisa's own stepfather attempts to rape her, after which she flees to another woman, Lenče, for help. Lenče suggests that Tisa go to Belgrade and stay with Lenče's son, which she eventually does. Subsequently, Lenče is violently assaulted by Bora, too, when she refuses to disclose Tisa's whereabouts.

In Belgrade, Tisa discovers that, to make ends meet, she has two options: to sing or to work as a garbage collector. These two options yet again highlight the two ends of the spectrum a Roma person occupies as a member of a marginalized, racialized, and socially ostracized group: be a source of a *jouissance*/*merak* and a conduit of an affective catharsis for her audience on the one end (either as a *kafana* or as a street singer), or a performer of one of the socially most undesirable jobs at the bottom of the labor hierarchies (garbage collector) on the other. Disillusioned with the big city, Tisa hitches a ride back to her hometown and is subjected to sexual assault by a white truck driver. When she fights back, he brutally beats her. After his fellow traveler meekly objects to him assaulting the girl, the driver angrily retorts: "She is not a girl. She is an *animal*." To the white man, the Roma girl is nonhuman, and her being branded an animal is steeped in the anthropocentric view of animals as lesser beings than humans—a point that is further driven home when he stuffs Tisa in the back of the refrigerator truck together with the meat that he is transporting.

In her analysis of the film, Radmila Mladenova (2016) has written how the imaginary, mythical "Gypsy" becomes rendered as an authentic, ethnographic object. One can add that the film's omnipresent, brutal acts of violence enacted against the female characters by family, friends, and strangers alike problematically suggest the authenticity of representation, too, as women are cast as almost-naturalized targets towards which the male affective rage is most frequently directed. Violence appears inevitable and inescapable, as the Roma woman is in a doubly-precarious position: as a woman, and a member of the Roma population. This positioning happens precisely through the film's gritty, almost neorealist style and form, which in turn works to disguise the workings of the ideology of white privilege and the problematic casting of the white gaze onto the imaginary subjects presented as real. Furthermore, when it comes to

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the Romani woman, the workings of the patriarchal ideology become an additional factor disguised through the seemingly objective, realistic directorial gaze. In the process, the patriarchy and its violence against the Romani woman become naturalized, too; the specificity of her experience emptied of socioeconomic and historical context. With these erasures, she becomes reduced to a source of liquid, excessive affect (usually of *merak*, as well as sexual pleasure, but also violent sadism) for the Roma men in her life and, in the Yugoslav context, the predominantly white audiences of the movies in which she appears.

The Time of Their Lives: The Roma's Cycle of Inevitability in Late Yugoslav Film

Emir Kusturica's *Time of the Gypsies* is positioned within a similar social milieu as *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*, a semi-urban area populated by the Roma, with geese and mud prominently featured. However, Kusturica's film's cultural and political context is starkly different from its predecessor's. This film—released two crucial decades after the peak of the New Yugoslav Film in the 1960s and early 1970s—was released during a fever pitch of rising ethno-nationalist fervor, in a time precariously close to the country's violent end (interestingly, for both these films, the English language titles contains the word "Gypsies" where the original Serbo-Croatian titles do not). *Time of the Gypsies* contains dialogue that is almost entirely in the Roma language, as opposed to the frequent code-switching seen in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*. While Kusturica's film can be seen as a logical follow-up to Petrović's film and its themes, it is also quite telling that in Kusturica's version, the Roma are even more isolated from the dominant society, appearing to comprise an enclosed universe unto their own. Where Petrović's film saw the Roma community exist on the sidelines, as well as interact and trade with their non-Roma counterparts, *Time of the Gypsies* depicts an almost hermeneutically sealed-off chronotope of Roma existence in late Yugoslavia that appears entirely isolated from the rest of the country or socio-historical, geopolitical situatedness. The titular "time" of the "Gypsies"

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is, in fact, an existence outside a concrete time and place alike. At this point in his career, Kusturica was both a Palme d'Or winner with *Otac na službenom putu* (When Father Was Away on Business, 1985) and a Silver Lion winner for first work with *Sjećaš li se Dolly Bell?* (Do You Remember Dolly Bell?, 1981). The director was by now an established voice of world cinema and what could be described as "a Balkan auteur." It became clear that with each new film, he was increasingly addressing an audience well beyond Yugoslavia and the Balkans, and, through his growing auteur status, he started to be perceived as *speaking for* Yugoslavia and/or the Balkans to the audiences outside of the region. His decision, then, to create a hermeneutically sealed *timeless* time of the Gypsies suggested an impulse to equate the enclosed, circular logic of the Roma experience depicted in the film with the very essence of what it means to be from the Balkans, or more accurately, from late socialist Yugoslavia. Since Kusturica became an internationally renowned filmmaker—his second Cannes Film Festival Palme d'Or was awarded for *Underground* (1995), while at the same festival, he won an award for Best Director for *Time of the Gypsies*—his frequent focus on the stereotypical, "magical" Roma who embodies affective excesses is received as a stand-in for the entirety of the Balkans for the filmmaker's widespread international audiences.

The Roma lives and times are depicted in *Time of the Gypsies* as a chaotic landscape of perpetually heightened, liquid affective states: from tears and laughter, music and dance, to anger, violence, and aggression, all often mixed beyond recognition. The screen is populated by excesses—affective and aesthetic—in almost every frame. Kusturica stylistically and formally eschews total immersion in gritty neorealism and permeates the film with magical realism instead. The protagonist of the film, a young man called Perhan, further solidifies the dominant cultural exoticization of the Roma quite overtly in that he appears gifted with supernatural, telekinetic powers—he can move physical objects with his mind, as well as communicate with his beloved pet turkey. He is also musically gifted, reiterating the previously mentioned stereotypical trope about the Roma as simultaneous carriers of the lowest cultural capital and supernatural, otherworldly gifts. Perhan frequently cheers up his

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grandmother and ailing younger sister with his accordion. And even though Perhan is the protagonist, women are central to his life and, therefore, to the plot: his grandmother and caretaker, Khatidza is an essential force in his life and the person he inherited his supernatural gifts from (she is a healer); his deep sense of responsibility to protect his little sister, Daca, drives his character arc; his love for a young woman called Azra brings the film to its dramatic climax. There is also the crucial absence of a woman—Perhan's mother—who died shortly after giving birth to Daca. Her passing leaves an unsurmountable void at the center of the family, as Perhan's father was never a part of his life and is identified by the grandmother as "a Slovenian," someone who was not a part of the community and is, by implication, not a Roma person. When Daca leaves, accompanied by Perhan, to travel to a hospital in Ljubljana, during the trip, their mother appears to Daca as a vision in a white wedding gown, hovering above the car that is transporting the siblings. "Is she beautiful?" asks Perhan, to which Daca nods.

Perhan's telekinetic powers dovetail with the film's broader utilization of magical realism, a cinematic style that Kusturica treats as a self-evident match for representing the community that is discursively typified as always already somewhat "magical" and "mystical." In a famed dream sequence, Perhan levitates above a scene of ritualistic celebration of the rites of spring while the traditional Roma folk song "Ederlezi" plays in the background.[9] In the dream sequence, Perhan descends to the water and encounters Azra, naked from the waist up, as the camera and Perhan's gaze linger on her. For him, Azra's beauty is dreamlike transcendental, a pure object of visual pleasure, and the film itself embraces that objectifying position. Violence is always just under the surface, yet again particularly enacted upon female bodies. When Perhan and Daca get

9 The film's soundtrack was handled by Goran Bregović, a globally popular musician known for frequently "poaching" original Romani songs and reinterpreting them, often without proper credit. For more on the ethics and politics of Bregović's musical appropriations, see Aleksandra Marković's doctoral dissertation *Sounding Stereotypes* (2013), as well as her essay "Sampling Artists: Gypsy Images in Goran Bregović's Music" (2009).

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forcibly separated, and he ends up in Italy working for Ahmed, who runs a network of baby trafficking, pickpockets, and children made to work as street beggars, Perhan witnesses a gang rape of a young woman who is likely going to be forced into prostitution. Hardened by the difficult experiences, he eventually becomes the ringleader of the operation, and when he returns home with the money he made, determined to marry Azra, he discovers that she is in the advanced stages of pregnancy. The discovery sends Perhan into a tailspin of self-destruction which is yet again placed within the mythical space of *kafana* as a site of affective excess. Perhan is seen breaking objects and wildly dancing in a state of severe intoxication. *Merak*, as a fluid, liquid affective state, becomes a mixture of excessive pleasure and pain, *pleasure in pain*, just as for Bora in *I Even Met Happy Gypsies*.

In the same way that Azra is an object of pleasurable *jouissance* at first, she subsequently becomes a source of abjection for Perhan, who is convinced that the child she is carrying is not his own, despite her claims to the contrary. Thus she completes the well-established cycle from Madonna to whore, first adored and then inevitably reviled. Upon marrying her, Perhan declares his intent to sell the baby once it is born so that they can "subsequently have our own," much to Azra's horror and protestation. When Azra goes into labor, still wearing her white wedding gown, her appearance visually echoes that earlier apparition of Perhan's dead mother, creating an overt visual link between the two women. That connection is sealed when Azra, after going through labor next to a passing train and being magically lifted off the ground (while the film's central musical leitmotif, "Ederlezi," dramatically returns), dies after giving birth to a boy—just like Perhan's mother died after giving birth to Daca. Azra's veil flies away into the night, just like Perhan's mother's veil. Childbirth is positioned as a site of miraculous wonder and a source of a Romani woman's untimely demise. The cycle is completed and closed—both Perhan's mother and the mother of his child die the same way; his newborn son will now face the same motherless life as Perhan faced. For the birthing women, the cycle entails the inevitable interlocking of life and death, with her death taking place almost simultaneously as she *gives* life—an annihilation between a firm boundary between

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the life/death polarities, since for the Roma woman, they appear as one and the same. They become liquid affective experiences seeping into one another, impossible without one another. The closed cycle of inescapability, circular motions of time-space continuums (motifs that frequently recur in Kusturica's films) are reiterated when Perhan unexpectedly encounters his son after three years of searching for his sister, Daca—it turns out that Daca had been made to work as a street beggar and has been taking care of the boy, whose name, upon Perhan's inquiry, turns out to be: Perhan. Just like Azra had her mirror in Perhan's dead mother, the older Perhan now faces his own mirror image in the younger Perhan. As Gregg and Seigworth state in theorizing affect, "Affect is in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*. (...) At once intimate and impersonal, affect accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between 'bodies'" (2010, 2, emphasis in the text). When Perhan encounters his son, who is simultaneously his younger and his future self, the forces of the affective encounter amount to the ultimate uncanny: meeting one's doppelgänger, as it were, one who declares to his older "self": "You will not return."

In the final act of the film, the liquid permeability between life and death is sealed when weddings reconfigure themselves into funerals: Azra dies in childbirth shortly after getting married, and upon finding his sister and son, Perhan decides to exact revenge upon Ahmed at Ahmed's wedding to a new, very young wife. Perhan uses his telekinetic powers to send a fork into Ahmed's neck amidst the jubilant wedding celebration. Subsequently, he is fatally shot by Ahmed's wife-to-be, another bride in a white wedding gown. This final bride becomes a source of Perhan's ultimate demise, as she exacts revenge on him because he prevented her marriage from taking place by killing her husband-to-be. In the film's final moments, Perhan's funeral back in the grandmother's house, with Daca and young Perhan in attendance, closes the final, seemingly unavoidable loop. We are right back where we started—a young Perhan, parentless, is about to be raised by his (great)grandmother, the cycle of inescapability unbroken and untouched.

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That inescapability's de-centered yet unambiguously present subtext is the suffering of women. The violence enacted against them is not a story in itself. Instead, time and again, it is used as a plot device to propel Perhan's character arc rather than call attention to the women's stories. From mother and grandmother to sister and wife to the final bride who kills Perhan, all the women in the film seem to matter only to the extent to which they serve a role in Perhan's life rather than the other way around. This way, instead of critically illuminating the annihilating violence against Roma women, *Time of the Gypsies* treats it as an inescapable part of the necessary cycle for a male character's affective "growth," change, and, eventually, downfall. Romani women's stories of suffering under patriarchal violence are once again rendered not their own—instead, their stories are co-opted and repurposed in the service of a male character's arc. Moreover, the film audience's cathartic affective *jouissance* is brought about through the spectacle of the "inescapable," cyclical entanglements between unrestrained pleasures and pain embodied by the Roma, which positions the Roma women's suffering as both an essential ingredient of the cycle, and simultaneously not her own.

Precarity's Double Erasures after Yugoslavia

If *Time of the Gypsies* punctuated the end of the Roma's screen life in socialist Yugoslav cinema, *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* by Oscar-winning director Danis Tanović[10] can be seen as a defining cinematic text about the Roma lives and times in the age of neoliberal capitalist precarity after Yugoslavia. Long gone is any form or even hint of *merak*. It is instead replaced by the gloom and doom of crushing dispossession and existential uncertainty. The film acts as a multifold performance: a *docudrama* in which a Roma family reenacts the

10 His 2001 film *No Man's Land* won Best Foreign Language Oscar—Bosnia and Herzegovina's first and, as of this writing, only Academy Award.

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events that had previously transpired in their lives and which the director first read about in a newspaper. It is also a performance of a director's belief in his own altruism. Tanović's directorial choices betray a conviction that he is doing right by the Roma family, whose traumatic story he makes them reenact while making his film. Finally, I posit that the film is a performance of what Lauren Berlant has called cruel optimism. According to Berlant, "Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss" (2006, 21, emphasis in the text). The attachment in question is here the director's and the camera's presence in the Roma family's life, suggesting to the family an engaged and sustained visibility from an Oscar winner and, once the film is completed, from the broader public. Unspoken in this dynamic is the optimistic promise that the family's woes will finally be witnessed and resolved. It is an optimism that is cruel since, indeed, it turns out to be "an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss." After the film's release, aside from the brief "fame" that the family's father enjoyed on the international festival circuit, nothing in the Roma family's life changed, and they returned to living in obscurity and abject poverty. During the making of the film, and as we watch the family on the screen in the process of participating in the film, the family does not yet know about the outcome, and therefore, they continue to attach themselves to a problematic object (a promise of positive change) in advance of its loss.

The film is also a performance of a double displacement of the Roma woman, Senada Alimanović, and her story—by the director's questionable ethics when it comes to his relationship with the film's subjects during and after filming and by the film's centering the story on her husband, Nazif Mujić. The film's sustained focus is on Nazif, even though the events that led to the newspaper reports, which initially drew the director's attention to the story, were about Senada's life-threatening pregnancy that required an abortion for which the family had no health coverage nor the financial means to pay for out of pocket. The cost, they are informed, is 980 convertible Bosnian marks, which is roughly 500 euros, a sum near-impossible to obtain for a family in such a dire socioeconomic situation. Nazif is even in the film's title—the titular "iron picker"—or

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instead, he is the only person acknowledged in the title. This is an episode from *his* life, even though the drama revolves around *her* life being in danger. Once again, we see the co-optation of the Roma woman's precarity for the purpose of centering the story almost exclusively on a Roma man's struggle instead, which effectively renders her pain not her own but, rather, yet another vehicle for accentuating how and why life is hard for a man. Moreover, what is being co-opted is the story of the Roma woman's reproductive health and, by withholding her the right to a safe abortion, the story of the system's denial of proper health care coverage that would save her life. Incidentally (or perhaps not?), there is an intertextual connection here between the fictional Azra in *Time of the Gypsies*, as her story ends with her dying in childbirth, and the story of the real-life Senada in *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*, whose life hangs by a thread because her unborn baby has died in utero and Senada is denied a life-saving procedure. The precarity of the Roma woman through a frequent emphasis on her reproductive labor as somehow *inevitably* life-threatening is a trend that needs further dissecting. While there is no doubt that Roma women are burdened with many overlapping forms of discrimination and precarity, including the systemic lack of healthcare coverage, the precarity of their reproductive lives seems to be overrepresented (and ideologically overdetermined) by white male film directors in a way that eschews other forms of precarity that Roma women live through and with.

Senada's medical crisis is eventually resolved when she passes as her sister-in-law, Munevera, and uses her sister-in-law's health insurance ID card to finally get the procedure she desperately needs. However, even this touching (and risky) illustration of familial solidarity is depicted as solely Nazif's doing. He is shown contacting the family and discussing the logistics of Munevera lending Senada her health insurance card, as it is implied by the film that Senada had no active role in arriving at the resolution of this difficult situation with her own family. She seems to have no agency of her own and is framed as a figure whose dire position is an invitation to impose onto her the husband's affective states, as well as the spectator's. She becomes a mere conduit for the precariousness of others. The film's international festival life

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further amplifies the centering of the story squarely on Nazif. The film's successful run at prestigious film festivals was punctuated by Nazif's growing stardom on the festival circuit, culminating in him being bestowed the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the Berlin Film Festival (the film itself was awarded the Jury Grand Prix). Ironically, Nazif was found to be the best actor while not exactly acting—instead, he and his family shared their actual precarious life with the director, the director's camera and, subsequently, with the adoring festival audiences who appear to have found said story a moving affective experience and a performance worthy of praise and awards. Subsequently, after the novelty of the film wore off and the film's festival and theatrical run ended, Nazif's newfound "fame," as well as the seeming "care" about the family's well-being that the film appeared to temporarily spearhead, proved to be fickle and quickly fizzled out, suggesting it may have been another performance—of affective solidarity and care with a limited period of empathy, solidarity, or attention. The Mujić family and the precarious position of the Roma population that their story illustrated were quickly forgotten, and the family was eventually forced to sell the Silver Bear award statue because they needed the money it was worth to make ends meet (Nazif died in 2018, at the age of 48). Additionally, the story of the specifically Romani post-socialist neoliberal precarity was taken to stand in for the post-socialist precarity more broadly. Thereby, the specificity of the Roma story vacated, not their own, but rather an affective stand-in for the post-socialist neoliberal precarity of the non-Roma majority who project themselves and their challenges into the story of the systemic lack of healthcare coverage or the financial troubles that threaten their basic livelihood. In an affective encounter with a Roma family's precarity, general audiences read themselves into the story.

The film extensively focuses on Nazif's seemingly never-ending physical labor—the iron picking that is the primary source of the family's income—while Senada's own domestic labor, which includes childcare (they have two young daughters), is used as a set-up which will lead to the reenactments of the events triggered by Senada suddenly feeling a sharp pain in her stomach. She is asked to reenact a traumatic period of her life, punctured by the loss

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of her unborn child and fear for her own life. Nevertheless, her emotions and internal struggles do not appear to interest the director. Unlike the films of Želimir Žilnik, for example, where non-professional actors often play some version of themselves and are at the same time given the freedom to play out fictional storylines, Tanović here insists on a documentary, *vérite*-style reenactment veracity that gives Senada no leeway but to re-experience her trauma anew.[11] Her traumatized affective state is repurposed for the film's ethically questionable self-stylizing as a fly-on-the-wall observational documentary when in fact, it is anything but—in actuality, the director and his "camera-eye" intervene by demanding "authentic" reenactments of deeply traumatic events without the possibility for the actors to re-appropriate the script into a story that might offer them, especially Senada, more agency, even a sense of healing through the feeling of being able to control the narrative the second time around. Likewise, at no point does Tanović acknowledge his directorial presence and role in the making of the film, although his presence is, in fact, central due to its privileged gaze from outside of the precarious world of the Roma in a post-socialist, neoliberal landscape. He can leave as soon as the film is over, never to return (and he did not return), while the family stays stuck in the systemic and systematic foreclosure of options for a better life. Tanović chooses to stylize the film as an example of *direct cinema* (a tradition in documentary filmmaking that insists on a non-interventionist, fly-on-the-wall approach), as if the events we see here are transpiring for the first time, and Tanović's camera is capturing them in real-time. However, the temporal relations are far more complicated, revealing a complex web of temporary, fleeting affective investments which illustrate the workings of cruel optimism for the Roman family—a cluster of promises that were never

11 See, for example, Žilnik's participatory docudrama work on the forceful Roma displacements in *Kenedi Goes Back Home* (2003), as well as the follow-up, *Kenedi Is Getting Married* (2007). In these films, the stories specific to the Roma population are not co-opted as stand-ins for the broader social precarity. They remain firmly rooted in their own specific, geo-political and socio-cultural contexts, and their participants are encouraged to embrace fictionalized performances of themselves.

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going to be fulfilled. The cruelty lies in the fact that in the film, we watch a family that harbors hope for a better tomorrow (one which, outside the film's frames, never materializes).

In Lieu of Conclusions

As I have discussed throughout this chapter, the Roma—and Roma women, in particular—are perpetually positioned as symbolic carriers of collective affective fluidity of both existential struggle and uncertainty (precarity) and existential joy (*merak*, *jouissance*), a liquid process which on occasion invites solidarity or a fleeting alliance with the Roma, and yet typically also works to obfuscate the specificities of the systematic precarity of the Roma population's own socio-economic and racialized position as such, since that specificity is substituted with a sense of a figurative, albeit fleeting collectivity.

In the broader society, the Roma, as the subaltern, cannot speak, or perhaps can only be heard temporarily, when their experiences become translated for the dominant culture into intelligibility through, for instance, the lens of a Palme d'Or winner, or an Oscar-winning director, the latter conveyed in a *cinéma vérite* film language accessible to the non-Roma majority, one which promptly co-opts the Roma story as a metaphor for their own. As we have seen time and again, the Roma woman is here persistently rendered doubly erased—as a Roma and as a woman. Her precarity is overdetermined and always already locked inside a cycle of inevitability that deprives her of agency and depicts her as a victim of both Roma men and the broader society. Placed within this cycle of the affective economy, she is never fully human as herself but rather a conduit for the affective experiences of others—an objectified channel of affective transference and co-optation. When the Roma's struggle is presented as a trigger for the affective engagement of the director and the film's audience, it is the Roma man with whom we are primarily invited to identify and whom the directors typically position as the story's protagonist. In *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker*, for instance, the Roma woman is silenced by the repositioning

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of the story of her bodily and existential autonomy as a narrative arc of her husband's, as an episode in his life, as the director renders her as a body without a voice, a necessary presence whose precarity is not her own to claim, speak, or resolve. In the subsequent cultural life of a movie nominally about them, the Roma become carriers of an affective surplus which can then be poached by the dominant majority until the Roma family ultimately becomes supporting players in their own story.

We have seen the workings of such affective poaching circulate in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav cinema time and again, albeit each time firmly rooted in their own historical contexts: from the tectonic cultural and political shifts in the 1960s Yugoslavia, as evidenced in the so-called New Yugoslav Film/the Black Wave (*I Even Met Happy Gypsies*), to the country's late socialist period and its violent demise, which Kusturica punctuated with his "Gypsy-themed" films (next to *Time of the Gypsies*, there is also his 1998 *Black Cat, White Cat*). Currently, the workings of said affective poaching are rooted in the ongoing post-socialist neoliberal landscape of precarity, for which the Roma appear to present a very suitable affective subject whose story all too quickly becomes poached as an experience of every Yugoslav after Yugoslavia. What changes is the historical context; what stays the same is the taking for granted of an affective encounter with the most discriminated-against minority group in the region. In the current landscape of precarity, however, *merak* and *jouissance* are increasingly replaced with a growing identification of the majority group with the Roma's affective experiences of—or perhaps we should refer to it as stuckness in—the seemingly permanent states of dispossession and invisibility.

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