

PROJECTIVE IDENTIFICATION WITH THE ROMA PEOPLE IN BALKAN FILMS

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Abstract: In the cinema of the Balkans Roma people are present at every step. As these films were not directed by Roma specialists, one has the tendency to ask the question: how true are these figures to the real Roma nature and behaviour? And very important: what can we account this ongoing interest in Gypsy culture and life for? Is it curiosity about what seems to otherwise be despised by people or could it possibly be the so-called "projective identification", an expression extensively used by Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis?

The figure of the Gypsy is omnipresent in the history of Balkan cinema. The first ever Balkan film, shown in foreign countries too was about them: In Serbia: A Gypsy Marriage (1911), the first ever Gypsy film to enter and win an international film festival was from the former Yugoslavia: I Even Met Happy Gypsies (1967), directed by Aleksander Petrovic. It won the "Grand Prix Special". The image of the Gypsy was, however presented by the non-Roma film-directors in these films.

"Rather than being given the chance to portray themselves, the Romani people have routinely been depicted by others. The persistent cinematic interest in "Gypsies" has repeatedly raised questions of authenticity versus stylization, and of patronization and exoticization, in a context marked by overwhelming ignorance of the true nature of Romani culture and heritage. " Dina Iordanova, Cinematic Images of Romanies, in Framework, Introduction, no. 6

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*"Ethnic minorities are 'written' by members of dominant social groups, they do not (re)present themselves. Their images are shaped under the influence of historical and socio-cultural experiences, patriarchal stereotypes, and the desires of the dominant community and its culture. These desires yield contradictory relations to the Other; the pervasive negative images are often softened and corrected by a romanticised heritage and the desire to neutralize or assimilate otherness. Ultimately, the representations of exoticised ethnic minority images serve the majority, but they <are not altogether divorced from Gypsy realities,> allowing Serbian films to <provide some of the most truthful images of Gypsies available. "*¹

While watching Emir Kusturica's movies, we are under the impression of an overwhelmingly positive representation of the Roma people. The two most important films he has made are *Time of Gypsies* (1989) and *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998) in which representations are magically positive, the narrative tropes employed in them being utterly conventional. The plot in *Time of the Gypsies* regards Roma children being trafficked across the Italian border in order to become prostitutes and beggars. The plot of *Black Cat, White Cat* presents the Roma as charmingly funny criminals stealing a train load of oil. Moreover, these two films show Emir Kusturica at his best in creating his spectacularly beautiful magical-realist visuals, these being part of his cinematic signature, however, at the same time being the projection of his deeply romantic scenes, a kind of romanticism more evident in *Black Cat, White Cat*, where Gypsy lifestyle is presented as an endless feel-good roller-coaster adventure. All the Western frustrations are thus projected into these Gypsy characters

¹ Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film*, Wallflower, 2003, p. 221

who live and love illegally, fulfilling secret desires of the civilized white person. Freud considered that in projection thoughts, motivations, desires, and feelings that cannot be accepted as one's own are dealt with by being placed in the outside world and attributed to someone else.² What the ego repudiates is split off and placed in another, the Gypsy in this case.

The reception Kusturica's films have received varies, and all the divergence is based on the question of authenticity. While some critics appreciated them for their authenticity, representatives of the Roma community have criticized them for not presenting the harsh realities of their current lives, and for perpetuating negative stereotypes.

The director attempted at a truly authentic approach to the life of these people, *Time of Gypsies* having been filmed almost totally in a local Romani dialect and the actors being amateur Romani people, showing us a versatile image of the Roma people: hard-working and full of ideas, but in the same time potentially criminal and not to be trusted.

Underground, another film directed by Kusturica, approaches his land as a crazy expedition, like Herzog's *Aguirre* or *Fitzcarraldo*. As the film opens, a maniacal Gypsy orchestral troupe accompanies, on foot, its two drunk protagonists Marko and Blacky into the Belgrade of 1941. The loud pair are hustlers and street fighters as well as newly joined-up Party members and the war represents for them a scrumptious opportunity ... to fight, have sex and live as large as their intoxicating and breathless antics foreshadow. When the shelling begins in Belgrade the next morning, the two entrepreneurial communists join the fight to protect their country from the Germans and "fascist motherfuckers" everywhere. They steal weapons and anything they can lay their hands on from the Nazis and as the heat's turned up on their activities, the two go underground, manufacturing weapons in a deep cellar and a network of tunnels. As the war ends, the unscrupulous Marko has planned—both through his connections to the Party and his knack for turning a black-market dinar—to fool his old comrade Blacky into believing the war continues.

The Gypsy orchestra continues its live accompaniment to fifty years of Yugoslavian history, more or less accurately sketched for such a vast, distorted and less than accommodating canvas. The "underground" of the title might have been drawn by a loud, hysterical and perverted Dante, an epic poem of Balkan history, but by the time the descending infernal circles are counted, Kusturica has already dispensed with them. *Underground* refuses such simplicities, at the very same time portraying them in a comical, hysterical and perverted way." While Kusturica plays on nostalgia (the root stock of all narrative but none more than the patriotic history mobilized and manipulated in this particular milieu), he works at a certain realism, depicting too the illusory particles of the heroic past of a now fractured country. It is the latter that displays, to relative degrees, a complexity of view on the conflict and its provenance and that polarises audiences."³

What might be seen in its narrative drive is the playing out of the Hegelian struggle to the death between two apparently opposing but intimate forces—Marko and Blacky serve the reflexive core of this grand narrative, which disappears on its announcement, its negation

² Sigmund Freud, *On Psychopathology*, Middlesex, 1987, p. 198

³ Peter McCarthy, *Doing the Balkans with No Baedeker*: Kusturica, Peter Handke, and Beyond, *Film & Screen Media*, 11 May 2009

already implicit. Marko and Blacky (same and other) are set to consume each other in the manner of the grand historical narrative that both defines and, as their history will show, erases them. Any opposition to this play is at once annulled and accommodated, recovered in a new guise. This dialectical manoeuvre shows that any notion of a totalising history, of a truly monumental narrative, is false; that history, including the Balkan narrative, is as manifold and multivocous as the ideologies that harbour it. This is Kusturica's clever gambit. As Blacky emerges from his generation of struggle with Marko—apparently the victor, the slave loosed from his master; Marko and Blacky's cheating wife Natalija immolated on a wheel chair, circling a fallen Christian statue—he is condemned to continue the struggle, taking on all comers: Croatian Ustashe, Serbian Chetniks and the UNPROFOR, all to the familiar refrain “fucking fascist motherfuckers!”

Melanie Klein⁴ saw the projection of good parts of the self as leading potentially to over-idealisation of the object. At its conclusion, a rejuvenated cast gather on the Danube for a wedding, replete with orchestra, at the end of a narrative that can only end in a fantasy ... that begins again. Blacky sits with his family before spying a furtive Marko, entreating Blacky to let them enter the festivities. Blacky shrugs off his misgivings and invites them in. “My friend,” Blacky announces as they join the boisterous party. Marko asks for forgiveness to which Blacky, perhaps speaking for a lost nation, replies: “I can forgive but I cannot forget.” That's enough for a jubilant Marko. The party swirls and a piece of the bank breaks away and drifts off with the flow of the river: “Once upon a time there was a country.”

Jacques Lacan perceived the subject simply as that which broke up and split up the conventional order of things. The subject could be thought of as the disjunction between the way things are and the way our awareness represents them. The Real is not reality as we usually speak of it - the Real is in fact the unidentifiable origin of the insecure fluidity of language - the irrational core of our subjective experience. Facing the Real is an analytical strategy used to reveal the nature of desire and thus go through the fundamental fantasy. The random character of the relationship between signifier and signified⁵ is shown in the fact that any word holds meaning only in the context of other words (and we already meet the concept of the Other) and sensorial associations we have developed in relation to them. There is no absolute word which exemplifies the meaning associated with any object or experience. The Real is the abyss standing between a word or symbol and that which it represents.

Think about the intertwining of magic and realism in *Time of Gypsies*, as it is meandering along the story of Perhan growing from a sheltered country lad to a young man versed in the ways of petty crime; he learns about the latter under the tutelage of Ahmed (Bora Todorovic), who is something of a gypsy Godfather. The story leads Perhan away from his protective grandmother at home in Yugoslavia and into Italy with Ahmed and his band of beggars and thieves. Meanwhile, Azra matures, and very dramatically at that. By the end of the film, she and Perhan are married, and Perhan has a son whose lot in life eerily mirrors his own.

None of this happens quickly. And the film's momentum is not notably enhanced by the quacking and clucking of barnyard animals as they scuttle through the action, providing

⁴ R. D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought* (London 1989)

⁵ William J. Richardson, "Lacan." *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*. By Simon Critchley and William Ralph Schroeder. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998.,p. 521

the local color. The Gypsies' love of animals is part and parcel of the frivolous accordion music, muddy settings, picturesque houses from shantytown and chattering minor characters who keep the film so busy and colourful. Even the more flamboyant figures, like the uncle of Perhan's who spitefully hoists the family house off its foundations on a rainy night because Perhan's grandmother refuses to give him money, begin to seem exhausting in their very spontaneity.

Emir Kusturica being a specialist in grungy lyricism in *Time of the Gypsies* the images of his maladroit, melodramatic characters, living their moth-eaten lives, move with the suspended, weightless rhythms of hallucinations. As a stylist, he makes everything seem to float, held aloft by a combination of folksy superstition and mysticism, like reveries hammered together out of junkyard pieces. The transcendent and the vulgar, the prosaic and poetic, are in perfect balance. Even his epiphanies are mud-splattered.

In order to make amends for the loss experienced as a being of language, Lacan said that we create psychic projections of our beliefs. The grossest level where this happens is the Imaginary: From our necessarily limited perspective, we create representations of how the world works, and what we might do to make ourselves happy within it. We create screenplays and theories which allow us to cope with the infinite loss of the Real - that true satisfaction is impossible to reach due to our embodiment of language. Summed up, these projections constitute fantasy - the stories we tell ourselves to convince ourselves that we will one day be happy and completely pleased.

In order to invigorate fantasy, we participate in Symbolic actions which fall in perfect harmony with our fantasy. For instance, we may believe that a successful career will bring us comfort and security, so we do our jobs well, show up on time, etc. Or, if we are in love and believe that our partner is bringing us a wholeness, we display our affection by holding hands, kissing, etc. These actions constitute the Symbolic framework upon which the Imaginary rests.

However, the Real is always waiting in a sneaky way to attack, preventing the complete satiation of our desire. For example, we might have a successful career and accumulate vast wealth, yet still feel that something is missing, or even desire more money. The Real warrants that our desire will always pursue like a ghost - total satisfaction is impossible to reach. It is essential that we distinguish desire from needs - Lacan had no doubt that we can satisfy our immediate biological and social needs. It is our desire which is insatiable.

It is this tricky sensation we feel with our desires which Lacan defines *jouissance*. Once we reach a new level of achieving a goal, we will immediately look for more. Even if we seek to achieve nothing, our needs will continuously contradict us. The object-cause of our desire - *objet petit a* - is the fantastic supplement which fills the void of the Real. Žižek explains it is not just the fact that we cannot attain *jouissance* - it is that we can never escape it.

For Lacan, the trouble with *jouissance* is not only that it is impossible to reach, always-already lost. This also explains the difference in the reflexivity of drive and desire: desire desires its own unsatisfaction, the deferral of the actual meeting of *jouissance* - that is,

the essential recipe of the reflexivity of desire is to turn the impossibility of satisfying desire into the desire for non-satisfaction.⁶

Babies exist in their mother's uterus with all of their needs met. Food, water, warmth, etc. are all provided by the mother, creating the illusion of harmony with the surrounding environment. However, upon birth the child begins to experience numerous forms of minor or major suffering. This "castration" - the cutting off from the mother - creates the force of demand: The child is now stuck in the area of eternal lack. This loss is irreversible, re-unification is impossible. This split forces the child to develop abstract representations in language - "food" is needed to satiate hunger, which is coming from the body. As the capacity for speech develops, symbolic representations become necessary. Thus, the Imaginary comes into existence alongside the Symbolic. Simultaneously, repression of this fact begins, and the conscious and unconscious mind divide.

To explain this process in detail, Lacan conceptualized the mirror stage of personality development. Corresponding to the imaginary domain, the child believes itself to be in a unified state of wholeness. This concept of the self as stable and coherent Lacan calls the ideal-I or ideal-ego.

The strong interdiction against incest prevents re-unification with the bliss of perfect interdependence with the mother. The child is instead forced to adopt to the rules of language and society. Desire for the mother - for Lacan - is better exemplified as the desire to be desired by the mother. This is synonymous with playing the role of the phallus of the mother. The rule of the father, of course, prohibits this objective. As one scholar explains Jacques Lacan's oeuvre, we can see the real corresponding to needs, the imaginary to demands, and the symbolic to desire.⁷ Psychoanalysis may accompany the patient to the borderline of the "Thou art that," in which it is unveiled to him that his mortal fate bears a cipher, but it is not in the subject's power to discover that point where the real journey begins.⁸ Slavoj Žižek brings it up more than once that through the death drive, we may overcome the societal norms and regulations which have been imposed upon us.⁹ , the death drive causing us every now and again not to aspire to reach the ultimate void, but actually take some action in the opposite direction.

Understanding Lacan's concept of the "Big Other" allows us to understand with additional depth. Our identities and our beliefs are constructed in terms of another (an Other) - the Other is a construction necessary for enjoyment and pleasure. We can only base our values on a hypothetical figure who judges from a privileged, all-knowing position. This figure is the Big Other. Although the Big Other is an ambiguous figure¹⁰, Christianity affords us a clear example. A true follower of the words of Christ tries to be like Him, to follow in his footsteps, etc. What is right and wrong is dictated by Him alone - His knowledge is unending.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999. Print., p. 291

⁷ Dino Felluga, "Introduction to Jacques Lacan, Module on the Structure of the Psyche." College of Liberal Arts : Purdue University. 2003. Web. 16 Apr. 2010

⁸ Jacques Lacan and Bruce Fink. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalysis." *Ecrits: a Selection*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2002, p. 8

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: the Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. London: Verso, 1999. Print., p.43-45

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2006

Once the subject traverses such a fantasy, the omniscience of the Other is refuted. This opens the opportunity for true autonomy as the individual is now forced to create their own system of values.

The Gypsies/ Romani, their lives, social status, and their portrayal have got in the course of a few years increasing attention in the media, just like artistic curiosity. Special numbers of the journal dealing with media *Framework* (2003), covering films on Romani topics, drew up the fundamental topics and analyzed a few milestone films in the domain. The systematic method of studying Gypsies in film, "Screen Gypsies (Aniko Imre)"¹¹ is inseparable from theories analysing the Other in relation to the majority's representatives.

The topics prominently used in films about Gypsies are cosy stories told by the wise old, stories of fire, ice and dance, fairy tales and terrifying myths, giving the audience a glimpse on "ancient and primitive times and endless passion for life and death; marginalization, poverty, law breaking, the status of social outcast- these are the things featured in the films about the Gypsies."¹²

The film *Time of Gypsies*, about 90 percent of which was shot in the Gypsy dialect of Romany, is set in the village of Sutka, and its characters are the lowliest imaginable. Perhan (Davor Dujmovic), the movie's central figure, is a stringy young lad with black horn-rims and a gawky slouch who lives with his grandmother (Ljubica Adzovic), the village healer. Unlike his Uncle Merdzan (Husnija Hasimovic), a good-for-nothing, gambling lecher who also lives with them, Perhan is a good boy, honest, loving, his grandma's favorite. But when his sister Danira (Elvira Sali) is taken ill with a leg ailment and has to be operated on, the boy is drawn under the influence of the prosperous Gypsy leader Ahmed, who takes him to Italy and into a low-life community of whores and thieves.

Made with real Gypsies who in addition to never having acted before were also illiterate, the picture tells the story of Perhan's transition from an innocent, accordion-playing boy whose only passions are for his grandmother, his girlfriend, Azra (Sinolicka Trpkova), and his pet turkey, into a small-time master crook. In revealing his corruption, Kusturica immerses us deeply in the milieu of the Gypsy. The appeal of this is basic. "Time of the Gypsies" shows us a wholly unfamiliar place where magic and special powers still hold sway over science and reason; where, when a man gets drunk, he's liable to tie a rope to his house, hitch it up to a tractor, and pull it off its foundation; where if a boy dreams of a glorious white bird, that bird is a turkey.

A kindhearted Gypsy teenager, Perhan is forced to leave his ramshackle home in the Skopje ghetto to accompany his young sister Danira (Sali) on a journey to a hospital where she is to undergo an operation on her bad leg, courtesy of Ahmed (Todorovic), the richest man in the ghetto. Danira and Perhan become separated, and he spends the rest of the film trying to find her so that he can return home and marry Azra (Trpkova), the girl of his dreams. During his odyssey Perhan loses his innocence and learns the brutal ways of the world.

Film director Emir Kusturica ("*Underground*"/"*Life is a Miracle*"/"*Black Cat White Cat*") chronicles Gypsy life in a poor Gypsy village in Yugoslavia, in this unusual, moving

¹¹ History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe, Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Vol IV: Types and Stereotypes, John Benjamins publishing Company, Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, 2004, p. 391.

¹² Idem, p. 392.

and original tragic-comedy drama. Non-professional Gypsies speak in their native language and play most of the principal roles, giving the disorderly, dreamlike and lengthy episodic movie. When looking past the Gypsy color (their frivolous accordion music, their strikingly expressive gestures and their ostentatious attire), it can be viewed as a coming-of-age film about survival for a sensitive lad—a film about his need to deal with difficulties successfully only to find his true moral compass and celebrate life as a happy family man.

Silly looking teenager Perhan (Davor Dujmovic), wearing patched glasses, is a bastard orphan, living with his adoring protective shamanistic grandmother (Ljubica Adzovic), his younger sister Danira, physically weakened by her handicap (Elvira Sali) and granny's inconstant idiot son Merdzan (Husnija Hasimovic) in a Gypsy community in Yugoslavia, where he operates the fireplace for their family business. The boy falls head over heels in love with pretty teen Azra (Sinolicka Trpkova), but her imperative mom turns Perhan down because Perhan doesn't have good enough career prospects for her fancy daughter. His only talent is his telekinetic power, where he can make spoons slide up and down a wall. When the village's richest Gypsy, an unscrupulous, deceitful character called Ahmed (Bora Todorovic), also called by locals "The Sheik," returns from a successful journey to Milan, granny saves the life of his choking son with her healing powers. As a payment, granny gets Ahmed to promise to finance a leg operation for the bedridden Danira in a hospital in Ljubljana. Perhan goes along in Ahmed's van to look after his frightened sister, leaving granny behind. Constrained to go back upon his promise to stay with his sister because Ahmed says he needs him in Italy to raise money for the operation, Perhan unwillingly travels with him. The corrupt top banana Gypsy lures the innocent Perhan into his illegal activities, that involve selling children and young women, who will eventually become servants. On the road to Milan, they crowd into the van and travel together stuck in their own dark world and private thoughts. Perhan is reluctantly permeated by a life of crime that includes begging, theft and prostitution. The question that matters in his case is how he reacts to his new skill sets, and if he can still return to his original purity and marry the girl he loves without betraying the solid values granny had given him.

Kusturica's film is a compassionate portrait of a much besmirched people, outsiders who live by their own laws and conventions. He shows the Gypsies at their best and at their worst, and even though they live peregrine lives and don't belong to one specific land, their loves and hatreds are not that different from others who must go through the hurting of growing up in a world that often isn't fair..

Most coming-of-age films — whether set in Sweden or Brooklyn — reinforce the universality of their young protagonists' experiences. In *Time of the Gypsies*. Perhan (Davor Dujmovic), the hero, is a Yugoslavian Gypsy teenager who wants nothing more than to marry his sweetheart, a village girl whose toothy, sensual stare is to him sheer beauty. By the end, though, he is drawn into thievery, pimping, and vengeful murder. The movie outlines a culture so drenched in moral and physical inertia insidiousness and knavery that most filmmakers would have played it for comedy. The shrill, grabby Gypsies here are like an agitated version of a stereotypically cacophonous and rowdy Italian or Jewish family, with everyone shouting at each other in order to have a simple conversation. Kusturica shows us how the daily Gypsy frenzy originates from anxieties concerning money: Who has it, and who can get it, and who can keep it to the end?

Yet there's a great subject here: the way Perhan, with his idealistic erotic dreams, has to corrupt himself to become a man. Dujmovic has some of the tongue-in-cheek cheekiness of the young Bob Dylan, and he gives a performance of scarcely suppressed innocence. *Time of the Gypsies* becomes a kind of ante *Godfather*, with Perhan, who uses telekinesis to murder his enemies, emerging as a magical-realist Michael Corleone. It's a harsh haphazard way of interpreting *Godfather*. Kusturica has said that his style in this film is a mixture of Ford and Bunuel, and *Time of Gypsies* has telling echoes of both, bringing its characters vividly and vitally to life. But there are also echoes of Coppola's *Godfather* films here--in *Time of Gypsies* tone reminding us of that of a classical opera and vision that is sad on a grand scale, as well as the parallels between both films' treatment of a criminal subculture typical of an ethnic group. The corrupt kingpin who is also strangely sympathetic as a family man, is one of the few players to give a performance that works on its own terms, and not solely within the context of this film's robust, turkey-fancying, highly self-conscious charm, underworld, and "The Threepenny Opera" would seem simple common sense to them. Kusturica also channels a true sense of wonder at the Gypsies' ability to live, love, and dream amid the sordid dirtiness by which they are surrounded.

Time of the Gypsies, which uses a large canvas and melodramatic emotions to paint a portrait of a family of Yugoslavian Gypsies - people who live in Yugoslavia but are not really of the country, since they are neither Serb nor Croat, and speak their ancient language, Romany. Perhan has grown up inside the Gypsy culture without really accepting it, but now, on the brink of manhood, he faces a series of initiations. One involves the girl he loves: Will he be able to marry her, or will she be taken by his uncle, the king of the Gypsies? Will he be able to support himself, or will he engage in the scams and cons he has already absorbed? If his girlfriend is taken by his uncle with a band of Gypsies to Italy, will he be able to follow and find them? The movie plunges into the center of Gypsy life; certainly no other film knows or shows as much about these legendary people. There are feasts and fights, weddings and funerals, and no line is drawn between magic and deception. Some things happen that are only tricks, and some things happen that are really magic - Perhan's ability to move things at a distance, for example, or the disconcerting tendency of people to simply start floating, or the way a bride's veil has a life of its own.

In the film, these Gypsies spread out over Europe, to cities such as Rome, for example, where they pick pockets, read palms, trade in the street markets and support themselves by their wits. Their most important possession is an absolute freedom from convention.¹³ They stand outside all laws, especially those regarding property.

Hard to take seriously at first, the tragic-comic film shows us Perhan, the bastard boy hero, who seems to be a clichéd victim figure - patched glasses, a face that lacks any trace of intelligence or vitality – wandering aimlessly the shantytown like a holy fool. His grandmother has healing powers; Perhan is telekinetic, and spends his time moving spoons up and down walls. Too poor to marry his beloved Azra, his sad initiation into the real world is a long journey with dragging feet, performed at breakneck pace, filled with music, drama, tears and mocking-sarcastic humour. The film has a contradictory imagery : a semi-documentary style, punctuated with Paradjanov-style miraculous imagery. Bringing it back to reality are the

¹³ <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/time-of-the-gypsies-1990>

stunning performances by a cast of mostly illiterate Romany non-professionals, its realistic view of Gypsy life, and its immense humanity. It makes a strong and vivid impression on its viewers and profoundly heart-warming, though the underlying story is much less original than the film's surface-story; concerning the events in the plot, we are firmly in the territory of Dickens, Collins and the other Victorian melodramaticists; these Gypsies seem to be carrying on the traditions of the early 19th century *Coming of Age as a Gypsy With a Turkey for a Friend*. One of the roles in Emir Kusturica's *'Time of the Gypsies'* being played by a turkey, and the word role is not used lightly. The turkey actually plays a part. For a time, he is the pet and companion of Perhan (Davor Dujmovic), the oafish, naive and highly sensitive gypsy boy who is this coming-of-age film's hero; after that, the turkey winds up in a pot. And after that, the turkey reappears in a magical way, as one of the many omens and miracles that shape Perhan's vision of the world.

This is a movie full of hauntingly beautiful moments. In one scene, a wedding veil drifts serenely over the traffic on a superhighway; in another, a goose soars awkwardly over a campfire. But there are raucous, noisy moments too, when the characters squabble violently and then, in an instant, forget their differences and continue on as if nothing had happened. For the first part of the film, Kusturica's parade of ethnic eccentricity is transfixing; you follow along out of sheer curiosity, if nothing else. But the director's storytelling style is scattered and unsatisfying, and the characters have a folkloric one-dimensionality that taxes instead of enhances our interest.

Black Cat, White Cat, this farce, set in a Gypsy settlement along the banks of the Danube, where three generations of characters burst forth in manic and frenetic displays of charm, confusion, and chaos. Garbage dump godfather Grga Pitic (Sabri Sulejman) and cement czar Zarije Destanov (Zabit Memedov), both in their 80s, remain friends even though they haven't seen each other in 25 years. Zarije's son Matko Destanov (Bajram Severdzan) goes to Grga for a loan. Matko is double-crossed by his partner, gypsy gangster Dadan Karambolo (Srdan Todorovic), who demands that Matko's son, Zare Destanov (Florijan Ajdini), marry Dadan's small sister, Afrodita (Salija Ibrahimova). Unfortunately, Afrodita and Zare have absolutely no interest in each other. Cute barmaid Ida (Branka Katic) and Zare fall in love and only have eyes for each other as plans get underway for the wedding of Zare and Afrodite. The sudden death of Zarije seems to offer a solution, since no Gypsy would have a wedding and a funeral on the same day. However, Dadan delays the death announcement by hiding Zarije, packed in ice, in the attic. The wedding celebration gets underway amid numerous madcap mishaps and misadventures.

The people here, like those in Kusturica's 1989 Cannes prize winner, *"Time of the Gypsies,"* are Gypsies who live on the banks of the Danube River. These cheerful outcasts, who inhabit roughly constructed, semi-permanent dwellings, make a living via all kinds of skullduggery, and their currency of choice is the Deutsche mark. Kusturica clearly adores these larger-than-life characters, and his film is filled with wonderfully expressive faces and personalities.

The film builds to the problem-prone wedding and its aftermath. Matters are further complicated by the sud-den death of Zarije, which Zare believes is cause enough to postpone the ceremony; but Dadan won't hear of it, and insists the old man's body be hidden away and his death not revealed until Zare and Afrodita are safely spliced. The corpse in the attic —

eventually there are two — provides rich material for the farcical comedy so adroitly staged in the film. The wedding itself is pic's hilarious center, but there are plenty of laughs in the final stretches of the film, in which all ends so well that Kusturica is able to conclude the film with the title "Happy End." The film certainly is happy, with its cheerfully lowbrow jokes about excrement, sex and death and with its well-timed pratfalls and mishaps. A running gag has grandfather Zarije watching the final sequence from "*Casablanca*" over and over; in a sense, the film is about a beautiful friendship formed by a seemingly mismatched pair.

This Yugoslavian saga about two Gypsy patriarchs and their unruly families is staged as a kitsch comedy in the Fellini vein. There are some quieter, more lyrical moments too - young lovers disappearing into a field of sunflowers; a rheumy-eyed old gangster watching a *Casablanca* video again and again. Flaunting Kusturica's usual disregard for conventional narrative, this is storytelling on the hoof, rambling, self-indulgent, but with enough warmth and humour to overcome its own excesses.

Personnel oscillates between *A Thousand Clowns* and *Ten Thousand Maniacs* as a throng of volatile hustlers, smugglers, and schemers plot, strut, and zorba their way toward the grand climax of the world's most mondo Gypsy wedding. Coming after Kusturica's controversial Serbian allegory *Underground*, *Black Cat*, *White Cat* is actually something of a light romantic comedy. It's also a bit of a menagerie. The title creatures are much in evidence while, over the course of the movie, a pig devours a derelict car and flocks of geese storm across the screen at every opportunity. Nor does Kusturica neglect his humanoids.

While the younger performers are largely experienced actors, many of the most colorful roles are filled by grinning local personalities--most notably the wizened godfather Uncle Grga (Sabri Sulejmani, the retired proprietor of a "shoeshine salon," with no previous acting experience). Tattooed, with a mouth full of gold teeth and a matching Mogen David moon-and-star pendant, Grga is "elegant as a vampire," in the words of his long-lost buddy, Zarije (Zabit Memedov, a goofball veteran of Kusturica's *Time of the Gypsies*). Grga is also sentimental; he watches the end of *Casablanca* over and over, and like all of the movie's more sympathetic characters wears his heart on his sleeve.

This is a film without a single quiet moment. A Gypsy band squeezes itself into a hospital ward to escort the ailing Zarije. ("Music! Aggression!" he cries, at least according to the subtitles, as he dances out.) Set mainly in a Dogpatch resort on the banks of the Danube, *Black Cat*, *White Cat* is largely a succession of stunts. In the most exuberantly grotesque of these, a Wagnerian tango singer with a lacquered pompadour demonstrates the strength and precision of her sphincter muscles by parking her ample posterior against a wooden plank and extracting a nail.

His absurdist microcosm is a group of Gypsies in Slovenia on the banks of the Danube -- most of the characters are played by nonprofessional actors. They're so earthy, they're a bit out of this world -- part of Kusturica's elaborate joke.

For many viewers, "*Black Cat*, *White Cat*" will require patience. It's noisy, surrealistic at times, filled with slapstick. Much of the chaos is accompanied by loud, brassy music or punctuated by a parade of geese and pigs. This is not comfortable comedy.

The story focuses loosely on two longtime clans, both friendly and rivals, headed by eccentric mobster patriarchs (Jas'ar Destani and Zabit Mehmedovski). A third mobster type (Srdan Todorovic) is a cocaine- sniffing womanizer who fancies himself a disco king and is

obsessed with marrying off his kid sister to the right guy. Trouble is, Mr. Right (Florijan Ajdini), is a sweet, virginal teenager with a crush on a pretty girl in his village. In episodic shifts, a wild range of events unfolds -- a botched train robbery, fake deaths, and love at first sight, forced marriages, wacky sex and drug flings, a pig that eats a parked car.

Kusturica shows us all western desire that verges on chaos; a wild, endlessly inventive romp set in a post-war world so full of machine-guns and hand-grenades that people barely flinch when one or the other goes off, where corruption is so pervasive that an honest swindler like Matko can hardly make a living. But it's also a joyful place where entertainment means a hefty singer with a crescent-shaped hairdo pulling nails from a board of wood with her buttocks, and there's a surprising warmth and even a little optimism behind Kusturica's gallows humor. Like the happy-marriage ending and the two fornicating cats — one black, one white — that prowl their way around the film, there's even a hope for the end of murderous divisiveness, making this a riotous blend of crime, comedy and romance.

There is a political subtext if you look hard enough at the age gap angle. But Kusturica has determinedly set out to produce a joyous romp in the company of the people with whom he clearly has an affinity, the gypsies. With goats, geese and the eponymous felines rarely out of shot and played to the frantic strains of a gypsy band, the gleeful farce is a scattershot affair, with offbeat hilarity vying with clumsy slapstick. But there are lyrical moments too, most notably a seduction in the sunflowers.

"Weddings and funerals don't mix", declares the incompetent blackmarketeer Matko (Severdzan) in *Black Cat, White Cat*. Yet, during the extended wedding party sequence that makes up most of the film's second hour, death is (literally) never far away, as the bodies of two old men are kept on ice in the attic upstairs. Even the junk-addled official who presides over the final vows has mistakenly brought along "the register of deaths, not marriages". In Emir Kusturica's farcical fairy tale of family, fraud, fate and friendship, it turns out that marriage and death are just one of a number of unlikely pairings that make up the film's carnivalesque absurdity.

Young Zare Destanov (Ajdini) has his eye on the free-spirited waitress Ida (Katic), but after his father Matko is cheated in one of his scams by the powerful gangster Dadan (Todorovic), Zare finds himself about to be married off to Dadan's diminutive sister instead as part of a deal to settle the family's huge debts. It seems that only grandpa Zarije Destanov (Memedov) and his old friend Grga Pitic (Sulejmani) can save the day, and these two irrepressible patriarchs prove not only to be a match for all the other scoundrels, swindlers and liars around them, but also more than capable of cheating death itself.

One person in *Black Cat, White Cat* is described as a "six-foot giant with hands like shovels", another as a "midget" just over a metre high. All the film's characters are exaggerations, whether it is the criminal who keeps cocaine hidden in a crucifix and likes to juggle hand grenades, the hard-drinking grandfather who is followed everywhere by a gypsy brass band, the near-blind godfather who endlessly rewatches the closing scenes of *Casablanca*, or the chanteuse with the Leningrad Cowboy quiff whose act climaxes when she extracts a nail from a wooden plank using only her ample behind. For in the little Romany village of Surduk on the bank of the Danube, exuberance, hyperbole and excess are a way of life, and it is difficult to know where the locals' tall tales end and reality begins, or even where the boundary lies between love and hate, life and death.

Two hours may sound overlong for what is essentially a spirited romantic comedy, but the lavish brand of magical realism that Kusturica has made his own in films like *Time Of The Gypsies* and *Underground* here ensures that each and every scene is richly saturated with colour, noise and incident - and with enough unhinged vitality to get everybody smiling. It is as though *Four Weddings and a Funeral* had been reimagined by Fellini with a cast of crazy Balkan rogues and a background chorus of farmyard animals. Cinema is seldom so hyperactively busy, deliriously charming or surreally humane.

The subtext that runs through the picture is Kusturica's implied belief that ethnics around the world are not only similar in temperament but they are also the folks who really know how to live, enacting various types of projective identification that can be identified easily if one pays close attention.

Acquisitive projective identification, where someone takes on the attributes of someone else, the viewer identifying with the chaotic recklessness of these Balkanic rogues who move around like hurricanes, with no lazy or boring stops.

Although we are used to seeing the phenomenon of projective identification as the ego splitting off intolerable experiences by dividing itself, and locating parts of the self in external objects; typically, though not always, it is "bad" parts of the self which are expelled in this way, but they are then feared as "bad" objects(the kleinian definition)- this phenomenon can appear as "putting oneself in another's shoes", this benign form of projection into someone else being the foundation of empathy, thus we can identify a spectrum of different "uses" of projective identification: expulsion, non-symbolic communication, and empathy ¹⁴, all types of projective identification being fully present in Emir Kusturica's films.

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Filmography

Casablanca, 1942, directed by Michael Curtiz

The Godfather, 1972, directed by Francis Ford Coppola

The Godfather Part II, directed by Francis Ford Coppola

Time of Gypsies, 1988, directed by Emir Kusturica

The Godfather Part III, 1990, directed by Francis Ford Coppola

Four Weddings and a Funeral, 1994, directed by Mike Newell

Underground, 1995, directed by Emir Kusturica

Black Cat, White Cat, 1998, directed by Emir Kusturica