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# Gitanos and Subalternity in Cine Quinqui: The (Un)Archived Spanish Transition

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**Abstract** Interrogating one of the most popular definitions of *cine quinqui* as an archive focused on a particular interpretation of social conflicts during the Spanish Transition, this paper seeks to answer the following research questions: what to include in and what to exclude from such an archive? Who are the subjects represented in the archive? What narratives structure the meaning of the archive? How do such narratives shape the collective memory of an epoch? The analysis follows the intertextual hermeneutic principle to explain the productive process of texts in a historical and dialogic relationship, in reference to Kristeva, and Amossy and Herschberg. The chosen methodology has led the author to map out a constellation of documents, both visual and textual, revealing the political dimension of conflicts hidden behind the screen of cine quinqui. The paper shows how cine quinqui constructed a de-ideologized image of gitanos, reducing their agency to criminality. Reiterated in different films of this genre, such a representation reinforces the perception of a passive political subject and of an antisocial being living outside the law. Countering this image, the paper re-inscribes the history of gitanos in the struggles for democratization during the Spanish Transition.

**Zusammenfassung** Der Beitrag hinterfragt die populäre Definition von *cine quinqui* als Archiv, das sich auf eine spezifische Interpretation sozialer Konflikte während der spanischen Transition konzentriert. Dadurch versucht er, folgende Forschungsfragen zu beantworten: Was wird in ein derartiges Archiv aufgenommen, was ausgeschlossen? Wer sind die im Archiv vertretenen Personen? Welche Narrative strukturieren die Bedeutung des Archivs? Wie formen solche Narrative das kollektive Gedächtnis einer Epoche? In Anlehnung an Kristeva, Amossy und Herschberg folgt die Analyse dem intertextuellen hermeneutischen Prinzip, den Produktionsprozess von Texten in einer historischen und dialogischen Beziehung zu klären. Die gewählte Methodik veranlasste den

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Autor, eine Konstellation von Dokumenten, die die politische Dimension von Konflikten offenbart, die sich hinter der Leinwand von *cine quinqui* verbergen, sowohl visuell als auch textlich zu kartographieren. Die Arbeit zeigt, wie *cine quinqui* ein de-ideologisiertes Bild der *Gitanos* konstruiert, das ihre Handlungsfähigkeit auf Kriminalität reduziert. Eine derartige Darstellung, die sich in mehreren Filmen dieses Genres wiederholt, verstärkt die Wahrnehmung als ein passives politisches Subjekt und asoziales Wesens, das außerhalb des Gesetzes lebt. Gegen dieses Bild stellt der Beitrag die Geschichte der *Gitanos* in den Kämpfen um die Demokratisierung während der spanischen Transition.

## Gitanos during the Spanish Transition

The death of the fascist dictator Franco on November 20, 1975, marked the beginning of the Spanish Transition. Three years later, the Spanish Constitution was approved in plenary sessions of the Congress of Deputies and the Senate held on October 31, 1978. The new Constitution was ratified in a referendum on December 6, after which it was signed and promulgated by King Juan Carlos I on December 27 and eventually published in the Official State Gazette on December 29 of the same year ("Constitución").

These were frenetic years of strategic decisions that determined which new actors, principles, and institutions would lead the democratic transformation of the State. In democratic terms, the Transition activated a bottom-up political momentum in which universities, civic associations, trade unions, and political parties played a major role. All democratic actions suffered the threat of violent attacks by fascist paramilitary groups nostalgic for Francoism (Baby). As I will show next, the *gitanos* took part in various social, cultural, and political initiatives.

On February 20, 1976, the poet, playwright, and university professor José Heredia Maya, together with the flamenco dancer Mario Maya, premiered the flamenco play "Camelamos Naquerar" (We wanna talk) in the University of Granada. All year long, the play was performed around Spain, and it eventually came to Paris in early 1977. Some authors underlined the clash between the political dimension of the new flamenco play and the kind of folkloristic flamenco promoted by the Francoist regime (Quintanilla Azzarelli; Andrés).

On April 24, 1976, *Triunfo* dedicated an article to "Camelamos Naquerar" (**Fig. 1**). *Triunfo* was a magazine that embodied the ideas and culture of the Spanish left in the 1970s and was a symbol of intellectual



**Fig. 1.** Cultural chronicle on the theater play "Camelamos naquerar." *Triunfo.* April 24, 1976.

resistance to Francoism. José Monleón, one of the most iconic cultural chroniclers, summed up the intention of the play: "It's about reminding us of the persecutions to which *gitanos* were subjected [...] it shows the reality of the people, the repressive situation, and the racist violence" (66–67)¹. On May 23, 1976, the newly founded newspaper *El País* also published a cultural chronicle by Enrique Llovet. He highlighted that "It is a vindication of tragic flamenco against its festive and smiling manifestations. It is a Brechtian meditation. It is, finally, a cry of freedom" (Llovet).

Still in force in 1978, the military police service regulations (Guardia Civil) contain articles such as the following:

1 All the quotes from the original sources in Spanish cited in this paper have been translated into English by the author. Art. 4. Gitanos will be scrupulously watched, taking rigorous care to recognize all the documents they have, confront their signs, observe their costumes, find out their way of life, and whatever leads to forming an accurate idea of their movements and occupations, investigating the destination and the objective of their trip.

Art. 5. Given the fact that this class of people does not generally have a fixed residence, it is convenient to take from them all the necessary information to prevent them from committing robberies of horses or other types of animals.

Art. 6. Authorizing the arrest and imprisonment of Gitanos who do not carry the license that would allow them to exercise the trade of dealers. ("Acaba")

That was the situation for *gitanos* in Spain until 1978—persecuted and guilty until proven otherwise. Faced with this situation, "Camelamos Naquerar" functioned as a clear message of vindication for *gitanos* and their collective history of racial discrimination.

On June 7, 1978, Juan de Dios Ramírez Heredia, a *gitano* member of Parliament, presented a petition to the government inquiring the abolition of the above-mentioned articles. His proposal passed with 285 votes in favor and one abstention. On July 28, any reference to *gitanos* wwas suppressed ("Orden"; "Acaba"). In between, his declarations appeared on the front page of the weekly magazine *Interviú* from June 22–28, 1978: "I'm a Marxist, so what?" This quote is part of a longer interview in which he declared: "I wish a free socialism. Neither authoritative nor dogmatic to perform a transformation of society through democratic vote and popular pressure" (Cañete Quesada).

A decade earlier, as a young activist, Ramírez Heredia had participated in the creation of the International Secretariat of the Gitanos Apostolate. Promoted by Pope Paul VI, this was a Catholic project marked by two major events in Rome: 1. an international pilgrimage to Rome by the Romani peoples ("Omelia"); 2. the First International Congress of Pastoral Care for the Romani peoples ("Discorso"). In October 1967, thanks to the Episcopal Migration Commission, the National Directorate of the Gitanos Apostolate was established in Spain (Secretariado; Méndez López). And almost two decades later, in 1986, Ramirez Heredia founded Unión Romaní as a Spanish branch of the



**Fig. 2.** Ramírez Heredia, with a red tie, standing up behind Yul Brynner. Second World Roma Congress in Geneva, April 1978.

International Romani Union (**Fig. 2**), established at the Second World Romani Congress in 1978 (Klímová-Alexander).

From the 1960s to the 1980s, a number of civil society organizations was established all across Spain (Méndez López; Llopis): Desarrollo Gitano (1968), Unión de Juventudes Gitanas (1972), Presencia Gitana (1972), Integración Gitana (1977), Acción Social Gitana (1978), Enseñantes con Gitanos (1979), Secretariado Nacional Gitano (1983), Federación Gallega de Asociaciones de Promoción Gitana (1984), Unión Romaní (1986), Federación de Asociaciones Romaníes Andaluzas (1988), and Asociación de Mujeres Gitanas Romí (1989).

Looking at the process of institutionalization, there are three events that should be highlighted. On January 11, 1979, the Interministerial Commission for the study of the problems that affect the *gitano* community was created ("De 11 de enero"). On October 3, 1985, the plenary session of the Congress of Deputies urged the government to promote a National Plan for Gitano Development ("Proposición"; Díez). On May 22, 1989, the Spanish government set up a specific budget for the National Plan for Gitano Development and created an administrative unit in charge of it ("Subsecretaría"; Presencia).

## (Un)filmed Gitanos: the power of symbolic

Bourdieu defines symbolic power as the capacity to impose an order of common sense, to construct the social perception of reality, a dominant doxa. This is an order in which logical integration is the precondition for moral integration (Bourdieu 1979). Though frequently veiled, symbolic power is present in virtually all social relations. Yet the means of symbolic power, i.e., semiotic, technical, and institutional tools, gets concentrated in the hands of some groups, and, as Bourdieu explains, the concentration of capital for some always leads to the dispossession of others (Bourdieu *Sur l'État*; Arnholtz).

Meanwhile, symbolic violence concerns the oppression of people who seemingly have come to terms with their position as symbolically diminished or disposed (Bourdieu and Wacquant; 1992; Bourdieu and Passeron). In contrast to hegemony, which rests on consent, symbolic violence rests on misrecognition and asymmetric access to the means and the fields that construct social perception (Burawoy; Rowlands; Bourdieu *Sur l'État*). The exercise of symbolic violence has been conceptualized in overtly unidirectional terms as "a kind of violence being perpetuated on those not belonging to the dominant social groups" (Grenfell 267).

Different postcolonial authors have reported that, in the fight for equality, it is crucial to adopt new approaches to symbolic power in order to (re)formulate anti-racist policies (Bhabha; Mbembe; Carty and Mohanty). In previous works, I have studied how symbolic violence has enabled the construction of the 'gypsy' otherness in the Spanish collective imaginary in different fields of discourse throughout history (Cortés). In the field of antigypsyism studies, Mladenova has offered an interesting reflection considering cinema as a technology that has the symbolic power to represent social relations and collective images. According to Mladenova, film narratives have been used as a powerful and highly sophisticated tool for the racialization of Romani peoples.

In the case of the Spanish Transition, the long process of *gitano* political mobilization and institutionalization was not documented in any film. Nevertheless, *cine quinqui* constructed a symbolic pattern for the representation of *gitanos*, linking them to the social and legal fringes of society. While the entire Spanish society was transitioning to new forms of social and political organization, *cine quinqui* represented *gitanos* as stagnating in the lowest social status, to criminality and marginality. The imagined 'ethno-racial' *gitano* always appeared

equated with an entire social stratum. Thus, a double mechanism was set in operation: depoliticizing ethnicity and racializing marginality.

Between the 1970s and the 1980s, *cine quinqui* brought to the fore the peripheric neighborhoods of major cities of Spain: La Mina in Barcelona, Vallecas in Madrid, and Ortxarkoaga in Bilbao, among others. The urban scenarios foregrounded by *cine quinqui* were segregated areas with high rates of poverty and unemployment and a critical segment populated by *gitanos*. In some of these neighborhoods, civic associations were very strong and kept close relations with Marxist parties like the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC) and the Socialists' Party of Catalonia (PSC) in La Mina, or the Spanish Labor Party (PTE) and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) in Vallecas.

It is worth remembering that on May 27, 1977, the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) gathered 60,000 people at the electoral meeting in Vallecas. In this meeting, one of the speakers addressed the residents of Palomeras, Pozo del Tío Raimundo and La Celsa, significantly populated by gitanos (Díaz). On the other hand, a week after being elected Member of Parliament by the electoral district of Barcelona, on June 15, 1977, Ramírez Heredia declared to the newspapers *Pueblo*: "I haven't given up on my socialist and Christian ideal to achieve a society without class differences [...] I have many friends in the PSC and PSUC" (Ricardo). Though he was originally a member of Parliament within the Liberal party UCD (1977–1978), soon he was to become a member of Parliament within the Socialist party PSOE (1982–1986), and then a member of the European Parliament within the Social Democrats (1986–1999).

*Cine quinqui* did not give an account of the political atmosphere in which *gitanos* were socialized during the Spanish Transition. Neither did it cover the series of *gitano* protests and marches against racism. Next, I will introduce three of the most relevant episodes.

In the first episode, around the year 1978, a group of non-gitano citizens organized a violent boycott against the newly constructed primary school for gitanos in the city center of Burgos. On top of numerous threats made to the gitano families, the non-gitano neighbors collected signatures to obtain a legal prohibition for the school. And, indeed, a citizens' delegation asked the city council to demolish the school building, arguing that "just 150 meters from the cathedral it is impossible to live with those unwanted people dedicated to theft and other crimes" (Pereda). Finally, the city council detained the school project, and this decision triggered a wave of protests organized by the local gitano civic associations.



**Fig. 3.** A member of the youth movement Unión de Juventudes Gitanas holding a banner. Madrid. June 6, 1978. Author: José Mauricio Martínez Cáceres



**Fig. 4.** A young *gitano* activist with a raised fist surrounded by his family in a settlement of Madrid. June 6, 1978. Author: José Mauricio Martínez Cáceres.

The second episode is from June 6, 1978, when over five hundred *gitanos* protested in the city center of Madrid, on Plaza Mayor, claiming their rights in areas such as labor, education, housing, public security, and against historical racism ("Orden"). The photographer José Mauricio Martínez Cáceres, a militant of the Spanish Labor Party (PTE), covered that protest as a reporter for the national television RTVE. **Figs. 3–4** show a member of the youth movement called Unión de Juventudes Gitanas with a raised fist and surrounded by his community and family as he is heading to the protest. He is holding a banner with the following text: "I am a young *gitano* and I want the same rights for my people as those of the Gadje. And that is why I want the unity of all young *gitanos*." **Fig. 5** shows a *gitano* group protesting in the city center of



**Fig. 5.** A crowd of *gitanos* during a protest on Plaza Mayor de Madrid. June 6, 1978. Author: José Mauricio Martínez Cáceres.

Madrid. We can see a big banner with three messages: "*Gitanos* are also citizens," "Against racism and despotic hypocrisy," "[Spain], until when are you going to continue being the stepmother of your *gitano* children who love you? Wash away your sins of 500 years!"

The third episode is from July 12, 1986, when the town of Martos in the province of Jaén witnessed the most brutal pogrom against a gitano neighborhood in the twentieth century. About 200 non-gitano citizens set fire to thirty homes belonging to gitano families located in the extremely poor neighborhood of Cerro Bajo. Over 150 gitanos were affected and had to flee their hometown. During the pogrom, a crowd of about 2,000 people shouted: "Gitanos out of this town!" (Fuentes "Vecinos"). Responding to this massive attack, on July 28, 1986, five thousand gitanos demonstrated in Madrid against racism ("Manifestación"). Few months later, on November 21, 1986, the so-called Civic Coordinator of Martos called for a demonstration and a two-hour general strike to show support for the only two prosecuted for burning the gitano homes, and about 2,000 people gathered in front of the City Hall to blame themselves for the same acts (so no individual actor could be responsible for the crimes). "We're all guilty," was the most repeated chant during the riots (Fuentes "2.000 vecinos"; Gamella; Río).



Fig. 6. Film poster for Perros Callejeros (dir. José Antonio de la Lloma, 1977).

# Unmasking Cine Quinqui

One particular feature of *cine quinqui* is its implicit and sometimes even explicit claim to realism. On November 4, 1977, José Antonio de la Loma declared in an interview: "I want to make something very clear. I make realistic cinema" (De la Loma). Considered by many to be the pioneer of *cine quinqui*, de la Loma premiered his movie *Perros Callejeros* on December 24, 1977 (**Fig. 6**) (Cuesta et al.; Sánchez Noriega; Ikaz). Just a month earlier, on November 11, 1977, a decree had abolished censorship in Spain ("Por el que se regulan"), and all cultural taboos came out with the inaugurated genre of *cine quinqui*: drugs, nudity, brawls, sex, police races, marginal suburbs, robberies, etc.

By that time, Fernando Trueba was a film critic working for *El País*. He had the privilege of watching the films before their premiere, and he made the following remarks: "It is a consumer film with a social, testimonial vocation. [...] The subject matter: juvenile delinquency. [...] Despite its paternalism, it is redeemed by its considerable dose of realism." (Trueba). The fact that the main characters were played by non-professional actors provides an illusory effect of truth. This is a technique reiterated by all the subsequent films of that genre.

The paternalistic approach to the peripheric, impoverished districts turned into the impossibility of marginal groups representing themselves and, therefore, emancipating themselves. This approach represents the marginal subjects within a framework of pessimistic victimhood: the

wretched protagonists do not show any signs of rebellion against the existing order. Theirs are the lives of losers surviving in misery, victims of society converted into an archetype of the anti-hero. Before the cultural phenomenon of *cine quinqui*, other world-renowned Spanish filmmakers also delved into the nihilistic lumpen fate that leads one to perpetrate a crime, such as Luís Buñuel's film *Los olvidados* (1950) or Carlos Saura's *Los golfos* (1960). This approach combines an existential and a social dimension by showing the inner process of self-making/self-destruction tied to a very poor background that limits one's opportunities in life.

To illustrate how this context is presented, I will reproduce the voiceover narration that opens up the film *Perros Callejeros*:

Unfortunately, it is not a problem of a neighborhood, as some pretend, nor of a district, not even of our city, but of all those that suffer the ills of an accelerated and uncontrolled increase in population, of a society launched down the slope of easy living, luxury, and exhibitionism. No one should feel personally alluded to by what is recounted in this film, but we are all implicated in the problem and deep down we are all to blame, and we all must do something to remedy it. Lifting the arm of justice, of course, but without forgetting charity, and the chances of redemption of those boys. (De la Loma)

The plot of this film is quite simplistic: a gang of boys around the age of sixteen from the suburb La Mina on the outskirts of Barcelona have specialized in car thefts. They spend their time pickpocketing, robbing stores, attacking and robbing couples in remote places, or harassing women. Sometimes, surprised by the police, they engage in furious chases to eventually end up in prison. In one of the most spectacular scenes, the main character El Torete runs over the *gitano* patriarch El Esquinao as revenge for having cut his penis off after El Torete impregnated El Esquinao's youngest niece, who was about 12 years old. This wild suburban world of teenage sex, brutal violence, drugs, and rollercoaster life attracted 1,813,732 spectators; *Perros Callejeros* was the most viewed film of this genre in the 1970s and 1980s.

On November 28, 1976, when de la Loma wanted to film some scenes of *Perros Callejeros* in the streets of La Mina, many neighbors were outraged and protested. They contested that the film was creating a model of antihero for the youth of the neighborhood. A youth movement from La Mina signed a manifesto entitled "We are not street dogs" (Monferrer;

Colomer). The rest of the footage had to be shot in Bellvitge, a suburb of L'Hospitalet de Llobregat in Barcelona. Recently, *El Periódico de Catalunya* asked some of the neighbors of Bellvitge about the film, and they answered as follows:

I didn't like it at all because it represented a type of life that had nothing to do with mine or the average in the neighborhood. There were drugs, too. But Bellvitge at that time was above all a working-class neighborhood where people worked, children went to school and led normal lives, nothing to do with crime [...] Beyond the social criticism that it could intend, the film was a "show" that led to a stereotype that identified Bellvitge with quinquis, drugs and easy sex. There was a very unfair stigmatization. ("Perros callejeros")

The main character of *Perros Callejeros*, El Torete, was interpreted by the non-professional actor Ángel Fernández Franco, a juvenile delinquent from La Mina who became famous thanks to the four films he starred in, all directed by de la Loma: *Perros Callejeros* (1977), *Perros Callejeros* II (1979), *Los últimos golpes de "El Torete*" (1980), and *Yo, "El Vaquilla*" (1985). He died at the age of 31, infected with HIV, after accumulating a hundred arrests.

Other blockbuster films of this genre were *Navajeros* (1980), directed by Eloy de la Iglesia (**Fig. 7**), and *Deprisa*, *deprisa* (1981), directed by Carlos Saura (**Fig. 8**). Saura won the Golden Bear for best film in 1981 at the Berlin International Film Festival. The casting of the film was made up of non-professional actors from the suburb of Villaverde in Madrid. During screening in cinemas, two actors were arrested on the accusation of bank robbery, which gave extraordinary publicity to the film on TV and in newspapers. One of them was José Antonio Valdelomar, who played the main character Pablo ("El protagonista"). He died of an overdose of heroin at the age of 34 in Carabanchel prison hospital in Madrid. About *Deprisa*, *deprisa* Saura said:

In the case of *Deprisa*, *deprisa*, I wanted to make a reconstructed documentary about that kind of youth, these delinquents (people as normal as ourselves), who are a problem that concerns us all. I was collecting a vast amount of journalistic material until, suddenly, I had a valid theme for a film; a film that I have been building gradually (Caparrós Lera 200–201).



Fig. 7. Film frame from *Navajeros* (dir. Eloy de la Iglesia, 1980).



Fig. 8. Film frame from Deprisa, deprisa (dir. Carlos Saura, 1981).



Fig. 9. The death of El Jaro. Triunfo. February 25, 1979.

The film *Navajeros* (dir. Eloy de la Iglesia, 1980) is another paradigmatic example of *cine quinqui*, both in terms of aesthetic method and composition: suburbs of Madrid, violence, robberies, sex, police races, entries into and exits from prison, and drug users. The film opens up with the following text: "This story is based on real events, although all the characters that appear in it are imaginary."

The film was inspired by a real story, the life of a famous juvenile delinquent who had died a year earlier at the age of 16 by gunshot; his name was Jose Joaquín Sánchez Frutos, alias El Jaro. At the age of 12, he entered a reformatory for the first time; there would follow up to 30 entrances and exits. Up to 40 young people came to join his gang, the Jaro gang, carrying out robberies of shops, carjackings, and even raids on bank branches. In the summer of 1978, when El Jaro was 14 years old, his band robbed a chalet in Somosaguas, which was followed by a shootout with the Civil Guard ("La banda").

El Jaro was played by a non-professional actor who would become an icon of *cine quinqui*: José Luis Manzano Agudo. He also starred in other films directed by Eloy de la Iglesia: *Colegas* (1982), *El Pico* (1983), *El Pico* 2 (1984), and *La estanquera de Vallecas* (1987). Like other icons of *cine quinqui*, Manzano Agudo died very young, at the age of 29 (**Fig. 9**).

The autopsy revealed that his death was violent in nature, with traces of heroin and other toxins found in his blood, urine, and vital organs.

#### Conclusions

This paper claims that film narratives are not merely a mirror of social reality but an aesthetic composition, and that the artist's view is shaped by his/her own positionality in terms of power: class, ethnicity, 'race,' and gender. As with any other cultural creation, films project the artist's mental archetypes, biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. In the case of *cine quinqui*, under the mask of a pretense at realism and an aesthetic claim to authenticity, it created a particular way of thinking about *gitanos* as merely criminals. Thus, all civic initiatives led by gitanos during the Spanish Transition remain hidden behind the screen of *cine quinqui*.

The described episodes of *gitanos* cultural and civic initiatives, the antiracist protests, and the whole process of democratic institutionalization are completely ignored by *cine quinqui*. Instead, it created an imagined alterity to satisfy the fantasies and curiosity of the upper middle class—the intended audience—about the suburbs as places of hedonism, free or cheap sex, drugs, violence, and crimes. *Cine quinqui* did not give an account of the political atmosphere in which *gitanos* were socialized during the Spanish Transition, i.e., the Marxist and Christian left movements from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The misrepresentation of *gitanos* from the suburbs produced a critical vacuum in the archive and, thus, in the collective memory of the Spanish Transition. For *cine quinqui*, it was easier to show a depoliticized image of the *gitano* than to explain the complex dynamics of exclusion and resistance. In the impoverished urban periphery, the neighborhoods were territories where social class and ethnicity became intertwined; and in such intersections, not everything occurred at the mercy of what the emergent commercial cinema was representing.

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