

## Preface

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Like most children in Bulgaria, I grew up with scare stories about ‘gypsies’. These were stories I would hear from the grown-ups around me and their hushed, confiding tone made my ears perk up, or these were stories I would read in my favourite illustrated books for children. I loved listening to stories and I loved plunging into the fantasy storyworld of books. So, like most Bulgarian children, I grew up fearing ‘gypsies’ with a deep, atavistic fear. There were two Roma quarters in the vicinity of my family’s home in Sofia, and these places filled me with horror; in my child’s mental map of the familiar world, the Roma quarters were to be avoided at all costs.

In the late 1980s, I remember watching, together with a gang of friends, Emil Loteanu’s film *Queen of the Gypsies* (1975). Just watching his film felt like an act of rebellion to us. I remember the fascination that the throbbing music and the passionate, colourfully dressed characters produced in us; it was a rare, revelatory experience that added glue to our camaraderie. Some years later, when Kusturica’s films *Time of the Gypsies* (1988) and *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998) came out, they became an immediate hit. Everyone went to see them. All the while, I had not had a single acquaintance of mine who was of Roma origin. There was hardly a chance to meet somebody from the Roma community at the schools I was lucky to go to – the Russian language school, the English language school, and Sofia University with its much-coveted Department of English and American Studies. Everything I knew about the Roma came from hearsay, from books and films, from the evening news.

It was several years after leaving university that I got to know Roma individuals close up. In 2004, I worked for an EU-funded project called “Roma Population Integration” in which over a hundred young Roma were trained for the position of teachers’ assistants and in which I was responsible, among other things, for the production of two films, a short fiction one and a documentary. Working on this project not only brought me close to Roma people but also gave me an opportunity to observe first-hand the kind of dialogue that takes place, if at all, between the mainstream society and the minority. And, in 2009 and 2010, I took part as a Bauorden volunteer<sup>1</sup> at two building camps in Hungary, organised in the aftermath of the series of murders in 2008 and 2009 in which six Roma were killed and fifty-five injured by right-wing extremists (cf. Mareš). In the village of Tatárszentgyörgy, we helped renovate the house of a family whose twenty-seven-year-old son Róbert Csorba and five-year-old grandson had been shot dead as they ran out of their burning home, which was set on fire with a Molotov cocktail. While renovating the grandparents’ house, we could see the charred remains of the son’s home, standing there grimly only a few meters away.

Shortly after this experience, an enthusiastic friend sent me Aleksandar Petrović’s film *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (1967), and after seeing this highly acclaimed cinematic masterpiece, I realised I no longer shared the fascination. On the contrary, I was appalled by the film and my sense of indignation was bolstered by the painful awareness that I had no language, no tools to lay out my objections in a convincing manner. This is how I came up with the idea to do research at university level on the forms and functions of the imagined ‘gypsy’ figure in film. For I asked: what is communicated to the general audience in Bulgaria by a *Deutsche Welle* reportage about a Roma schoolgirl from a small Bulgarian town in which the girl is praised for attending school and yet is made to read aloud that one passage from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s tale *The Little Prince* where the fox explains that it is untameable? What is communicated to the general audience in Germany by a *Tatort* episode<sup>2</sup> in which Bulgarians (and by implication Roma) are depicted as people who are used to living among bags of decaying rubbish? What is communicated to the general audience in Germany by a TV reportage

1 Bauorden organises international youth exchanges and aid projects in Europe and overseas. By setting up building camps, it supports non-profit organisations with construction and renovation work; see the website of Bauorden Germany: [bauorden.eu](http://bauorden.eu).

2 See the episode *Mein Revier* (2012, Dir. Thomas Jauch).

about the inauguration of the monument to Sinti and Roma in Berlin in which reportage scenes from the opening ceremony are edited together with footage of a family with many children living in a desperate housing situation? Why did the news about a blonde girl-child found in a Roma quarter in Greece spread in no time across all of Europe, even reaching the headlines of *The New York Times*? And why did this piece of news prompt policemen in Ireland to detain fair-haired children of Roma parents and subject them to DNA tests? These were the kind of questions that set my research in motion and that eventually led to the present Heidelberg dissertation *The 'White' Mask and the 'Gypsy' Mask in Film*. I move from practice to theory and then back to practice, so my hope is that the following chapters will precipitate a turn in film scholarship as well as in the art of filmmaking.