

# Roma people of Turkey re-write their cinematographic images

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## Abstract

The historical construction of the Roma image in Turkey, via both official and unofficial narratives, has constituted a derogatory repertoire. Their portrayal in the mainstream Turkish cinema and TV in particular has contributed to the predominant imaginary in circulation which essentially is based on common binaries and stereotypes. In order to challenge prevailing stereotypes about the Roma, we have conducted a transformative action research project with the Roma people of the Sıra district in Izmir, Turkey, who volunteered to make their own films. This article provides an account of this community filmmaking project. Locating the Roma in the conceptual framework of subalternity, we ultimately investigate whether it is possible to talk about agency in regard to the Roma people of Turkey.

## Keywords

Roma people of Turkey, community filmmaking, auto-ethnography, subaltern, agency, ethnic identity

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## Introduction

The historical construction of the Roma image in Turkey, via both official and unofficial narratives, has constituted a derogatory repertoire. Their portrayal in the mainstream Turkish cinema and TV in particular has contributed to the predominant imaginary in circulation, which essentially is based on common binaries and stereotypes. We have conducted a transformative action research with a local Roma community in İzmir, Turkey, in order to reveal whether their self-representation would differ from the hegemonic discourse about them in the mainstream audio-visual Turkish media exclusively produced by non-Roma people. According to Brendan McCormack and Jan Dewing (2012), action research, especially transformative action research, entails a dual purpose: bringing social change and simultaneously generating a research practice.<sup>1</sup> It proved convenient since this type of action research allows the involvement of the individuals/community that is being studied in the research process as well as facilitating the mutual transformation of both the researchers and the studied community.

The current article is the outcome of said transformative action research project, presenting both the discussion of the process and an analysis of the end product: the auto-ethnographic documentary made by the Roma of the Sıra district themselves – *Unutulmuş Romanların Hikayesi* (*The Story of the Forgotten Romanies*). Since ‘it is extremely difficult to find empirical data for the self-definition of the Roma’ (Csepeli and Simon, 2004: 129), this community filmmaking project and the resultant article analyzing the film are hoped to become a starting point for similar attempts and research.

In this context, this article first strives to locate the Roma along the lines of subalternity with reference to contesting arguments in the pertinent literature. This is followed by a brief illustration of the common Roma image in Turkey in general to provide a contextual background. We then move onto the discussion of our community filmmaking project by explaining the field, method and the process. Finally, we conclude by analyzing the auto-ethnographic documentary in comparison with the predominant stereotypical imagery in the mainstream Turkish audio-visual media.

## Locating the Roma

As argued by Ian Hancock (2011), Roma people have not produced their own historical narratives, and most of our knowledge about the Roma, including the scientific narratives about them, has been constructed from a Eurocentric perspective. Conceptualizing the Eurocentric gaze, Edward Said focuses on imperialist discourses and how they locate peoples (Said, 1978). However, he has not been interested in how subjugated people have received, changed, challenged or even contributed to these discourses. Despite his attempt to revive the experiences of those who are overlooked by dominant discourses, Said could be criticized, along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for overemphasizing the role of domination.

In this context, while striving to locate Roma people with reference to their historically under-privileged and marginalized status across the world, we believe it is imperative to critically engage with the debates in the field of Subaltern Studies, albeit briefly.

The concept of ‘subaltern’ was first used by Antonio Gramsci, then embraced and enhanced by Spivak (Gramsci, 1971). Spivak’s work, especially the debate on ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, has created a big controversy, particularly in the context of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. With the increasing popularity of Cultural Studies, the term began to be used to include all sorts of oppressed, minorities and victims. In this respect, instead of defining a homogeneous group identity, subalternity should be regarded as a dynamic concept, which is almost always related to being the ‘other’.

Gramsci used the concept of subalternity to address those who do not have a voice, cannot represent or express themselves via hegemonic channels in mainstream society. He used the term ‘subaltern’ to refer to different groups such as peasants and women that are oppressed by the capitalist state but do not fit the same categories as ‘proletariat’ in the classical Marxist sense (Yetişkin, 2010: 16). In Gramsci’s work, ‘the subaltern refers to various forms of domination and marginality that were grounded in exclusion from the political economy of industrialized capitalism – an exclusion that could not be accounted for by the logic of class only’ (Bracke, 2016: 7). Defying the ‘thesis of exaggerated censorship’ that claim the term subaltern was merely a euphemism for proletariat in Gramsci’s work, Marcus E. Green states that: ‘Gramsci recognized that subalternity was not merely defined by class relations but rather an intersection of class, race, culture and religion that functioned in different modalities in specific historical contexts’ (2011: 395).

Debating Gramsci’s ideas on the subaltern, Spivak claimed that the subaltern could not speak at all or there is nobody to listen to them. According to Spivak’s arguments, grounded in the example of the tradition of *sati*, the Hindu tradition of widow sacrificing (Spivak, 1988: 297), it is impossible to revitalize the voices of subordinate groups or oppressed subjects. This is further reinforced by the inherently privileged position of the researcher/intellectual who studies the subaltern. Spivak exemplifies this by referring to the work of Western humanitarian organizations that aim to help the subaltern from an inevitably Eurocentric position (Spivak, 2004). Therefore, Spivak points out that ‘the general political importance of Subaltern Studies is in the production of knowledge’ (Spivak, 2000: 325). Following Spivak’s concerns, Sarah Bracke (2016 deftly argues):

Subalternity is very much entangled with the question of representation. Spivak’s work shows us that any representation of the subaltern leads us into the deepest philosophical questions of cognition and representation (Cornell, 2010: 100). The subaltern points to power and representation, and the difficulty of representing the subaltern points to the power of disciplinary knowledge in the academy. The subaltern cannot be represented adequately by academic knowledge because academic

knowledge is a practice that actively produces subalternity, in the very act of presenting it (Beverley, 1999). (Bracke, 2016: 8).

In other words, production of knowledge is bound by epistemic violations. Spivak has developed the concept of epistemic violation inspired by Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic violence. Epistemic violence is an attempt of silencing, which ensures and reproduces the prevailing hegemonic relationships. Epistemic violations occur through epistemic violence. Epistemic violation can be defined as the internalization and preservation of the constructed codes through the representation and re-presentation of the self in terms of ethnicity or cultural identity. Even if it is not possible to eliminate the epistemic violation altogether, it can be reduced by critically reflecting on the production processes (Yetişkin, 2010: 18). For Spivak, the only way for researchers/intellectuals to truly speak to and hear the subaltern is first to acknowledge their privileged position that has a role in silencing the subaltern in the first place, then to denounce their privileges, and finally, to accept to 'learn from below' (Spivak, 2000: 333).

Still, Benita Parry criticizes Spivak for her 'deliberate deafness' (1987: 39) to the native voice, and for assigning 'an absolute power to the hegemonic discourse in constituting and disarticulating the native' (1987: 34). Parry argues that Spivak's writings 'severely restricts, if not eliminates, the space in which the colonized can be written back into history' (1987: 39). Spivak's homogenizing attitude concerning, in particular, the doubly oppressed subaltern women as mute and susceptible to the masculinist-imperialist ideology deems them victimized. This, Parry claims, undermines any possibility of native agency (1987: 35).

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha questions the structures of power and hierarchy by emphasizing the failures of colonial discourse in establishing stable and fixed identities. To this end, he suggests the terms 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence' to describe the dynamics of the colonial encounter. According to Bhabha, dominant discourses often fail to function properly (Bhabha, 1994). An important concept to underline here is 'mimicry' as Bhabha discusses. Mimicry is the repetition of a language, culture, behaviour and thought in an exaggerated way. This exaggeration stems from the fact that every repetition involves a difference from the original behaviour. The relationship and antagonism between repetition and difference appear in forms of subterfuge, parody and mockery in everyday life. Imitation functions not only as the producer of colonialist discourse but also causes it to transform itself. For this reason, Bhabha regards mimicry as a kind of resistance. Nonetheless, it is a hidden form of resistance which he calls 'sly civility' (Jefferess, 2008: 37-44); it can be seen in forms of silent, mundane and ordinary acts in everyday life. Imitation works both as a resemblance and an intimidation, thus revealing the fact that the dominating mainstream discourse and its power are limited (Bhabha, 1994). Accordingly, the contemporary subaltern, who is located in the global capitalist context and thus is different from the colonial subject Bhabha studies in his work with reference to Franz Fanon, uses mimicry deliberately to penetrate the hegemonic discourse, to be heard and seen.<sup>2</sup>

Michel de Certeau, too, challenges the absolute power of hegemonic discourses and relations in the context of everyday life practices. De Certeau regards even the act of reading, which he defines as a form of consumption, as a 'silent production' (Gardiner, 2001: 174). The desire not to accept the authority of the text passively and literally transforms consumption into a production that distorts the strategic narrative (Gardiner, 2001: 175). Strategic narratives or discourses belong to 'instituted powers' according to De Certeau (1984: 23). He explains that, 'a strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it... Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model' (De Certeau, 1984: xix). 'Tactics, on the other hand, tend to be unstructured, random, and thus, subversive. Tactics do not strive to create an order, but disrupt the existing one' (Tunç Cox, 2019: 803). According to Bleiker, 'De Certeau proposes an anti-Foucauldian path to understand resistance and domination' that does not over-privilege the apparatus of discipline (2000: 201). To De Certeau, subalterns are 'always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized' (1984: xix) in order to use the imposed systems for their benefit (1984: 18). Differing from Foucault, he states that the subaltern can use 'the actual order of things' to their own ends (De Certeau, 1984: 26). Even if they have to use the vocabulary and resources provided by the elites during production, they will produce a fiction that is beyond the orbit, the interests and intentions that are intended to be imposed on them (De Certeau, 1984: xviii).

This brings us to the discussion of agency in the context of subalternity. If one adheres to Spivak's contested conceptualization, agency cannot be conceived in relation to the subaltern because, in her understanding, 'the recognition of agency always already moves us away from subalternity' (Bracke, 2016: 9). Due to the imminent threat of epistemic violation, even our best intentions to give voice to the subaltern ends up in the reproduction of subalternity for we actually tend to 'speak for' them. Yet, in light of the abovementioned line of critique that diverges from the essentialist readings of subalternity, agency becomes a possibility. As De Certeau rightfully suggests:

If it is true that the grid of 'discipline' is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also 'miniscule' and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them. (1984: xiv)

Against this backdrop, we ask: can the subaltern speak for themselves, talk back and represent themselves at all? According to Ania Loomba, this question is not only of interest to the postcolonial studies because there are many fields that are concerned with resurrecting the history and perspectives of marginalized peoples, women, non-Europeans, lower classes and oppressed castes (2005: 193). Following this line of thought, we regard the subaltern as an aggregate concept, and locate

the Roma in general and the Roma people of Turkey in particular in the context of contemporary subaltern.<sup>3</sup> Through a transformative action research project, we further ask: if the equipment and the means of production are provided, what could the Roma, the subaltern in our case, produce? Would this auto-ethnographical film produced by the Roma themselves be different from the existing narratives in the mainstream media? Would such self-representation be capable of challenging unequal power structures or would it simply reproduce them? Could this practice be regarded as agency?

### Imagining the Roma in Turkey

It is now widely accepted in the literature on the Roma that the history of Roma in Anatolia dates back to the 11th century (Arayıcı, 2008; Hancock, 2006; Marsh, 2010; Ünalı, 2012). Since then, diverse Roma communities have been living in various regions in Turkey. The numbers concerning the contemporary Roma population in Turkey are quite controversial for the official records indicate a number around 500,000, while the unofficial data claims the Roma population to be around 5,000,000 (Arayıcı, 2009: 532).<sup>4</sup> Such discrepancy alone implies that the Roma in the Turkish context is a contested category. In spite of the growing official incentives that encourage social projects about the Roma to tackle discrimination against them<sup>5</sup> as well as the increasing political awareness and the concomitant activism of the Roma themselves, particularly from 2000 onwards,<sup>6</sup> Roma communities in general continue to suffer from poverty, unemployment and social exclusion across the country. It should also be acknowledged here that they constitute a heterogeneous people with various education and income levels. Still, widespread discontent towards Roma people is even mobilized as violent attacks at times. Outbreaks in Bayramıç, Çanakkale, in 1970 and in Selendi, Manisa, in 2010, whereby the houses of Roma people were stoned, they were beaten, injured and eventually dislocated, can be given as examples.<sup>7</sup>

The Roma people in Turkey are mainly categorized in three groups: Roms, Doms and Loms (Marsh, 2010: 28–30). They are also often classified as nomads, semi-nomads and settlers although most of them are settled now (Avara and Mascitelli, 2014: 138).<sup>8</sup> Even though the Roma people have been given different names based on the geographical region they live in or according to their occupation and/or way of life in Turkey such as *Karaçi* (Birecik, Diyarbakır and Niğde region), *Mutrip* (Van and Diyarbakır region), *Cono* (Adana region), *Şopar* (Tekirdağ and Kırklareli region), *Arabacı* (horse-carriage driver), *Sepeçi* (basket weaver) etc. (Arayıcı, 2009: 527), they are commonly addressed as *çingene* (gypsy). *Çingene* is a pejorative term laden with negative connotations, indicating the under-privileged status of the Roma people in the eyes of the Turkish public. It should be underlined here that negative attitudes, or even the hatred towards gypsies, are not particular to Turkey. As Hayriye Avara and Bruno Mascitelli rightfully argue, ‘gypsies fall into the category of people that everyone loves to hate and they often appear out of place and generally maligned’ across the world.

That is why ‘they are also kept on the move by negative legislation in many countries’ (2014: 132).

It is important to underline that the terms ‘gypsy’ and ‘Roma’ both refer to the same ethnic group, are used interchangeably, and yet, their perception may differ. While the term Roma is relatively well perceived, the term gypsy seems to have negative implications (Csepeli and Simon, 2004; Kolukırık, 2009; Ürer, 2012). The Roma themselves mostly prefer the term Roma for their self-identification because the term implies cultural and national roots/connections for in fact an uprooted, landless and nationless community. Furthermore, it is an attempt to cleanse the negative associations embedded in the term gypsy. Nonetheless, in the public realm, we frequently come across the term gypsy, especially in Turkey. As György Csepeli and Dávid Simon state in their study concerning Eastern and Central European gypsies, ‘the gypsy image of the majority is more or less homogeneous, stereotypical and fraught with negative bias’ (2004: 129). In a similar vein, considerable research conducted in Turkey examining the perception of gypsies by the mainstream Turkish society has demonstrated that prejudices persist. For instance, Suat Kolukırık’s study surveying university students in 2005 shows that gypsies are mostly associated with ‘theft’. It is followed by ‘nomadism’, ‘entertainment’ and ‘fortune-telling’ (2009: 127). Gökçen and Öney argue that dominant negative perceptions of gypsies as ‘criminal’, ‘immoral’, ‘fickle’ etc. by the majority of Turkish people are particularly reinforced by ideological reproductions and repetitions in the media (2008: 129).

As Aidan McGarry succinctly puts it, ‘whilst no community retains an uncontested image of itself and its identity, Roma communities have little or no control over how they are represented’ (2014: 756). Accordingly, *çingene* is constructed as a derogatory term and image in official and unofficial narratives in Turkey. Kolukırık’s analysis of Turkish language, novels and myths discloses widespread stigmatization: For instance, one of the origin myths claims that the two siblings Çin and Gane had sexual intercourse and the ethnic group *Çingene* is the result of this cursed incest relation. The official *Turkish Language Dictionary* used to describe the word *çingene* as ‘stingy’, ‘shameless’ and ‘greedy’. Likewise, various Turkish novels such as *Çingene (Gypsy)* (Ahmet Mithat Efendi, 1870), *Çingeneler (Gypsies)* (Osman Cemal Kaygılı, 1939), *Raziye* (Melih Cevdet Anday, 1992) and *Ağır Roman (Cholera Street)* (Hasan Kaçan, 1999) served to reinforce the circulating predominant stereotypes and prejudices.<sup>9</sup> ‘Beggard’, ‘thief’, ‘dirty’, ‘cunning’, ‘unreliable’ and ‘criminal’ constitute some of the common descriptions of gypsies in these literary examples (Kolukırık, 2009: 116–126). A research book by Ali Rafet Özkan, funded by the Turkish Ministry of Culture, provides another example of a denigrating and biased construction of the gypsy image. Özkan claims that gypsies are ‘dirty, primitive, socially and culturally despicable, illiterate, polygamous and promiscuous’ (2000: 45). Such negative imaginary is widespread even in children’s books approved by the Turkish Ministry of Education. For instance, Kemal Bilbaşar’s novel *Yonca Kız (Clover Girl)* (2006) incessantly depicts gypsies as ‘frightful’ people who are ‘immoral’ and ‘criminals’.

The support of the governmental organisations in cultural productions as such reveals how deep-seated are the prejudices against the Roma in Turkey. In brief, the construction of the Roma image is fundamentally based on their ethnic and cultural differences, and thus, serves to marginalize and otherize them in relation to the mainstream society.

The most striking and widely circulated imaginings of the Roma people come in the form of cinematic and televised narratives, which can be considered as the staples of popular culture in Turkey. It, therefore, seems crucial to briefly depict the scene concerning the Roma in the mainstream audio-visual media in the country. It is possible to categorize three major periods regarding mediated narratives about the Turkish Roma based on the thematic and aesthetic characteristics and narrative structures of the films and TV shows. Such periodization is also reinforced by the sociocultural and political atmosphere in the country: (1) from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, (2) the 1980s and (3) from the 1990s onwards.<sup>10</sup> A remarkable concentration on the topic is observable in the late 1960s and during the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, we detect a sporadic interest in the subject with films in variety of genres, from dramas to comedies. When it comes to the TV shows, we see the first examples, including some very popular ones, revolving around fictional Roma communities from the 2000s onwards.

Overall, it seems plausible to argue that the early examples of films about Roma (from the late 1960s to the early 1970s) at first glance construct a seemingly positive discourse of Roma; however, they cannot help but reproduce certain binaries and stereotypes such as advanced–primitive, civilized–barbaric and austere–hedonist, leading to consumable narratives by the mainstream Turkish society. These are certainly not auto-ethnographic texts since neither the screenwriters and the directors nor the cast are Roma. They are the products of the ‘voyeuristic gaze’ of ‘white Turks’, who commodify this peculiar sociocultural subgroup for narrative and visual pleasure.

The Roma in the films of the second period (the 1980s) are portrayed as an apolitical, and thus a harmless, ethnic group, whose only concern seems to enjoy themselves with a happy-go-lucky attitude. The Roma are portrayed through the lens of ‘exotic romanticism’ in these films. In other words, any implication of discrimination against gypsies is erased. Unemployment, poverty and illiteracy are not an issue at all. They are not seen as disadvantaged or subjugated.

When it comes to the last period (from the 1990s onwards), we observe that the Roma are mostly located at peripheral positions, as part of a rich sub-culture, in the films. A formulaic narrative is formed based on common stereotypes, reproducing the image of the Roma as ‘happy-go-lucky’, ‘devious’, ‘opportunist’, ‘petit criminal’ and ‘untrustworthy’. The bodies of the Roma women in particular are fetishized and they continue to be exploited for visual pleasure. Roma melodies and scenes of belly dance occupy a significant screen time in every episode in the TV shows, enhancing the opportunities for visual pleasure (Tunç Cox and Uştuk, 2019: 159–179).



## **A community filmmaking project**

As our field research has revealed, positive developments like the abolishment of the Settlement Law of 1934 in 2006 or the much-celebrated Roma Opening in 2009 have not changed the conditions of the Roma people in Turkey profoundly. Furthermore, Roma people's portrayal in the mainstream Turkish cinema and TV since the 1960s has produced prevailing stereotypes and a popular imaginary that has shaped the knowledge about the Roma people of Turkey in the public domain. Accordingly, Roma people in Turkey are mostly regarded as the 'others' of society, who cannot speak for themselves, who are the subaltern. In order to challenge said clichéd imagery, we have conducted a transformative action research project with the Roma people in the Sıra district, Urla, İzmir, Turkey, for which they volunteered to make their own films.

The main reason for choosing this specific district instead of other neighbourhoods with high population density of Roma in İzmir such as Tepecik, Tenekeli (Ege) or Tarlabası is because Sıra is the most incarcerated and neglected of all. While the other neighbourhoods have been considered for various urban transformation and social and cultural inclusion projects, Sıra has systematically been excluded from such efforts.<sup>11</sup> It is mainly due to its peripheral position unlike the other neighbourhoods which are located in the city centre or in close proximity to the centre, and also as a result of its low population. All these deem Sıra as the ideal location for our research that investigates the potential for agency of the Roma people as the contemporary subaltern.

### *The research field and the method*

Urla is a town 35 km away from the provincial centre of İzmir, Turkey. It has 16 districts, of which Sıra is the second most populated. The municipal population records are not kept in detail, but, according to a study conducted in 2013, the Sıra neighbourhood is the second most populous region of Urla with a population of over 3000. The Roma of Sıra district live in barracks, totalling 299 people. The Roma neighbourhood is situated in an area of 7500 m<sup>2</sup>, with a very high population density. It is predominantly populated by children and adolescents (Şimşir et al., 2013).

According to the data gathered during our preliminary interviews in the field, the first migration of the Roma to Urla dates back to the population exchange after the Lausanne Treaty in 1923. Despite the common negative perception of the Roma across Europe at the time, they were not seen as a threat by Turkish officials provided that they were settled and productive; so their resettlement in Turkey was accepted, even encouraged, although they were not given citizenship up until the 1934 Settlement Law (T.C. Resmi Gazete, 1934). In fact, they were seen as suitable labour power for the advent of the Turkish Republic which was also in need of increasing its population rapidly. The main criteria regulating the resettlement of immigrants in general were their potential contribution to Turkish economy, their

ethnicity and class. If they were Turks, they were allowed to settle where they wished whereas, if they were not Turkish, they had to settle in the districts the government allocated for them (Gürboğa, 2016: 111–117). For instance, most of the Roma that were resettled in Bornova, İzmir, were tobacco workers in Thessaloniki (Kolukırık, 2006: 2). The official state policy for the resettlement of the immigrants at the time was to primarily use the deserted Greek houses in Turkey.<sup>12</sup> However, many Roma were known to escape the designated settlement areas due to social exclusion and discrimination (Gürboğa, 2016: 129). The first group that migrated to the Sıra district were from Thessaloniki, Greece. The neighbourhood received the second wave of migration from the Kandıra district of Kocaeli, predominantly towards the end of the 1980s. After the second wave, migration has continued from various cities, including Ankara, the capital of Turkey. The Roma, who emigrated from Thessaloniki, describe themselves as the natives of Urla.

The current location of the neighbourhood embodies the incarceration of the ethnic group from the mainstream society. According to the statements of the Sıra inhabitants themselves, when the first Roma settlers came, they were forcibly placed in the area by the local government and pushed out of the city silhouette, which resulted in not only the spatial segregation but also in the ethnic exclusion of the population. Because of this spatial configuration and incarceration, the Roma residing in the neighbourhood have limited contact with other Urla natives. The back side of the neighbourhood is adjacent to the road connecting Urla to Seferihisar, making it impossible to expand the liveable environment for the Roma. That is, the neighbourhood as it stands is imprisoned in impenetrable borders. This positioning of the Sıra neighbourhood, *per se*, strengthens the social relations established on the basis of ethnic discrimination, while it defines and regulates the context of intercultural communication – the relations with other Urla residents (*gaco* – non-Roma people). The lack of intercultural contact serves to deepen the prevailing exclusionary discourses and stereotypes about the Roma. The Roma identity has been criminalized, hence is the ghettoization of the neighbourhood. This turns the neighbourhood into an inaccessible zone for non-Roma people. Entering the neighbourhood is perceived as ‘dangerous’ by Urla natives. Spatial incarceration and cultural exclusion deprive the Roma people of a fair participation in the public sphere of the city. As there are no schools, hospitals, health centres, government agencies, buses or transportation facilities in the immediate vicinity of the neighbourhood, the Roma need to leave their neighbourhood to meet their needs. This incarceration and the criminalization of the Roma identity has also led to the exclusion of Roma from the formal labour markets (Uştuk, 2019: 85–87).

From the very beginning of the community filmmaking project, we paid extra attention not to interfere with the narrative and making of the film other than acting as mere providers of technical equipment and staff to avoid any epistemic violation. Because as Bracke points out, ‘the study of the subaltern pushes the scholar to look for her own involvement in creating and reproducing relations of

power and subordination' (Bracke, 2016: 8). That is the reason why we have decided to conduct a transformative action research because it intends not only to strengthen the 'other' but also to question and transform the role and position the researchers take in creating the predominant discourses. Consequently, the researchers have not got involved in the filmmaking and editing processes; from pre to post production, the film was shaped and completed by the Roma themselves.

The project has developed in two stages. The first took place in March 2017, during which we conducted an ethnographic field research mainly using participant observation. From July 2017 onwards, we expanded the ethnographic material and conducted formal and informal in-depth interviews with the Roma of the Sira district as well as the municipality officials who are responsible for the district. During the field research, we went to the neighbourhood on and off, over a seven-month period and conducted 15 in-depth interviews in total. The second stage was the production of the film, which lasted almost a year. During the first weeks of the field visits, we realized that most of the residents were unwilling to let us access their private spaces. This was mainly due to the distrust they have for non-Roma people (*gaco*) as well as the need to conceal their alternative economies and illegal activities. This inevitably led to a fragmented research and filmmaking process.

Even though there were two groups who volunteered to make films in the beginning, one of them eventually dropped out. The group who discontinued were planning to shoot a fiction film with commercial expectations. The second group that wanted to express and discuss issues concerning their identity decided to shoot a documentary film. The main reason for their choice was the contempt



**Figure 1.** Sira demolition.

they had for the prevailing Roma representations in the mainstream media. This mission of re-writing their public image motivated the group to finalize the project despite various hindrances such as the demolition of their barracks which begun half way through the filmmaking process. In the end, we had one medium-length documentary film as the output of the project (Figure 1).

### *A practice of agency?*

Referring to the mainstream cinematic and televised narratives, the director of the auto-ethnographic documentary, Selim Çalık, and the cameraman, Zekeriya Kızı, specifically expressed their disapproval of the portrayal of Roma people as 'immoral', 'primitive' and 'devious' with a happy-go-lucky attitude. They stressed that 'they do not constantly play music and dance without any reason nor [do] their women give birth to their children on the streets as pictured on TV and in films'. By making their own film, they wanted to tackle the discrimination and social exclusion they experience on a daily basis. Correspondingly, they focused on the poor living conditions of the Roma people in the Sıra district. They particularly underlined the housing problem since they all live in the shanties rather than purposefully built houses. As mentioned before, during the shooting period, some of the houses in the area were demolished and the inhabitants were evacuated.

They paid extra attention to create a polyphonic narrative which would allow plurality instead of concentrating on one person's story or life. That is why the director included many interviews with his neighbours even if he had arguments or disagreements with them. This accentuates the role of group identity based on ethnicity in shaping their self-identification as well as the solidarity against non-Roma people.

The film opens with a Romani song (*Opral Miyavniv*, meaning *Four Horses*, Thrace region)<sup>13</sup> performed by the director himself on black screen which fades in to the various images of the Sıra district depicting the daily routines of the inhabitants. The song continues until the title of the film appears. They named their film *Unutulmuş Romanların Hikayesi* (*The Story of the Forgotten Romanies*). The title, per se, explicates the urge they have to write themselves back into the dominant discursive realm, which seemingly tends to exoticize and/or demonize them, if not totally exclude. This at the same time reveals the potential for subaltern agency once they are given the chance and the means (Figure 2).

It is possible to argue that the opportunity to speak by the means of the dominant 'other' has become political for the Roma people of the Sıra district. The imperfect and amateurish quality of their film helps to enhance the realistic claim, rendering the film even more political. For instance, one inadvertent act during shooting served to create a meaningful metaphor: The director was shooting an interview, which was suddenly interrupted by the gathering crowd and spontaneously turned into a musical interlude with the community members playing instruments and dancing. Instead of re-arranging the scene and the frame, the director continued shooting, meaning the chair which was placed there for the



**Figure 2.** Sira filmmaking.

interviewee was forgotten in its place. This empty chair occupied a central position in the scene in the front, while the community members were dancing on the background. In retrospect, the very chair, we argue, became the metaphor for the long-silenced, long-neglected, and thus, inaudible and invisible subaltern; the supposed absent subject lacking any agency. This connotation was further reinforced by the accompanying famous Roma song, *Bizim Mahalle (Our Neighbourhood)*, for the lyrics indicate the importance of collective and cultural identity through their everyday life practices. This very scene was placed right after the title during the editing process, creating a noteworthy juxtaposition. Here they willingly reproduce a common stereotypical image of the Roma as the happy-go-lucky entertainers while the opening scenes underline their often suppressed or assimilated ethnic identity (Figure 3).

This contradictory narrative flow also invited contested interpretation of the film by the Roma themselves. Since this article is not a reception study, it does not focus on the Roma's perception of the film. However, the informal screening of the film for the Sira district inhabitants showed that the majority of them are happy with the outcome of this auto-ethnographic filmmaking project. Still, some, particularly those who are actively involved in various Romani NGOs, expressed their discontent with the dancing scene, even though it is the only one in the entire film, for such scenes readily contribute to the prevailing popular imagery. Yet, even the



**Figure 3.** Sira filmmaking.

latter group was very pleased with the general structure of the film, especially with the employment of ethnic Romani language in the opening song. Because they ‘ashamedly’ confessed to have forgotten their own ethnic language despite their advanced political awareness.

Said accidental creation of a metaphor, and other similar instances, at the same time helped us, the researchers, reflect upon the research process and our positioning in it. Because, instead of complying with the conventional methods of documentary filmmaking, they instinctively and naturally inclined towards their cultural and habitual ways of self-expression, with which they seemingly felt more comfortable. Such a replacement of the hegemonic style with unconventional and culturally particular means of expression taught us the necessity to challenge ourselves to learn from below. In the end, rather than a critical intervention in the scene, we merely observed and eventually realized that this should be interpreted as a form of agency that transforms the hegemonic ways of communication, even if involuntarily, rather than a sign of incompetence or primitiveness that encumbers communication. Their inexperience and awkwardness about the filmmaking practice resulted in several such incidents, reinforcing the potential resistance against the dominant strategic narrative. As Bhabha argues, ‘mimicry is the desire for a recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite . . . In order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference’ (Bhabha, 1994: 86). As a result, during the filmmaking project they experimented with the means of the dominant ‘other’ creating their peculiar narrative style and discourse. Simultaneously, we learnt to listen to them without imposing our frameworks, formulas and methods on them, breaking with our presumed internalized deafness to the subaltern, to refer to Parry’s earlier-mentioned critique of Spivak.



**Figure 4.** Sıra filmmaking.

While reproducing some popular imagery in order to penetrate the established discursive realm, they actively strived to challenge existing bigotries by elaborating upon the issues the mainstream films and TV shows fail to deal with such as poverty, unemployment, class, social exclusion and discrimination. Reproducing some of the circulating stereotypes to a certain extent, they shot several music scenes although they were omitted in the editing process. In addition, many interviewees approved their reputed role as entertainers in the Turkish society. Yet, they also emphasized that they want non-Roma people to acknowledge the existing heterogeneity in the Roma community. The director and all the interviewees repeated their wish to be seen, heard, accepted and helped throughout the film. Challenging the abovementioned corpus of exclusionary narratives that reduce them to an exotic and often threatening ethnic group, they deliberately emphasized that they are part of the mainstream society and the Turkish nation, and they wanted to be treated as one. In doing so, they even internalized the hegemonic nationalist discourse by arguing that ‘they do military service’, ‘they live under the same Turkish flag’ and ‘they are Muslims’ like every other Turkish citizen (Figure 4).

Overall, the filmmaking group and the Roma of the Sıra district saw the documentary as an opportunity to express themselves, and thus, they used it as a platform to get their voice heard, to become visible. Because even though this was a film made by the Roma themselves, they knew the target audience was non-Roma.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the reproduction of common stereotypes in the narrative appears to function as a tactic to reach out. They utilized accustomed cliches to attract attention, to perform what is expected of them and then they drew attention to their neglected problems. This, on the one hand, means they, as the

non-producers of mainstream narratives, cultural representations and artefacts, consume the predominant public imagery of, and about, them produced by non-Roma people. On the other hand, it indicates how they appropriate such imagery to initiate dialogue with the 'other' by deploying the 'other's language and discourse, and eventually to disrupt the existing hegemonic relation. Because, as De Certeau points out, 'the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices' (De Certeau, 1984: xvii). With reference to Michael Gardiner's discussion of De Certeau's ideas, this film, therefore, can be read as 'an act to subvert the structures of power in the less visible and non-confrontational ways that are available to them' (Gardiner, 2001: 171).

## Conclusion

Having located the Roma in Turkey in the category of the contemporary subaltern predicated on the pertinent literature, we have asked whether the subaltern can actually speak and acquire a sense of agency. To this end, we have conducted a transformative action research project with the Roma of the Sıra district in İzmir, Turkey, resulting in an auto-ethnographic film. In brief, this practice of auto-ethnography can be seen as a tactic of self-empowerment that seeks to enhance the visibility of this marginalized group and their status in Turkish society. Because auto-ethnography can be considered 'a subversive form of inscription that consciously draws attention to the constructed nature of the master narrative. It is a deconstructive practice that comments on existing stereotypes and rewrites them' (Moorti, 2003: 363). Thus, it can function as the means that 'enable ordinary people to reclaim autonomy from the all-pervasive forces of economics, politics and culture in general' (De Certeau, 2005: 213). Even if the Roma of the Sıra district seem to have refrained from a head-on confrontation, the film indicates the existence of agency for the subaltern, the potential for resistance and change.

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## Notes

1. They outline four different paradigms of action research in order for us to see the relation of epistemological grounds and ontology: technical, practical, emancipatory and transformative (McCormack and Dewing, 2012).
2. Please refer to GC Spivak (2000) for a detailed explanation of the concept of the new subaltern and how it changes the meaning and location of subalternity today.
3. It should be noted here that we are not the only scholars to address the Roma as the subaltern. See Özateşler (2014) and Kolukırık (2008) for instance for various examples. Nonetheless, unlike our attempt here, Özateşler's work do not critically engage with the concept or elaborate upon why and how the Roma should be subsumed under the rubric of subaltern. Similarly, Kolukırık's study mainly focuses on the notion of stranger/foreigner rather than providing an overview of the scholarly debates concerning the concept of subaltern in particular.
4. See Surdu (2019) for a discussion of the ethnic quantification and categorization of the Roma via administrative and scientific practices such as censuses.
5. Aligning with the attempts to fight discrimination against the Roma across Europe, Romani studies and various research projects concerning Roma people in Turkey multiplied beginning in the 2000s. The abolishment of the infamous Settlement Law of 1934 (which simply stigmatized Roma people as 'unwanted' along with anarchists and deportees) in 2006, Promoting Roma (Gypsy) Rights in Turkey research project in 2006, several Roma Workshops and the Roma Opening in 2009, and Kocaeli Metropolitan Municipality's EU project in 2013 can be given as examples.
6. See Akgül (2010) for a detailed discussion of the politicization of the Roma people in Turkey.
7. See Özateşler (2014) for a detailed account and discussion of the events.
8. From an anthropological perspective, Egemen Yılıgür addresses them as 'peripatetic'; a term that is not exclusive to Roma but encompasses those who are 'endogamic in different levels, subsist on providing services and craft production, and have a high level of spatial mobility' (2017: 1).
9. All the title translations in the article are ours.
10. It should be noted here that this article is the outcome of the second part of a three-phased research project. Each phase should be considered individually and yet as complementary. In the initial phase, in order to expose the prevailing prejudicial discourse concerning the Roma people in popular Turkish films and television series, we studied all the films (22 in total) from the 1960s onwards with Roma characters either in central or peripheral positions in the story, and all major TV shows (four in total) that focus on fictional Roma communities in Turkey (Tunç Cox and Uştuk, 2019). Our categorization here is based on the findings of said analysis.
11. See Kaya and Zengel (2005) for an example of an international urban design idea competition specifically focusing on a central Roma district in İzmir.
12. See Arı (2000, 2003) for the details of the population policies of the young Turkish Republic.
13. Refer to Duygulu (2006) for the musical note and the story of the song.
14. The last phase of our three-phased research project is designed as a reception study.

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