Play in the Ghetto

Global Entertainment and the European ‘Roma Problem’

Anikó Imre

THE ROMA IN FORTRESS EUROPE

A recent issue of the Roma Rights Quarterly dedicated itself to the theme of Fortress Europe, which Claude Cahn in his editorial introduction names ‘the most visible, systemic evil in Europe today’. He recalls the very first issue of the journal entitled ‘Divide and Deport’, in September 1996, which examined the restrictive laws and policies aimed at or resulting in the exclusion of Roma and other ‘non-citizens’ from Austria and Germany. He identifies Central and Eastern Europe as the site of ongoing trouble, ill-prepared for the obligations to integrate EU rules and standards in the absence of laws to protect immigrants and refugees. ‘In addition,’ he continues:

Western Europe has increasingly treated the states of Central and Eastern Europe as a borderland zone into which unwanted migrants and refugees can be expelled without explicit, egregious violations of international law taking place. A new harsh regime ordered in place by cynical Western Eurocrats, displacing the harsh old regime in countries in which governments have done little to nothing to roll back the rising tide of xenophobia and racism: This is Central and Eastern Europe today.

Given the cases of police abuse, illegal expulsion, racist beatings and shootings, lack of access to healthcare, gravely inadequate housing, illegal evictions and educational discrimination that the rest of the journal proceeds to discuss – no doubt the tip of the iceberg compared with the number of cases that have not received any legal attention – it would be hard to disagree with the ERRC’s statement that ‘the Roma (Gypsies) remain to date the most deprived ethnic group of Europe’. However, while NGOs, governmental organisations and social scientific studies have tirelessly called attention to the scapegoating of and violence against the Roma in post-Cold War Europe, it would be hasty to dismiss all recent changes as negative; and it would be counter-productive to ground Roma identities solely in victimisation.

2 Ibid
3 Back cover of the Roma Rights Quarterly


6 Kligman et al, op cit, p 113


A more complex model of post-communist developments is offered by sociologists Gail Kligman, Iván Szelényi and János Ladányi, who conceptualise the changing situation of the Roma in terms of an *underclass*. The notion of the underclass is typically associated with urban black ghettos, which represent the growing segment of the population who remain stuck at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy after the postwar deindustrialisation and restructuring of affluent Western economies. Neoconservative theories from the late 1960s onwards tried to essentialise the ‘culture of poverty’ in underclass ghettos, pointing to race as their defining feature, and ultimately blaming the victim for the reproduction of poverty. In the 1970s, however, the sociologist William Julius Wilson, in his book *The Declining Significance of Race*, returned the underclass formation to its structural roots and contested the equation of an underclass with blacks. He explained that the significance of race, though not racism, had declined in relation to economic restructuring. Blacks were differentially affected by de-industrialisation. Some benefited from economic opportunities and formed part of a new black middle class. Those employed in the sectors hardest hit by de-industrialisation, however, remained in the increasingly segregated inner-city ghettos, locked into extreme poverty.

The underclass formation, Kligman, Szelényi and Ladányi explain, helps analogically to describe the changing situation of the Roma in the course of the post-communist transformations. Most Roma are increasingly excluded and segregated as a result of de-industrialisation, de-collectivisation and the outburst of purifying Eurocentric nationalisms. Some of them, however, have seized economic opportunities and are upwardly mobile. As Kligman et al write, ‘it is this fundamental dynamic of increasing socio-economic exclusion on the one hand, and socio-economic improvement on the other, that makes it possible to speak of underclass formation’.6

This is the sociologists’ assessment. While the underclass dialectic is a useful model because it interrupts monolithically negative ideas about the Roma rooted in discrimination, racism and poverty, it still remains somewhat too homogenising. If we reach across disciplinary fences and take into account the extent to which global media culture has penetrated and transformed post-communist economies, societies and identities, we will see multiple, fluid connections not only between the upwardly mobile and ghetto-bound parts of the Romany populations but also between Roma and non-Roma within each nation, and within Europe as a whole.

The pan-European attention that has turned anti-Roma discrimination from an institutionalised and naturalised fact, the private business of communist states, into a major condition of desired EU accession has also brought the ‘Roma issue’ into daily media prominence in post-communist Europe. This has fuelled anti-Roma fury but has also increased collective sensitivity to stereotypes. Even more important, some of the same qualities that had for centuries served to demonise and homogenise the Roma as deviant, shiftless, lazy, naturally unfit to be hard-working citizens of the territorial nation-state, are revalourised by the transnational, mobile, hybrid, intersecting scopes of global media capitalism. This transnational mass media culture, through which all
political struggles necessarily pass in the post-Cold War era, has rapidly transformed East European national identities in the past two decades. The task is then to develop an approach to the post-communist ‘Roma problem’ in Europe that is able to take into account the accelerating formation of hybrid and mobile identities without ignoring the unique histories of East European nationalism.

**THE TIME OF SOME GYPSIES**

Global popular culture voraciously incorporates ethnic differences in the pursuit of selling and consuming non-stop entertainment. This process has two sides: it can be seen as liberating and democratic, empowering minorities whose voices and images would otherwise be missing or stereotyped. At the same time, it implies the appropriation of such voices and images by corporate multiculturalism and its cultures of simulation, which re-trivialises racial difference on a commercial basis. In Eastern European national regimes, global popular culture is generally seen by political and cultural opinion-makers as threatening – ostensibly because it undermines ‘authentic’ national literacy grounded in the Eurocentric cult of modernist high culture. While the growing resistance to the new triumph of commercialism is a justifiable and necessary reaction, it has an unacknowledged side, bound up with the neocolonial mobilisation of nationalism by comprador state and intellectual elites: the fear of racial contamination (as well as gendered and sexualised plurality) by a kind of play that is multicoloured and hybrid.

The Roma are twice rendered abject in the negotiation between nation-states and corporate agents of globalisation and Europeanisation. First, because they are perceived as unable and unwilling to assimilate to the national project, and are thus universally judged to be an impediment to full and furious EU accession. One can also see right away that excluding the Roma from the national body altogether will not help state governments fix the national self-image. Rather, it is precisely this low collective self-image, the result of long-term economic inferiority to the West, that has been projected onto the visibly different and initially nomadic Roma, obeying the trickle-down logic of colonialism that compels the colonised to perpetuate internalised colonial exclusions. Second, the Roma are also demonised because of their inherently transnational identity affiliations, which turn them into convenient suspects for allying themselves with the dreaded forces of globalisation. This is then compounded by traditional representations that reduce the Roma to musical play and ‘mobile’ ethics, employed as a proof of inferior reason rather than metaphorical evidence of potentially progressive play-in-identity.

Maintaining a fear of cultural imperialism helps support the state’s own hegemonic tendencies towards its minorities. Eastern European nation-states’ reinvention of the ‘cultural imperialism’ paradigm in the most simplified format that the term suggests – despite ample evidence that the multi-directionality of the global cultural landscape far exceeds this designation – itself follows a long European tradition. It is also continuous with the Communist regimes’ propaganda warfare to belittle everything Western and magnify everything national.
Finally, it denies both the fact that several Eastern European cultures were Westernised and Americanised before 1989 and that Eastern European states do engage in eager collaboration with global corporations, including media conglomerates, when their interests so dictate.

Some instances of this ludic, global ‘mediation’ between East European nations and their scapegoated Roma others are worrisome because they reproduce the violent opposition between a homogenously conceived Roma population and proper national citizens: The practice of ‘roming’ in Slovakia, for instance, refers to the playful circulation of cell-phone text messages that offer a certain number of calling minutes for every ten murdered Roma. The computer game ‘Oláh Action’ was downloaded by about 4000 people in Hungary in the course of the thirty-two hours that it was accessible on the Internet in February 2005. The task of the game was to exterminate Roma in Hungary, county by county, with a choice of weapons. When a county turned Roma-free, its map section turned white.

Other examples of Roma media play are more ambiguous. Roma faces have become more common and more varied on Eastern European television screens over the last ten years, and not only in crime reports and cabarets. Most programming has shown increasing sensitivity to the politics of stereotypes. The fate of the satirical television show My Big Fat Roma Wedding, aired on the Hungarian commercial TV channel RTL Klub in 2002, is instructive. The creators intended to capitalise on the spectators’ global film experiences by adopting the title and plot of the blockbuster My Big Fat Greek Wedding in order to unite the nation in laughter at the expense of Gypsies once again, as numerous jokes and cabarets had done with impunity before. But the show provoked the first universal media uproar over Romany representation in national history. Romany and non-Romany organisations alike contested the gross stereotypes of the Roma as lazy, uneducated musicians and dancers. The makers of the show defended themselves by arguing that their parody had come from old cabarets and Gypsy jokes and their purpose was ‘only entertainment’. They further appealed to artistic freedom – in other words, the excessive moral liberties that ‘artists’ enjoy in these nations – adding that their representation was purely fictional rather than sociological. If it was objectionable then so should be Emir Kusturica’s Time of the Gypsies. The Time of the Gypsies, however, is also a time when the political empowerment of Romany minorities is conditioned on the politicisation of entertainment and representation.

The creators of the show made the mistake of misunderstanding their audience. They neglected to consider the extent to which the global media had already transformed identities that had been primarily national before 1989. The introduction of a sort of postmodernism able to liberate popular pleasures from the terror of high culture also brought into play the multiculturalism of global media. Playfulness, which used to be the exclusive property of state elites and postmodern intellectuals, has become the property of the media business in which the rules of profit compete with those of ‘national ethics’. These compromises, this shared turf between transnational media corporations and the nation-state, provide an ambivalent...
situation for the Roma poised between empowerment and exploitation by both sides.

Local versions of the *Pop Idol* series have recently borne out this ambivalence throughout the region. These televised musical talent shows have been excessively popular among East European viewers. In the second 2005 season of *Czech Idol* – named *SuperStar* – the victory of Romany Vlastimil Horvath provoked widespread media reflection on the politics of ethnic representation. For some commentators, the popularity of Horvath, the ‘integrated superstar’, signals the majority’s increasing tolerance towards the Roma and other minorities, especially compared with the first season in which there were practically no non-white, non-Czech contestants, and in which the Romany finalist finished only second. Others wonder whether the celebration of Roma musical talent simply confirms the division between ‘acceptable’ (that is, entertaining) Roma and the rest, whom the majority of Czechs continue to regard as ‘noisy, aggressive, primitive, selfish, troublemakers, lazy, false and dirty’, according to a poll quoted in an article. In a similar vein, the first two seasons of *Hungarian Idol* (*Megasztár*) brought media prominence, national stardom and European recognition to several Roma singers, including the winner and two runners-up. Ibolya Oláh, who finished close second in the 2004 season, was officially chosen to represent Hungarian culture in the European Parliament in Brussels where she performed in March 2005. The final of the 2005 season, in which Roma singer Caramel (Ferenc Molnár) prevailed, was attended by scores of political and cultural elites. Three Roma finalists received the Roma Civil Rights Foundation’s awards for performing outstanding service to the cause of the of Roma in Hungary.

The Hungarian *Gyözike Show*, the first primetime Hungarian television show starring a Roma, has had a similar effect. It is reality TV in the fashion of *The Osbornes* and *Newly Weds*, which records the daily life of Gyözö Gázspár, leader of the popular Roma band Romantic. The fact that a Romany man playing essentially himself calls the shots on popular television, attracting a large non-Roma audience, is a very significant step. But Gyözike and his family hardly represent the Roma as a whole, particularly the larger downward-spiralling part of the Romany population.

The most radical way in which global entertainment culture has mediated the post-socialist situation of Romany minorities in Eastern Europe is by turning the ghetto, the place of the urban ethnic underclass, the very site of Roma segregation, into the site of profitable entertainment. The most popular results of such a convergence are Roma rap bands, playing East European varieties of world music, which draw on the identification of Roma musicians with the rappers of the black ghetto. The Czech band *Syndrom Snopp*, led by the Roma rapper Gipsy – who also calls himself *Cerry pes* or ‘Black Dog’ – distinguishes itself from mainstream Czech hip-hop bands by its radical critique of racial hatred and commercialism. The Hungarian Roma band *Fekete vonat*, or ‘Black Train’, was the first among many to articulate messages about Roma and non-Roma relations and to advocate Romany identity politics through entertainment in the 1990s.
THE LUDIC GHETTO

A term loaded with traumatic historical connotations, ‘ghetto’ immediately evokes the Roma Holocaust, an often-neglected result of Nazi persecution during the Second World War. The wars of Yugoslav succession brought the term back into circulation in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. Large-scale post-Cold War migrations led to the establishment of ‘Roma ghettos’ in Western Europe. In Eastern Europe, the atrocities committed against Roma minorities have been particularly disturbing. Some have caused international outrage, including the brutal beating to death of a Romany woman in front of her children in Slovakia, the infamous wall that a Czech city built to segregate Romany homes or the Hungarian high school that organised a separate graduation ceremony for its Romany students. While hate-speech directed against Roma was acceptable and naturalised even before 1989, now many ‘decent’ East European citizens seriously consider the establishment of apartheid; for instance, members of the Slovak Parliament proposed setting up Native-American-type reservations.

The extreme measures of exclusion only continue what had been happening with tacit state approval and even encouragement in Eastern Europe during Communism: the ‘caring’ communist state masqueraded as the benefactor of backward and unwilling Roma groups. Until the
1960s, Hungarian Roma were issued identity cards of a distinct colour.\textsuperscript{32} Roma children are still often automatically considered mentally disabled and sent to ‘Gypsy schools’ throughout the region.\textsuperscript{33} Assigning Roma families inferior housing in government complexes, the state’s direct effort at forced integration, also led to the formation of Roma ghettos. As Renata Salecl argues, while on the level of ideological meaning nationalism and Communism were opposed, the former being anti-Communist and the latter declaring itself to be internationalist in orientation, on the level of fantasy they shared solid ground in homophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and sexism. The takeover of governments that after 1989 came to represent the right-leaning East European moral majority reduced the distance between manifest ideological meaning and underlying racist and sexist fantasies.\textsuperscript{34}

In a convergence that is as ironic as it is productive, the exclusion of the Roma from European nation-states and the emergence of Romany participation on the stage of global media and particularly world music, have come together recently in the representational space of the ghetto. I will examine the implications of this spatial convergence in some detail with reference to the recent animated feature \textit{Nyöcker} (2004) – literally, \textit{Eightdistrict}, also translated as \textit{The District} – produced in Hungary in a collaboration between Romany and non-Romany artists.

\textit{Nyöcker}, one of the richest testimonies to the re-eroticisation of the emerging East European ghetto, references its setting in its very title and generic designation: ‘animated ghetto film’. ‘Nyöcker’ is slang for ‘nyolcadik kerület’ or ‘the eighth district’ of Budapest, also known as Józsefváros.\textsuperscript{35} The setting is a real centre of urban poverty, prostitution, drug trafficking and a high concentration of Roma inhabitants. The urban post-socialist ghetto’s typical underclass characters inhabit the film: a white pimp with the group of prostitutes he operates, an accented Chinese restaurant owner and his martial-arts-obsessed son, an alcoholic but charming Jewish plastic surgeon and his geeky son, members of the Ukrainian mafia, corrupt policemen and, most prominently, members of an extended Roma family. These realistic, though at the same time stereotypically cartoonish characters are thrown into what appears to be a Shakespearean romance. The Roma teenager Ricsi is infatuated with his white Hungarian classmate Julika. The ongoing feud between the two families, which cuts along the colour line, prevents their happiness. Ricsi is advised by an old drunkard uncle that the only way to reconcile the two fathers is by making money. The kids construct a time machine that takes them back to prehistoric times where they draw oil out of mammoth carcasses. They erect an oil well and begin selling their ‘black gold’ to prominent economic and media leaders of the world, including a mercilessly ridiculed George W Bush. At the end of the film, Bush decides to ‘liberate’ the district by bombing it; but he mistakes Bucharest for Budapest through severe cartographic challenge.

\textit{Nyöcker}’s postmodern hybrid style incorporates a combination of global media models, from MTV music videos to television news, from Japanese anime to Monty Python’s two-dimensional animation, from themes of prehistoric sci-fi fantasies and adventure films to the stock characters of teen flicks – an entertainment mélangé that strikes one as farcical. This combination of elements results in an explosive ventilation of suppressed and repressed energies whose symbolic locus is precisely
the urban ghetto, an increasingly multicultural, material space of racial exclusion, material deprivation, unemployment and immigration. Three of the most important strategies whereby the film introduces new, ‘cool’ Romany identities are its music, its use of language and its innovative animation technique. The filmmakers deliberately drew on the district’s association with Roma rap by recruiting several Roma musicians for the project, including rapper LL Junior, who lends his face and voice to the protagonist Ricsi.36

The use of language is the most immediate source of humour in Nyócker. Both spoken language and song lyrics mock the state-controlled media’s and educational institutions’ insistence on the purity of Hungarian, the official language of the nation-state, held up as a chief survival avenue since J G von Herder’s (1744–1803) ominous prediction of the death of small nations. Similar to other small East European nations, the Hungarian nation ‘lives in its language’ – to borrow the title of Peter Sherwood’s investigation of the thorough political interdependence of language and nationalism in Hungary.37 At the same time, the film also consistently ridicules the invasion of global consumerism in a series of linguistic and visual puns, such as ‘McKivánsz’, that is, ‘You want me’ – the name of a fast-food outlet prominently displayed in various scenes of the film. Nyócker’s anti-purist linguistic strategy rejects the idealised national homogeneity that earlier forms of anti-state resistance assumed: it speaks in a mix of languages, including Russian, Hungarian, German, English and Romany, mocking and subverting the ethical and political registers to which each had been assigned earlier. English, the language of American media MTV imperialism and the African-American ghetto, consistently contaminates Hungarian. Most subversively, the Romany language, formerly obliterated from venues of national media and politics, is represented as the local equivalent of black English, the youth language of the new millennium. In Nyócker, even non-Roma characters mix Romany expressions in their language. By elevating Romany to the level of ‘language’ in the first place, equal in value to Hungarian, the film confronts Hungarian speakers with the fact that many Romany expressions had been a part of spoken and even written

36 Available at: http://www.nyocker.hu (author’s translation)

Hungarian for generations. It is just that their etymological origins remained effaced in an effort to insist on an absurd model of one-directional influences in which only the national language and culture impacts the racialised minority and the latter’s only enlightened option is assimilation.

Nyócker turns this model upside down not simply by associating the Romany language with youthful cool but also by its thematic introduction as a language of diplomacy and trade within the narrative. The gang leader Ricsi makes sure that the polyglot robot that their Jewish ‘Einstein’ constructs to handle international oil negotiations is programmed to speak Romany along with English, German, French, Arabic and other languages. In another scene, the teens led by Ricsi go back to prehistoric times to bring oil into the future-present. Most of them wander around in the new location disoriented and utterly confused by the time-travel. While Ricsi’s white antagonist Simi Csorba makes inane remarks, Ricsi engages in negotiation in Romany language with a local prehistoric woman whose face is that of his Gypsy fortune-teller aunt. This is a powerful statement about the transnational reach of the Romany network: it asserts that Romany roots go farther down than the tenuous historical roots of nations. The scene also evokes the quick adaptability and negotiating abilities of the Romany – traits that have been widely known in the negative only: the Roma will cheat you. Here they take a reverse twist to indicate valuable life skills essential for access to and success in a global capitalist marketplace.

NATIONAL CINEMA, ROMA PROTAGONISTS

The key to Nyócker’s novelty as a post-socialist allegory of glocal ethnicities – also its most frequently noted aspect – is its innovative animated form. Without the substantial state support and large studios of the past, a handful of ambitious and talented young men, including Romany scriptwriters Jakab László Orsós and Damage, combined hand-drawn, two-dimensional stop-motion animation with digital animation of a limited technological scale. In effect, two-dimensional characters move around in the realistic three-dimensional space of the eighth district. In addition, many of the characters carry photographed heads of the dubbing actors or other well-known media personalities on their awkward two-dimensional bodies. The film’s satirical-allegorical effect derives largely from the jarring distance between photographic realism and jerky two-dimensional animation.

The projection of stereotypical hand-drawn characters with mask-like photographed heads onto a recognisable cityscape within a fantastic plot that requires quick editing, split screens and other familiar techniques of global television and film foregrounds its own performative function at any moment of the film. The mockery is directed against the state’s political and cultural elites, constructing spectatorial solidarity in a knowing, cynical repudiation of both Communism and capitalism offered on the terms of the nation-state. While the plot is fantastic and barely coherent, the musical numbers provide interpretive clues. The theme song, ‘Forog a pénz’ (‘The money rolls’) playfully raps:
If you think, brother, that the district is a fairy tale,
You have lost your mind!
If you watch this story about the district,
You can put it all together like a castle of cards.

... 
The state stuffs all sorts in here,
Chinese, Arab, Gypsy, and white trash.
The castle looks like garbage from the outside;
If you take a card out, the thing collapses.

The money rolls from hand to hand
Everyone gets to hold it.
What you live through here each day
Is nothing but a bloody gamble.38

In other words, the ghetto film allegorically constructs a micro model of a dirty card game that the state plays in the real eighth district. This hybrid, ethnicised 'trash' space is like a castle made of cards: temporary, unstable and without a solid foundation – an image that by extension stands for Hungary as a whole.

At the same time, the film’s publicity campaign emphasises continuities with previous currents of Hungarian animation. It turns watching the film into a moral duty by stressing the fact that the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation, the agency responsible for distributing state funds devoted to the national film industry and which funded half the film’s meagre production budget, is contracted to be reimbursed unless the film sells 80,000 tickets in the theatres. Indeed, 80,000 became a magic number, wedding the heroic times of Communist production with a marketing trick. The film’s online forum engaged viewers in a patriotic race to save ‘national animation’ and support ‘our film’ by going to see it, multiple times if possible, and recruiting other viewers to do so. This enthusiasm, fully exploited by the filmmakers, is also rooted in the nostalgic shadow of a collective opposition to the heavily centralised institutions of cultural control under socialism whose place is here metonymically filled by the Hungarian Motion Picture Foundation.

The latest Hungarian animated feature derives its national appeal from capitalising on post-Communist, post-EU-accession Romany empowerment. The film’s rap duels between ‘whites’ and ‘Roma’ are testimonies to this new, cool ‘black’ power. The lyrics from the song ‘Watch Out!’ (‘Vigyázz!’) leave no doubt that Ricsi, personified by rapper LL Junior, is the guy to identify with:

Tell me what you want from me and I won’t hurt you
But if you pick on me, you’d better be tough!
Here is the Gypsy force, the power is mine,
We’ll find out who will win out.

... 
The Gypsies are the blacks of Europe
They will rule the district!

At the height of the success of the new oil businesses, the Hungarian Prime Minister visits the neighbourhood with his delegation to meet the
two business partners in person. The event is presented as if through a documentary camera, with the politicians’ faces blocked out, emphasizing both the reality potential of the scene and the representation’s sarcastic, allegorical tendency. The meeting takes place in a public area with pro-EU demonstrators in the background noisily holding up their blue signs. This provides an ironic backdrop to a scene in which the chief politician of a new member state pays his respects to the economically powerful, notwithstanding the fact that the latter are embodied by Lőránt Lakatos, ‘life artist’, and Károly Csorba, ‘entrepreneur’, as the Roma pub owner and the white pimp introduce themselves.

During these introductions, the Prime Minister’s assistant whispers into his boss’s ear of Lakatos’s and Csorba’s criminal records, including the fact that Lakatos ‘wants street signs in Romany’. One can also hear someone in the Prime Minister’s group say aloud, ‘Gypsy and white trash together. Which one do you think stinks worse?’ Csorba and Lakatos overhear this remark and react in a satisfyingly violent outburst of ethnic-class solidarity that involves the kids, the hookers, and the Romany, Chinese, Arab and Jewish locals. They force the official delegation of suited men and reporters to flee onto an oncoming tram, where the ultimate humiliation is waiting for them: the bloodthirsty controller, the king of public transportation – that is, the real world from which politicians are widely considered to be removed.

The protagonists of this new, ‘glocal’ narrative are people who are only rhetorically included in the national collective, those the national elites would rather leave behind in the East in the course of their relentless march towards the West: the criminal and the drunk, the foreign-speaking and foreign-looking – in other words, the Gypsies of the nation. In the film’s allegorical perspective, it is the contaminating element, the Roma in particular, who stand for the transitional-transnational nation, retroactively making visible the whiteness and nationalism of the voices that had previously represented it.

But before one jumps into celebrating the progressive transnational potential of the new national animated film, one also needs to consider that the film itself by necessity plays by the rules of the very global
entertainment market that provides it with political and aesthetic inspiration. These rules do not allow more involvement in local politics than is sufficient to make the film a local and translocal sensation, to lend it trendiness and sexiness. Ultimately, the film’s critical voice remains non-committal, self-underminingly playful and postmodern, at times even cynical, poking fun at stereotypes without a consistent political project. For instance, after the united forces of the neighbourhood triumphantly fight back against the sleazy state politicians, the two fathers turn to each other: ‘Now what? Let’s drink.’ With that, they retire to Lakatos’s pub to swear friendship and quench their revolutionary zeal with many glasses of liquor. Later they revive from their drunken stupor to discover that the oil wells have dried up. This brings an abrupt end to friendship, collaboration and ethnic solidarity, and throws Nyöcker-Hungary back immediately into its original state of urban warfare.

It would be far-fetched to claim that the Roma’s ethnic prominence in the film’s taboo-breaking, demystifying thrust or the new youthful cool associated with Roma rap contribute to establishing a more dignified collective Roma identity. But, at the very least, the film complicates notions of ethnic representation by foregrounding, deploring, exoticising and then mocking stereotypes all at the same time. It explicitly undermines the fragile unity that the post-socialist state is trying to solidify between state and nation by extending the nation beyond its state borders and exposing the way in which transnational capital manipulates nationalism more efficiently than top-down appeals to purity of language and love of country.

The broader aim of this essay has been to argue for the need to connect media and cultural studies and social sciences in discussing post-Communist, post-Cold War transformations of ethnicity. Any approach that sets out to ‘solve the Roma problem’ necessarily limits itself to the perspective of modern (Eastern) European nationalisms. The perspective I have adopted in this essay is not contingent on authentic membership in one or the other kind of community. While it rejects the rigid binary categories of post-Communist state nationalisms, it is not a ‘Roma’ perspective either, and I can lay claim to neither of these identifications. It is instead rooted in the acknowledgement that the distinction between Roma identities and ‘proper’ Eastern and Central European identities is the discursive and institutionalised product of Eurocentric nationalisms, contingent on the perpetual performance of its own legitimisation.

At the current stage of post-Wall European transformations, it seems not only productive but also inevitable to rethink nationalisms through the lens of Romany identities that are enabled and rewarded by global entertainment media and world music and to reflect on the coexistence of this play – often in the same actual place and representational space – with brutal discrimination against Roma populations. To what extent and in what ways the former trend can engage with and transform the latter remains the most important question on which to speculate.