

Visual self-representations of LGBTIQ Roma: towards queer intersectional methodologies

(Preliminary draft)

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Introduction

Roma constitute a heterogeneous, transnational ethnic 'grouping' of numerous diverse sub-groups. Numerous members of these diverse sub-groups speak various versions and dialects of the Romani language and engage in similar cultural practices and customs. Yet, Roma are not united by one common language, religion, cultural practice, geographical location, occupation, physical appearance or lifestyle (Surdu and Kovats 2015; McGarry 2010). In the vast majority of cases, Roma are citizens of individual nation states; conversely, Roma are often *seen* (and at times *see* themselves) as a 'nation without a state'. This means that Roma and Romani identities are highly diverse and heterogenous. However, this heterogeneity of the cultural, ethnic and other identifications that Roma make has been rarely reflected in how Roma are represented.

Contrary to this complex reality, Roma and Romani identity have been subject to a plethora of distorted fantasies and binary stereotypical representations – whether notional, social or visual – imposed by majority non-Roma society. This paper argues that just like the lived experiences of LGBTIQ Roma (Fremlova 2017), visual and other self-representations of LGBTIQ Roma pose a fundamental challenge to stereotypical, one-dimensional, homogenising and essentialising representations of Roma. Informed by queer theoretical concepts and feminist queer methodologies, a preliminary analysis shows that the visual self-representations of LGBTIQ Roma allow for an alternative visual paradigm to emerge, bringing to the foreground representations of the ordinary and the everyday that exist in lieu of the 'positive' and 'negative' binary poles of stereotypical representations.

Mired in binary (mis)representations

Non-Roma have historically fantasised about Roma, thus creating numerous stereotypes, myths and binary notions about Romani ethnicity or 'Romaniness' as opposed to more varied, nuanced and accurate representations of Roma. At the same time, as the dominant social group, non-Roma have claimed 'to see with universal relevance' (Haraway 1991 188), thus establishing a dominant visuality. These 'stark, crude representations of Roma (...) become a form of power and control as identities are given essential qualities' (Tremlett 2017, 722). For the purposes of this paper, I will call them *misrepresentations* in order to emphasise the idea that '[a]ll stereotypes are inaccurate, even the positive ones (McGarry 2014, 761). These multitudinous misrepresentations have come to be intrinsically associated with the 'essential', 'defining', 'in-born markers', or 'properties' of Roma and Romani identity as a

homogenous ethnic group identity. They have become 'common knowledge', instrumental in maintaining the (often negative) perceptions of, views and beliefs about Roma held by many non-Roma. This has resulted in Roma and Romani identity being mired in a binary way of *seeing*. On the one hand, non-Roma have romanticised Roma, defining Roma and Romani identity by images of unchained freedom, passion, voluptuousness and exoticism (Oprea 2004, 1; Mayall 2003, 1). On the other, non-Roma have vilified Roma, portraying them in much more sinister ways: as criminals, thieves, vermin, a problem, inadaptable, undesirable, a/anti-social, work-shy, foreign elements, responsible for European societies' ills such as mass unemployment, migration, poverty, ill health and lack of social cohesion (Hancock 2002; Horváthová 2002; Liégeois 1983; Vermeersch 2006; McGarry 2014). The actual, everyday lives of people with multiple identities and identifications, one of which happens to be Roma, have thus been hijacked by the socially constructed, distorted notion of 'Gypsiness', 'the Gypsy' and a 'Gypsy fetish' (Gay y Blasco 2008, 298). Consequently, the everyday lives of Roma as ordinary people are eclipsed by either non-Roma's romanticising or vilifying misrepresentations of Romani identities, which are seen, understood and defined along strictly ethnic/racial lines.

McGarry (2014) reminds us that "'[r]epresentations' refers to how the community is understood by itself as well as by others' (2014, 756); and that negative societal 'representations of Roma as deviant, threatening and criminal have clear implications for the treatment of Roma by the state' (ibid 760) (e.g. the mistreatment of Roma in Italy in 2008 and more recently in 2018 and in France in 2010). McGarry also very helpfully distinguishes between 'representation of', or hetero- representation, and 'representation for', or *self-representation*:

the former refers to the construction of Roma identity and how they are seen and understood whilst the latter refers to the capacity of Roma to articulate their voice, make demands and control dominant images of themselves. (...) the two are linked. Without a presence in public life, the proliferation of Roma representations will continue unabated. (...) These representations have been constructed and sustained by elites, academics, etc., in institutional contexts, some of which may also have a Roma heritage. Any discussion on Roma representations must be aware of the academy's role in shaping dominant understandings so that due consideration can be given to potentially harmful representations (ibid 757).

Indeed, binary, literally 'black and white' representations of Roma by others (hetero-representations) present an issue even when they are used with allegedly good intentions. As End (2017) observes, even seemingly neutral representations of Roma may reproduce binary, racialised/ethnicised visual paradigms. Take, for example, the new series *Most!/Bridge!* (which also refers to the north-Bohemian town of Most where race relations between non-Roma and Roma have been tense for decades) produced by Czech television and broadcast in primetime. As one Romani commentator observed,

[t]here are still many viewers who are amused by this series as an 'exact depiction of reality', and I am constantly amazed at how quickly the 'reality' of the series has infiltrated into people's actual perspectives on Romani people. The show's vocabulary has been rapidly appropriated by both college students and pensioners - now we're not being called Romani

people or 'gypsies' anymore, but by the slang term 'chicories' [N.B. the pronunciation of the word 'cikorky' resembles the pronunciation of the Czech 'cikani', which stands for Gypsies].¹

One could argue that this is a classic example of 'art imitating life' and then, consequently, 'life imitating art'. Indeed, other, often non-Romani commentators have claimed that the series is satire, and therefore, it should be taken with a pinch of salt. However, in a society where various different, predominantly positive representations of ethnic Czech and cis-gender identities exist but dominant negative misrepresentations of Roma (as well as trans people) abound, it is almost impossible to laugh at something so painstakingly real. Therefore, instead of breaking down barriers, the series, which is based on stereotypical representations of Roma and trans people (as well as non-Roma and cis-gender people), has given rise to an alternative social reality where these misrepresentations exert even more influence over non-Roma's imagination, negative ways of seeing and interacting with Roma. It has thus legitimised misrepresentations of Roma.

Representations by non-Roma of Roma are dominant in the public sphere. Simultaneously, over the past two decades, in response to these misrepresentations of Roma, Roma self-representations – as a nation (without a territory), a trans-national ethnic minority group, a national/European minority – have emerged more prominently. When commenting on the prevalence of hetero-representations in the construction of Romani identity, Gheorghe (2013) made the following observation relating to the relational aspect of these self-representations of Roma: '[R]epresentations of Roma culture are often simply responses to other people's expectations of the performance of otherness' (2013, 50). If some representations *for* of Roma aim to offer the exact opposite of the negative hetero-representations, then, there is potentially a problem. Such self-representations, too, can become inaccurate misrepresentations if, just like the negative hetero-representations, they capture one pole of the binary only: in this case the positive extreme.

Searching for non-stereotypical images of Roma, Tremlett (2017) concluded that even a 'non-stereotypical' approach can still result in reproducing certain stereotypes. However, where self-representations and 'the everyday' are foregrounded rather than ethnicity, 'non-stereotypical' representations of Roma can emerge (2017, 721). She argues that 'whilst we have some ideas of what stereotypical images of Roma look like, this does not mean that the direct opposite is therefore "non-stereotypical"' (ibid, 722). Ultimately, even images that recast Romani ethnicity in a positive light may reinforce the marked essentialist difference that 'marks out' Roma as 'extraordinary/abnormal/deviant' vis-à-vis the ethnic 'norm' (non-Roma). Therefore, even in the visual world, both negative and positive stereotypical misrepresentations of Roma that dominate the public sphere are therefore reflections of the underlying social orthodoxies and asymmetrical hegemonic power relations that, in turn, give rise to and are articulated through particular scopic regimes (Rose 2001), or visualities.

¹ Renata Berková: Czech sitcom is rocking the Czech-Romani world.

<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/renata-berkova-czech-sitcom-is-rocking-the-czech-romani-world>

Visibility and visibility: From ethnic hyper-visibility and sexual invisibility to Roma LGBTIQ visibility

In a world dominated by normative social representations, specific visions of social categories and difference – whether on the basis of ethnicity/race, sexuality or sex/gender – are produced (Haraway 1991). Images make visible social categories, which are constructed and may take a visual form (Rose 2001). For example, ‘marked’ social categories such as Romaniness, non-heteronormative sexualities, trans identities and womanhood/ femininity are constructed and visualised in relation to their ‘unmarked’, neutral counterparts in this binary opposition: whiteness, heterosexuality, cis-gender identity and manhood/masculinity. In visualising social categories, images of social difference are embedded within the wider social contexts – or social modalities (Rose 2001), cultural practices, scripts or norms such as white normativity, male supremacy/patriarchy, heteronormativity and cis-normativity.

Following Haraway (1991), one segment of society, in this case Roma, is dominated by another one, non-Roma, due to the latter’s assumed superiority by virtue of representing the social norm. This kind of social order is contingent upon the dominant social group controlling representations of those who are seen and categorised in particular ways: this dominant visibility denies the validity of other ways of visualising or seeing social difference. In my previous research, using the lived experiences of LGBTIQ Roma (Fremlova 2017), I have shown that marked essentialist difference, whether ethnicised/racialised, sexualised or gendered, can be deconstructed, or ‘queered’, in non-hierarchical ways. In line with the argument, this paper demonstrates that visual self-representations of those who tend to be seen and categorised as ‘different’ and ‘distinct’ from the assumed ‘norm’ have a unique potential to undermine these dominant visibilities (i.e. Roma and LGBTIQ as opposed to the dominant social group, i.e. non-Roma and heteronormative/cis- normative individuals, who sees and categorises).

Visual images can be seen as ‘iconic’ symbols, or signs that come to constitute meaning, often resulting in the construction and reification of social norms, cultural scripts and ‘difference’ by means of a visual canon. Thus, certain ways of seeing are mobilised, producing specific effects in terms of dominant regimes of representations. For example, as mentioned above, visual representations of Roma are often – stereotypically – seen in the European social contexts of ‘crime’; ‘deviance’; ‘inadaptability’; romanticism and exoticism; discrimination, inequality; social welfare. In today’s world of visual images, these notional representations and binaries have naturally spilt and been reproduced in the domain of visual representations of Roma.

Contrary to these myriad representations of Roma, a different type of LGBTIQ Roma visibility has emerged over the past decade. LGBTIQ Roma have become more visible individually and collectively, gaining visibility in public spaces and at gay Prides across Europe. This has been possible thanks to the emergence of organisations such as ARA ART (Czech Republic), Queer Roma (Germany), Ververipen: Roma por la Diversidad, and Asociación Gitanas Feministas por la Diversidad (Spain). A series of Romani LGBTIQ related events have taken place since 2014: the first national Roma LGBT workshop (May 2014); the Council of Europe conference ‘United for dignity’ (June 2014); the first and second International Roma LGBT conference (Prague, 2015-2016); the third International Roma LGBT conference ‘Being Roma and LGBTI: at the

crossroads of multiple discrimination' (Strasbourg, June 2017; Budapest December 2017); Prague Pride with a special Romani LGBTIQ float (2014-2017); Budapest and Madrid/Valencia Prides (2015/2017); Christopher Street Day in Cologne with a Romani LGBTIQ float (2015-2017), to name a few.

Visibility matters because 'it suggests a presence in public life and recognition of existence as the first step' (McGarry 2016, 272); and it has consequences for acceptance and/or appreciation (or lack thereof) of difference (Tucker 2009). Simultaneously, invisibility often signifies lack of recognition, or even epistemic erasure. visibility makes it possible to recast what are often conservative, as well as 'stigmatised' conceptions of ethnic, sexual and gender identities by bringing the very identities into the context of a particular space, time and materiality.

Visibility is important for individuals and groups who want to affirm their belonging, including through pride parades as a means to publicly celebrate individual and collective their LGBTIQ and/or Romani identities. Such visibility performs the belonging of Roma and LGBTIQ individuals to wider society, thus providing an opportunity to control the narrative of collective identity maintenance by invoking solidarity and attempting to change the meaning and content of a stigmatised identity by challenging dominant negative stereotypes (McGarry 2016, 270). Thus, LGBTIQ Roma have been making a strategic political claim to be acknowledged and recognised by majority societies, LGBTIQ and Romani communities, as well as the LGBTIQ and Romani rights movements.

LGBTIQ Roma have been celebrating pride, often framed by experiences of antigypsyism, homophobia and transphobia, by displaying the Romani flag next to the rainbow flag. In the aftermath of this and the subsequent events that took place between 2015 and 2017, Romani presence at gay Prides has been fiercely criticised by proponents of the notion that Romani ethnic identity is heterosexual/heteronormative only. In extreme situations, LGBTIQ Roma received threats of physical violence, or even death threats. Visibility was key: the presence and representation of LGBTIQ Roma became visible in particular social, geographical, relational and temporal contexts whilst negotiating and renegotiating the boundaries of various degrees of (in)visibilities associated with their intersectional identities. This visibility, which generated some interesting, albeit problematic discussions about belonging (i.e. who can and cannot belong with, in or to Roma and under what circumstances), became the linking proxy, establishing a relationship between ethnic and LGBTIQ identities.

Methodology: non-normative (queer) self-representations as a challenge to visual canons

This paper draws on social science literature on using visual images when researching stereotypical representations of Roma. Yet, in social sciences, text has been traditionally privileged over visual images. In the current world governed and oversaturated by visual images, there is a need for more social scientists to use images in the production of knowledge on ethnicity/race. Methodologically speaking, the benefit of using visual images and visual methods consists in research participants *showing* the researcher how they see the world (whilst having some control over the image-making) as opposed to just *talking* about it. The visual images of LGBTIQ Roma feature the various events such as conferences, pride marches and other cultural events document how the LGBTIQ movement has evolved over the past

decade, thus acting as a visual trail which can be viewed, preserved, archived and reinterpreted (Kharroub & Bas, 2016; see also Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Therefore, the visual images of LGBTIQ Roma are not only a product of the movement but are also 'part of the symbolic practices which constitute the movement and its identity' (Daphi et al, 2013, 76).

At the very initial stage of analysis, I have examined secondary data: approximately 70 existing photos and other visual representations of LGBTIQ Roma produced between 2009 and February 2019. Most of the visual representations are photographs and videos publicly available on the internet (individual websites, Instagram accounts and Facebook pages) or artistic portfolios shared with me by the artist and/or author. The analysis of the visual representations by/for LGBTIQ Roma in this research has been undertaken with a view to challenging stereotypical portrayals of Roma historically circulated in public spaces, including conventional, social and other media; and exploring the potential of visual self-representations to contextualise, critique and challenge the dominant representational canons through queer (non-normative) creative and discursive interventions.

Initial coding and categorisation helped me to determine key preset, as well as recurrent and emergent constructs, patterns and themes; these will be revised throughout the research process (Willms et al 1990; Miles and Huberman 1994), using different sources of themes (Bulmer 1979). This is a reiterative process, which allows the researcher to identify and continue to identify themes; to review themes; and to name and define them. For each of the visual self-representations, I considered the following aspects: genre; composition, including the people portrayed, colour, objects, settings, positioning of the (intended) spectator; what the representation portrays (denotation) and what it may allude to (connotation); what captures the spectator's attention based on their interpretation of the photograph (studium) and what the details that stays with the spectator by catching their eye and jogging their memory (punctum; Barthes 1980). This process enabled me to categorise the existing photos and other visual representations in the following categories: individual or group selfies; portraits (insider gaze; outsider gaze); events (conferences, cultural events, pride marches); and other visual representations (logos, videos, media, books, art).

For coding purposes, I used the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo 11. One of its features enables to process the labelling of the content of each photograph which can then be generated into broader 'themes'. Thanks to its flexibility (Braun and Clark, 2006), I employed thematic analysis at a latent level, sensitive to queer theoretical concepts. Latent thematic analysis looks beyond the individual themes by examining the underlying ideas and assumptions that are likely to emerge particularly during the photo elicitation interviews. This means that the development of themes is already interpretive, theorised. As part of coding, I have identified the following concepts, or themes: more traditional visuality; everyday ordinariness; visual challenge to normative representations of ethnicity, gender and sexuality; pride in being visibly LGBTIQ Roma.

Theme 1: Visual challenge to norms representations of ethnicity, gender and sexuality

Whilst documentary photography has at times portrayed poor, powerless, invisible, oppressed or marginalized Roma to those who hold social power, that is non-Roma, it has also been used as a medium to counter essentialist, fixed views about ethnicity/race and

ethnic/racist oppression through a focus on the everyday (Franklin 2016; Tremlett 2017). The visual paradigms associated with dominant patterns of representing Roma (hetero-representations) have often been caught up in a number of archetypal, essentialist themes and binary oppositions. These have tended to mirror the societal representations of Roma discussed above and contributed to constructing notions of 'truthful' photographic representation (Rose 2001, 19) and establishing a particular visual canon of representing Roma. Some of the typical themes, recurring in photographs and other images portraying Roma include: poverty and disenfranchisement (including discrimination and segregation in housing, education, healthcare); family; tradition. Within these themes, binary oppositions are either explicit or implicit. Under the rubric of poverty and disenfranchisement, Roma are often represented as powerless victims as opposed to the dominant non-Roma oppressors and their white normativity. In visual representations of Romani families, patriarchy is often represented as the dominant force governing very strict gender roles assigned to each of the two sexes, children and adults alike. Children (often half-clad or naked) and women tend to feature in visual representations of Roma more often than men, often in front of or inside their poor dwellings. Women and children tend to be represented as submissive, powerless and at the mercy of Roma men; and explicitly as victims of both Roma and non-Roma men. Men feature in visual representations relatively less often and are usually portrayed as dominant, performing traditional jobs or crafts. Additionally, very rarely do we find visual representations of two women or two men, except for situations representing two family members of the same sex/gender or male colleagues (e.g. musicians). Thus, heteronormativity, cis-normativity and patriarchy are co-opted into representations of Romani ethnicity and the social units or structures (families and communities) associated with it. Romani tradition is often visually represented as romanticising and idyllic: performing music, fortune-telling, crafts (basket-weaving, smithery, horse trading), customs (such as wedding and funerals) or through representing the elderly (honouring the old age of both women and men).

The visual representations of and for LGBTIQ Roma are very different from conventional photography portraying Roma. Even photographs that evoke more a traditional visuality in relation to portraying Roma feature elements which show that the person portrayed is in charge of the message the visual image is meant to convey. The photograph below (Figure 1) was taken by Czech non-Romani gay photographer Lukas Houdek as part of a project consisting of a total of five photos: three portraying LGBTIQ Roma men and two portraying LGBTIQ Roma women (the other four photos are not published in this paper. They were produced for the organisation ARA ART, which has been at the forefront of the Romani LGBTIQ movement since 2014, on the occasion of launching the first-ever online counselling service for LGBTIQ Roma. Each of the photographed people came up with a homophobic slur they had heard in their closest circles (Roma) and they had to come to terms with. With the slogans in the background, they were then photographed in a street in Prague inhabited by sizeable numbers of Roma. To date, most of the writings have stayed in those public spaces. This photo features the denigrating slogan 'Aren't you ashamed, you faggot?' in Romanes. However, the way the young Romani lesbian woman portrayed looks directly in the camera makes her look very confident, sure of herself, far from being a victim, as if reclaiming and being proud of her ethnicity and sexuality. Even though the black and white style of the photograph seems reminiscent of traditional documentary photography portraying Roma, the photograph itself quite unusual in that it portrays a woman who looks somewhat neutral,

or even a bit tomboyish in terms of her gender: she does not wear any traditional female clothing or earrings that would link her to Romani culture. The only link to Romani identity is the Romani language in the slogan on the wall behind her. A sub-theme I have identified in



Figure 1: ARA Art's LGBT Roma campaign (Photo: Lukas Houdek)

this, as well as in other visual representations of LGBTIQ Roma is 'feminine masculinities and masculine femininities'. The following photograph (Figure 2) is the main poster advertising the Berlin-based Maxim Gorki Theatre's successful play *Roma Armee*, which first premiered in September 2017. *Roma Armee* is based on sisters Simonida and Sandra Selimović's original concept of the Roma Armee Fraktion as an umbrella platform for their interdisciplinary projects *Romano Svato* and *Mindj Panther* (Pussy Panther). The Selimović sisters came up with the concept of the Roma Armee Fraktion as a challenge to the traditional portrayal of Roma as helpless victims; and as a subversive call to explore the transformative power of anger to bring about change in the form of a Roma revolution (Drăgan 2018).

The poster features Romani actress of Serbian/Austrian origin, Sandra Selimović. The photograph is complemented by Figure 3 below, a photograph from the same play, featuring the Swedish Romani gay actor Lindy Larsson. Both photographs represent a sophisticated play

on a series of stereotypes and misrepresentations governing the popular imagination in relation to Romani women and Romani men. While Romani women are often seen as passive, powerless victims, whose main purpose is to give birth and function as an object of the male gaze of both non-Romani and Romani men, Romani men tend to be portrayed as masculine, chauvinistic machos. In both photographs, sexuality does not feature explicitly: it is implicitly present thanks to Sandra Selimović's tomboyish, if not masculine appearance, and Lindy Larsson's appearance of a 'femme'. However, the play makes explicit reference to Sandra Selimović's being lesbian and Lindy Larsson's being gay.



Figure 2: Sandra Selimović in Roma Armea (Photo: Maxim Gorki Theatre)

Simultaneously, the visuality associated with Roma Armea can be seen as challenging, critically examining or 'queer(y)ing' a powerful dichotomy in representing Roma, which revolves around the notion of Roma being either victims or criminals/perpetrators (usually seen as responsible for their own flaws).



Figure 3: Roma armee (Maxim Gorki Theatre).