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The Roma and documentary film: Considerations for collection development

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Abstract

This paper explores the issues and criteria involved in developing a creditable documentary film collection about the Romani people for an academic library. Throughout their history, the Roma, or Gypsies, have dealt with biased, romanticized versions of their story, perpetuated by stereotypes found in legend, literature, song, and film. The expectation in the present undertaking is that the evidence coming from documentary films provides an effective antidote for misrepresentations. The paper reviews pertinent literature, suggests a selection process, and furnishes commentaries on individual titles as they relate to a framework based on the Romani historical and geographical narrative. A critical lens, namely, an awareness of the misrepresentations that abound in *all* media, is recommended as the instrument through which the films should be viewed. It is this dual approach – applying a historical framework and a critical lens – that can offer librarians a foundation upon which to build and grow a well-balanced collection.

Keywords

Academic libraries, collection development, cultural diversity, documentary film, Gypsies, Roma, Romanies

Introduction

The Romani people, also known as Gypsies, and more recently as the Roma, have throughout their history been compelled to deal with misguided, often highly romanticized versions of their lives, embodied in stereotypes found in legend, literature, popular song, and film – distortions that twentieth century mass media have too many times served only to further perpetuate. From early silent films – such as the British *The Child Stealers* (1904); to the American D.W. Griffith's *Adventures of Dollie* (1908); to the myriad “Gypsy” characters featured in Hollywood films; to today’s commercialized British and American reality television programs; and to the references and themes in folk tales, standard ballads, and rock lyrics – the predominant culture has done much to promote and promulgate one-dimensional, racist images of an entire people. The Roma have been romanticized as naïve, musical, rootless free spirits living close to nature, unencumbered by material aspirations. Not surprisingly, at the same time the people as a whole have also been vilified as work-shy beggars, fortune-tellers, thieves, liars, promiscuous lovers, and criminals. Yet another imposed myth, coming from a contrary direction, sees them of interest only in their perpetual victimhood.

The radically different truth, however, is that for most of their history the Roma have been confronted with centuries of persecution, exile, enslavement, and genocide. Although conditions vary from country to country, a truer picture of Roma life in Europe today is that a large majority of the population presently lives in conditions of extreme poverty and discrimination, with inadequate housing, healthcare, and schooling, and few realistic opportunities in life. And now, with the resurgence especially in Eastern Europe of ethnic nationalism, right wing politics, and neo-Nazi street gangs, the Roma continue to be the victims of unmitigated hate crimes all across the continent. In these circumstances, it would seem incumbent upon the academic library to try to contribute to the righting of a badly distorted picture – all the more so given that the glossed over picture ignores the very real human suffering it overlooks. With misinformation being so deeply rooted in the culture, it may in fact take the visual evidence coming from documentary films to act as the necessary forceful antidote. The documentary genre provides a unique – and under many circumstances, the *only* – opportunity for students to experience the cultural and historical aspects of Romani life on a personal level. In many instances films have the unique power to present a world one might have known very little about, or conversely, change one’s preconceived notions. On the other hand, as is the case with ethnographic documentaries about other marginalized groups, some documentary films may be culturally insensitive and often put forward images that reinforce false, patronizing stereotypes. Indeed, the Roma narrative presents a unique complex of historical, anthropological, and geographical contingencies that a librarian ought to be aware of in order to judiciously navigate the labyrinth of the varied materials available.

Academic librarians involved in the collection development of media resources play a critical role in the acquisition of titles supporting research and instruction on campus. In particular, in the field of ethnic studies, a balanced collection might offer viewers multiple perspectives on different cultures, stimulating critical thinking and confrontation with often biased material, some of it plainly inaccurate. For the past twenty or so years,

a growing academic interest in the Roma has taken place. The European Academic Network on Romani Studies maintains an international database of academics engaged in scholarship in the field of Romani Studies. The database indicates that these scholars work out of disparate departments including linguistics, literature, history, European studies, music, anthropology, sociology, among others, and integrate Romani studies into their course units (European Academic Network on Romani Studies, 2016). As well, in the United States alone, several academic conferences have recently emerged. In 2011, The University of California, Berkeley hosted an inaugural Conference in Romani Studies (<http://berkeleyromanistudies.tumblr.com>). Subsequently, the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University established an annual Roma Conference in 2012 (<https://fxb.harvard.edu/research/adolescent-empowerment/roma-program/>), as did New York University in 2013 through the Initiative for Romani Music at NYU (<http://romanimusic.tumblr.com>). Most recently, at the end of 2017, The Center for Justice at Columbia University launched The Roma People's Project by convening a symposium (<http://heymancenter.org/events/the-roma-peoples-project-launch-and-discussion/>). In addition, as the study of significant issues such as migration, refugee status, representation, and human rights – all of which directly concern the Roma – continues to deepen on college campuses it is the librarian's role to seek out films that adhere to a multicultural ethos. That the academic library is necessarily the repository of information and resources concerning issues of social justice, racism, and diversity makes that role all the more relevant.

The present paper addresses the challenges faced in the task of developing a creditable collection of documentary films about the Roma. After providing background information and reviewing pertinent literature from library science and other disciplines, the paper suggests a collection development process that singles out particular periods of the Romani historical and geographical narrative – origins and migrations; World War II Nazi genocide; Eastern European Communism; post-Communism and the European Union; the culture of the Romani population residing in the United States and Canada; and a more recent period of self-representation. Strategies for locating titles are delineated. Additionally, as part of the selection process, it is recommended that films be viewed through a critical lens, a judicious tool used to identify biases that may be present in the work. Brief commentaries on individual films as they relate to the historical periods elaborate the contextual background. Ideally the selection procedure outlined, together with the suggested titles, will help jump start, build, and grow a creditable, well-balanced collection.

Background

Although no consensus exists, most scholars agree the Roma migrated out of India roughly a thousand years ago. Today the Roma comprise a stateless diaspora living predominantly in Europe—a stateless minority, in that Roma largely do not identify with or aspire to return to an ancestral homeland (Toninato, 2009). They happen to be the largest minority population in Europe, estimated at 10-12 million (Mineo, 2015). Substantial communities also exist in North and in South America (Hancock, 2002).

The Roma constitute a composite people consisting of many related, diverse subgroups. In different geographical regions, they may go by different names – *Roma*, in parts of Europe; *Romanichals*, in England, United States, Australia, and New Zealand; *Sinti*, in Germany and Austria; *Calé*, in Spain; and *Manush*, in France (Toninato, 2009).

For centuries the only available historical evidence about the Romani people came from the *gadže* – the Romani word for the dominant political group of “outsiders.” It is the *gadže*, of course, who more often than not subjected the Roma to persecution and forced assimilation. The Roma, on the other hand, had not or have not (this is changing) been eager to promote their own version of their story, nor to share their culture, traditions, or rituals with outsiders. Centuries of slavery and oppression – including having been the only people other than the Jews selected by the Nazis for complete extermination – have had a profound effect on some Romani communities, resulting in reserve in presence of strangers, and a need to keep separate (Hancock, 2002). Thus what we do know of the Roma, particularly of their origins and early history, has largely been set down by the dominant society, with all of the outsider’s unintentional or intentional misunderstandings and misconceptions. The truth of the matter is these erroneous depictions and stereotypes are far removed from the day-to-day reality of Romani life, which is centered on a strict moral code based on “honor,” “good fortune,” and “shame” (Matras, 2015: 86). Compounding the Roma reticence to share their story with outsiders, is the reality that in the United States, they are often even reluctant to self-identify as Roma, choosing instead to name familiar ethnic groups – Greek, Spanish, etc. – to describe themselves, and thus to remain “invisible and unidentifiable to most outsiders” (Matras, 2015: 40).

Literature Review

Library Science literature concerning the collection development of film resources focusing on the ethnicity, race, and cultures of marginalized, underrepresented populations has primarily placed its scholarly emphasis on African-Americans, Native-Americans, and Latinos (Dominguez, 2014; Higgins, 2007; Taylor and Patterson, 2004). During the 1990’s, in an effort to gain a better understanding of how media treats such groups, the concepts of multiculturalism and diversity emerged as critical points of reference regarding collection development in all kinds of library settings. This new perspective includes an in-depth examination of the way established media acquisition procedures affect the treatment of minority cultures. In the seminal work in the field, *Video Collection Development in Multi-type Libraries: A Handbook*, Volgelsong and Lewis (1994) argue the importance of collecting culturally diverse titles expressing a variety of political and cultural positions in order for the researcher to gain a sense of how other cultures can be misrepresented or ignored by mainstream mass media. For newcomers to fully understand topics that may be unknown to them, the authors recommend that selectors supplement appropriate print materials needed for clarification. Significantly, they further emphasize that

film... can demystify the “exotic” or “foreign” by revealing individuals in the context of their everyday lives and by wearing down the culturally imposed barriers between “insider” and “outsider,” (169).

Although the Roma are not mentioned in the handbook, the guidelines it suggests for collection development clearly apply.

Articles that specifically address the Roma in the cinema, including the documentary genre, enter the literature from scholarship in disciplines such as film and media studies, anthropology, area studies, and Romani studies, among others. These articles suggest that the representation of the Roma in film has reflexively exercised a profound influence on how they are perceived by outside communities, and thus how they are treated in the political sphere. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* devoted an entire issue to Romani and international cinematic representation (Iordanova, 2003a). The issue's editor Dina Iordanova (2003b), notes that the documentary, by focusing on different periods of Romani history and culture, presents a more authentic portrayal of Romani life in the face of extreme poverty, discrimination, and inequality, than perhaps any other media material available. In examining the account of Roma and Jews in Holocaust cinema, Loshitzky (2003) raises the disconcerting matter of one historical narrative having overshadowed another, as evidenced by the early absence of films, either documentary or feature, that focus on the Roma Holocaust, known as the *Porrajmos* (Hancock, 2002). Citing the example of Hungary, Imre (2003) comments that although a good many documentary films were made with the best intentions, they seem to be ineffective in changing the majority culture's attitudes of bigotry and trepidation. In depicting the Roma living in abject poverty or as once in awhile being able to rise above their social and economic conditions "...they [the films] continue to characterize Gypsies as the quintessential 'other,' or worse, the disease within the body of an otherwise 'healthy' society" (Imre, 2003: 18).

Another journal, *Third Text*, published a special issue, "Picturing Gypsies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Roma Representation" (Gay y Blasco and Iordanova, 2008) focusing on the visual representation of the Roma in a variety of art forms. Familiar, distorted, romanticized images of the Roma start in Europe as early as the 14th century in Eastern Europe, and by the 16th century in Western Europe. Notions of the wandering, freedom-loving, thieving, lascivious, noble savage remained resilient, only to be further romanticized in cinema – all this in keeping with the conventions of European Romantic literature (Gay y Blasco, 2008; Pasqualino, 2008). Gay y Blasco (2008) cautions that the durability and prevalence of the nomadic description, still thought characteristic of the Roma today, needs to be thoroughly explored in terms of all of its ramifications,

...if only because today the majority of European Roma are not nomadic and because the Roma populations of many European countries have been sedentary for several centuries (Gay y Blasco, 2008: 299).

Documentaries about the Roma in various films concerned with migrations within the European Union reveal how the Roma have been stigmatized by their no longer applicable nomadic reputation, thus their being deprived of benefits they would otherwise legally be entitled to.

Selection Process

As with other ethnic minorities and marginalized groups, a disjunction may exist between the way a particular group self-identifies and the labeling the outside or majority community imposes. It wasn't until the summer of 2001 that the Library of Congress, after several years of lobbying efforts by librarians, activists, and political constituencies, officially changed the ultimately pejorative and historically inaccurate subject term from *Gypsies* to *Romanies* (Crosetto, 2008). As the umbrella term for the Romani minority, the related term *Roma* has gained more currency over the years, largely among the international press and the European Union. The usage is fairly common, although linguistically *Roma* is a masculine plural noun derived from the noun *Rom*, denoting a married Romani male (Hancock, 2002). Since the term *Gypsy* occurs in the titles of many of the older films and is still widely used, it also appears in this paper. In fact, in searching for films whether in library discovery tools, catalogs (WorldCat), online databases, or the Web, the terms *Romani(es)*, *Roma*, and *Gypsy(ies)* were all pursued, in order to gain wider access to titles. To search for individual subgroups of Roma such as the Sinti, Gitanos, Manush, and Kalderash, it is necessary to use the major subject heading Romanies combined with the group name as a keyword.

Even so, in the quest for significant titles, it quickly becomes apparent that one needs to search beyond the mainstream media sources. Distributors can be found offering catalogs strong in multicultural works, often by independent filmmakers, whose works represent historically marginalized communities. (On occasion, it may even be necessary to contact the filmmaker himself or herself in search of a particular title.) Many of the films considered here were selected from one or other of: Documentary Educational Resources (www.der.org); Bullfrog Films (www.bullfrogfilms.com); National Film Board of Canada (www.nfb.ca); Filmmakers Library, Imprint of Alexander Street (alexanderstreet.com); New Day Films (www.newday.com); and The Cinema Guild (www.cinemaguild.com).

Another strategy for identifying and locating pertinent films is to take note of the various regional film festivals that take place year round which often present films not disseminated through traditional media outlets. An annual Roma Golden Wheel Film festival takes place in Skopje, Macedonia (<https://goo.gl/BpUFYJ>). Yet another approach is to canvas festivals with either an ethnic or human rights theme; Human Rights Watch is a prominent sponsor of the latter kind (<https://ff.hrw.org>). Other occasionally Roma-themed festivals to watch for are: the Borderlines Film Festival, the United Kingdom's rural film festival (<https://www.borderlinesfilmfestival.co.uk>); and the Canadian International Documentary Film Festival (<https://www.hotdocs.ca>).

It should also be noted that a comprehensive collection of materials pertaining to the Romani people, including books, journals, documents, film, and other media, existed at RADOC, the Romani Archive and Documentation Center, compiled by the Romani scholar Ian Hancock, at the University of Texas at Austin. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the archive is closed while the curator looks for a permanent home.

In searching titles, it soon becomes evident that almost all of the titles discovered were created and produced by filmmakers outside the Roma community. A major concern as well is the need to locate documentaries created by Romani filmmakers themselves, offering an inside perspective on Romani life and culture. The Romedia Foundation, established in 1992 in Budapest produces short documentary films made by members of the Romani community. Its program, “Mundi Romani – the World through Roma Eyes,” produced titles between 2007 and 2011 that can be viewed on the site and through YouTube with English subtitles (Mundi Romani, 2011). Although transient in their web accessibility, the films can serve as a media resource offering personal perspectives on Romani history, culture, and life not viewed elsewhere. The nonprofit organization Voice of the Roma (VoR) (<http://www.voiceofroma.com/index.html>), whose declared mission is to offset stereotypical, negative presentations, is another useful resource for finding films. It is also worth mentioning that in 2012 an International Romani Film Commission made up of the most prominent Romani filmmakers working in fiction and in documentaries, including Tony Gatlif, creator of *Latcho Drom* (1993) was established with the goal of assisting budding filmmakers in all aspects of film creation and production (Albert and Patočková, 2012). Two additional resources dealing with Romani self-representation will launch later in 2018: The Digital Archive of the Roma, sponsored by the German Federal Cultural Foundation (temporarily available at <http://www.blog.romarchive.eu>) and The Roma People’s Project sponsored by the Center for Justice at Columbia University (<http://centerforjustice.columbia.edu/roma-digital-archive/>). The hope is that these initiatives will prove to be sources for titles in the future.

Except for *Sterile Dreams* (2007) for which the filmmaker had to be contacted directly, the documentary films discussed in this paper all appear in WorldCat. They have English subtitles or voice over and cover a production span of years from 1975 to 2014. Regarding reviews, several databases were searched. *LexisNexus Academic*, *Humanities Source*, and *Social Science Full Text* provided, among other things, access to major national and international newspaper collections, as well as to a wide variety of discipline-specific journals. The journal *Romani Studies*, formerly known as the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, founded in 1888, publishes review articles of books and audiovisual materials pertaining to the Roma. Educational Media Reviews Online (EMRO) (<http://emro.lib.buffalo.edu>) with contributions by librarians and teaching faculty, along with IndieWire (indiewire.com), providing reviews and interviews with independent filmmakers, was also consulted. Each film was screened prior to inclusion. Most of the titles are available on DVD. A few are now part of the changing media landscape and can be streamed from platforms such as Films on Demand, Kanopy, and Docuseek 2. In such cases, their availability in the streaming format is noted in the Appendix.

The framework of the Romani historical, geographical narrative was used in selecting the thirty-one documentary films discussed in this paper. Although music comprises an essential aspect of Romani culture and is treated in some of the films, an in depth examination of the subject falls outside the purview of this paper.

Critical Lens

The Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL), in presenting its most recent guidelines for the profession, distinguishes media selection from print selection in that, in the media case the selectors, in addition to working with faculty, must rely heavily on specialized review resources and on previewing materials (ACRL, 2012). Indeed the film review, as it applies to Romani-themed documentaries, figures as an even more significant factor in the acquisition process, since the existing scholarly library literature does not at present adequately address the subject. However, taking note that the scholarly literature from other disciplines focuses primarily on the Roma's *misrepresentation*, librarians cannot rely solely on the film review, which may fail to address that aspect. The scholarly literature nonetheless raises pertinent questions about representation that can act as a lens through which to view both the documentary and ethnographic films critically. The lens derives from a strand of Critical Theory dealing with the, predisposed, not-immediately-identifiable preconceptions of the reader or viewer confronting alien or novel materials. Thus the gender or culture or both of the observer may seriously, unconsciously color and distort information received. When evaluating visual media, one must be cognizant of the racial, economic, historical, cultural, and political contexts that are embedded in their construction. As is the case with all creative endeavors, documentaries reflect to a certain extent the point of view and the vision of the filmmaker (Vogelsong and Lewis, 1994). In depicting the Roma, documentary films can run the gamut from offering biased, racist, stereotypical, romanticized images, to employing a patronizing tone, to forcing a narrative where the Roma are seen as perpetual victims. It is not the case that documentaries that have the aforementioned qualities should be left out of the collection – on the contrary,

[t]he range of materials included should provide a sense of the historical roles films...have played in creating and perpetuating negative images of cultures and ethnicities (Vogelsong and Lewis, 1994: 169).

A critical lens becomes one of the librarian's discerning tools to navigate the uncharted territory ahead. For librarians looking for a starting point, the critical lens can be buttressed by the familiar protocol of searching scholarly literature to gain subject expertise, along with the review literature. Government or non-profit or community organizations dealing with Roma-related issues, as well as university faculty and archives, may prove vital resources for further guidance. Some of these resources as they apply to documentary film acquisition, are cited in this paper.

Films

Origins / Migrations

The origins of the Romani people were for many years shrouded in mystery. During the middle ages, Europeans mistakenly thought the Roma came from Egypt – hence the word *Gypsy*, the Spanish *Gitano*, and the French *Gitan*. *Tsingani*, derived from

the Byzantine Greek, also erroneously refers to an Egyptian origin. It wasn't until the 18th Century that a linguistic relationship was discovered between Sanskrit and the Romani language, which led to the present belief that Romani ancestry reverts to India, from which they migrated westward sometime in the 11th Century (Hancock, 2002). The timelines and the reasons for the migrations remain a source of controversy for present day linguists and historians (Hancock, 2002; Matras, 2015; Taylor, 2014). Films that discuss this topic reflect the different hypotheses found in the literature. Two films, *Jaisalmer Ayo! Gateway of the Gypsies* (2004) and *Song of the Dunes: the Search for the Original Gypsies* (2009), follow the lives and journeys of Indian caste communities – musicians, dancers, craftsmen, merchants, storytellers, and puppeteers, among others – and purport to confirm the theory that these people embody the Roma's ancestral origins. *Song of the Dunes* suggests that those ancestors may also have migrated from Rajasthan during the 11th Century as warriors in a military campaign against invading Muslim armies. A much older film, Jeremy Marre's *The Romany Trail Part I, Gypsy Music in Africa* and *Part II, Gypsy Music in Europe* (1992) specifically supports the contested theory that the Roma exodus from India occurred when the Indian king of the 5th century sent a gift of 12,000 musicians to the Persian courts (Hancock, 2010). Although, the film is sympathetic to the Gypsies as a persecuted people and offers glimpses of the Roma pilgrimage to Saintes-Marie de la Mer in the Carmargue, France, and into communities in Spain, former West Germany, and Yugoslavia, the narration is flowered with the familiar and dubious clichés about a mysterious, fabled people who have hardly transformed over time.

The best-known film concerning the migrations out of India and travels westward is Tony Gatlif's, *Latcho Drom* (1993), Romani for *safe journey*. Gatlif, of Algerian and Romani descent, marketed the film as a documentary even though it possesses no narrative, and its various scenes, along with the musical performances, are staged. Told entirely through music, song lyrics, and images, the film depicts the migration from India to Spain, variously by way of North Africa, Egypt, Turkey, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Germany, and France. Woven together as a rich tapestry of a people who are seen as undesirables by the mainstream society and who share a common lineage and a fervor for music, the film can unintentionally fuel the romantic stereotype of the nomadic Roma living unencumbered by society's constraints. The film might also unfairly suggest that the Roma, no matter what their circumstance, can always break into song and dance. The very thought regrettably perpetuates the image that they can do little else – and thus feeds the discriminatory disposition they bear (Dobrova, 2007).

Jasmine Dellal's *When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan* (2006) follows a group of Roma musicians from four countries – India, Romania, Macedonia, Spain – on a six-week musical tour. The musicians recount their differing personal histories and traditions, but they ultimately come together in a musical finale symbolizing a united Roma identity after a centuries-long journey.

Nazi Genocide

Once settled in Europe, the Romani population endured centuries of slavery and persecution. They were enslaved in the Balkan principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia

(Romania) for four hundred years, to be emancipated only in 1855. At different times, other regions of Europe produced their share of atrocities and tyrants – among them, Maximilian I of Hapsburg (c. 1500), who accused the Roma of witchcraft, child kidnapping, and conspiring against the Church; Henry VIII of England (c.1530), who prohibited Roma from entering the country and evicted those already there; and Holy Roman Emperor Karl VI (1721), who ordered the extermination of all Roma in his domain (Hancock, 1987). But it is in the modern era that the Roma suffer an unspeakable tragedy. Before the Nazis came to power, discriminatory laws were long in place in Germany. Determined to amplify those laws, the Nazis designated various categories of peoples for eradication – homosexuals, persons with disabilities, Communists, others. Only one ethnicity other than Jews was selected for total extermination: the Roma. The Roma and Sinti were marked for complete elimination, from the newborn to the elderly, and everyone in between. “In Romani, the holocaust is referred to as the *Baro Porrajmos*, or ‘great devouring’ of human life” (Hancock, 2002: 34). For the longest time, the *Porrajmos* was an *unrecognized* holocaust, and if it was addressed at all in film, it was only ancillary to the Jewish Holocaust. Some early documentaries made about the subject ended up having limited circulation, and they are not easy to find today. Katrin Seybold and Melanie Spitta, the latter of Sinti descent, directed a number of films, one of which, *Es ging Tag und Nacht, liebes Kind Zigeuner (Sinti) in Auschwitz* (1985) contains firsthand harrowing testimony by Sinti survivors of Auschwitz. Cherry Duyns’ Dutch language film *Settela: Gezicht van Het Verleden* (1994) investigates the work of a journalist who discovers that the widely circulated iconic image of a girl – thought to be Jewish, staring out from a railway car – was actually that of a Sinti girl being transported to Bergen-Belsen to certain death (Loshitzky, 2003). Karin Berger’s *Ceija Stojka* (2010), filmed in 1999, tells the story of the Austrian Romani writer and artist Ceija Stojka who survived the Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and Bergen-Belsen death camps in her childhood. It is one of the first films to tell the story of a Romani survivor’s experience.

Alexandra Isles’ *Porrajmos, Europe’s Gypsies in the Holocaust* (2007), and a more recent film, Aaron Yeger’s *A People Uncounted: the Untold Story of the Roma* (2014), treats some of the same material. Through survivor testimony, including that of Ceija Stojka’s, and archival footage, the Nazi methodical procedures are recounted – identification, round up, registration, sterilization, and deportation – the very destruction of a people. Those who weren’t deported were often executed on the spot. Like other groups, the Roma were branded with numbers beginning in their case with the letter ‘Z’ for the somewhat derogatory German label *Ziguener*. The pseudo-scientific eugenics studies carried out by the Nazi Department of Racial Hygiene, conducted by Dr. Robert Ritter and his assistant Eva Justin, measured degrees of *Gypsiness* in individuals, thus “determining” their inherited criminality. Dr. Joseph Mengele, assigned to the Gypsy family camp in Auschwitz, conducted cruel medical experiments on children. The title *A People Uncounted* signifies not only a people who didn’t seem to matter, but also the unknowable large number of Roma slaughtered. Commonly estimated at 500,000 dead, the number suggests that, in some cases as many souls as ninety percent of the population of a given Roma community were put to death. After the war, many of the survivors found themselves without papers and no political voice. Not a single Roma was invited to testify at the 1945 Nuremberg trials, and until recently there seemed to be little effort made to commemorate their history. (At present, a member of the Roma community sits

on the board of the US Holocaust Museum.) As a consequence very little was done to provide war crime reparations to the Roma as a people. Although its focus is on the holocaust, *A People Uncounted* was one of the first films to plead the Roma cause in the face of the widespread discrimination they suffered in 21st Century Europe.

Eastern European Communism

After the war, the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe sought to assimilate the Roma into the larger population. While there may have been differences among the ways Soviet bloc nations treated their national minorities, the Roma were denied their distinct ethnic identity and culture (Taylor, 2014). During this time, Eastern European nations blamed the Roma's predicament on the former pre-Communist governments. The then rulers sponsored policies that sought to further promote assimilation through forced and voluntary settlement; the banning of any kind of nomadism; so-called improved housing in separate settlements; educational programs; entry into the urban workforce; and collective farms. In some countries, plans were carried out to limit the Roma population. Jehan Harney's, *Sterile Dreams* (2007) deals with an ominous matter – the involuntary sterilization of Roma women in Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1970's and the continuation of the practice in the Czech Republic through the 1990's. Some Romani women were promised financial incentives by the government as compensation (Crowe, 2007; Matras, 2015; Taylor, 2014).

One of the countries that in the 1960's took severe measures to force the Roma to settle was Poland, although it would take another twenty years for the measures to be fully carried out (Crowe, 2007). The film *Gypsies* (no date), produced by the Documentary Film Studio in Warsaw, founded in 1949, is an ethnographic short that on the basis of internal evidence appears to have been shot in the early 1960's. In a romantic manner reminiscent of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, the film depicts the nomadic way of Roma life in Poland that would soon disappear. Scenes of horse-drawn wagons, the communal campsite, and the family are set to haunting Romani melodies. Interestingly, footage from the film was appropriated by a number of other recent documentarians, presumably in order to add authenticity to their work. *Across the Tracks, Vlach Gypsies in Hungary* (1988) belongs to the anthropological film series for which anthropologist Michael Stewart was the consultant. The film follows several Vlach Roma families who live in a village outside the provincial town of Gyongyos, fifty miles from Budapest. The families struggle to maintain their culture, Romani language, and way of life while living in a modern communist state.

Post-Communism and the European Union

With the collapse of the Communist regimes in central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980's and the formation of the European Union, the Roma today, having acquired some civil and cultural rights in the process, still comprise one of the lowest socioeconomic groups in the countries they live in. They live in the poorest of conditions, unskilled and unemployed, and subject to separate and unequal education, with little or no healthcare. Moreover they are frequently the victims of racially motivated hate crimes. The establishment of the European Union made it possible for them to travel to member

countries, seeking asylum and a better way of life. A proclamation by twelve E.U. members declared the years 2005-2015 the Decade of Roma Inclusion, seen as the first time in history that European governments recognized the Roma as a distinct minority living everywhere in Europe with common problems. The proclamation aspired to bring together governments, non-governmental agencies, and members of the Romani community itself to work in concert on

... the priority areas of education, employment, health, and housing and committed governments to take into account the other core issues of poverty, discrimination, and gender mainstreaming (Roma Integration 2020, 2017).

However, the Roma were entrenched with discriminatory housing policies in prosperous Western European countries as well, including France and Italy, where their shanty towns were frequently destroyed without there being a provision for alternative lodging. There was no retribution for those Western countries that would randomly and illegally expel large groups of Roma from their borders. These waves of expulsion of migrants and refugees brought the plight of the Roma to the attention of a world audience (Amnesty International, 2013; New York Times, 2015).

The Post-Communist period is treated in a number of documentaries ranging from ethnographic studies to independent productions. The films produced during the Decade of Roma Inclusion clearly reflect a deeper understanding of the Roma situation. Alaina Lemon's film *T'an Bahktale! (Good Fortune To You!): Roma (Gypsies) in Russia* (1993), presents a profile of several Roma families living in central Russia. The families represent different Romani subgroups and professions, including performers from the Moscow Romani theater, teachers, merchants, and metal workers. Speaking Romani, the participants explain aspects of their culture, relationships with the *gadže*, and relationships within the community itself. Two other films depicting the Russian Roma are *Gypsies* and *Gypsies Fortune*, both directed by Tatiana Homutova and released in 2000. The films reveal another peril in assessing documentaries about the Roma. It becomes apparent that some of the Roma responses are hesitantly given, as the interviewees deem the ethnographic filmmaker's questions patronizing, even condescending.

Several films deal with Romani life in squatter settlements or encampments, where people live in makeshift shacks, with no water, electricity, sewage disposal, or garbage pickup. Among these, Ivana Todorovic's *Everyday Life of Roma Children from Block 71* (2006) focuses on families and children in New Belgrade, Serbia. Giovanni Princigalli's *Japigia Gagì Roma (Gypsy) Stories* (2003) chronicles families that, after the 1989 collapse of the Ceausescu regime in Communist Romania, flee to Japigia, a district on the outskirts of Bari, Italy. *Suspino* (2003), the Romani word for *cry* or *lament*, directed by Gillian Darling Kovanic, provides perhaps the most sobering account of the vicious cycle of poverty and discrimination the Roma find themselves in as they seek asylum after the fraught experiences in their own countries. The film not only reveals the deteriorating living conditions in their home country, Romania, but also the racial discrimination, systemic persecution, and murderous pogroms that cause them to flee to Italy, where they live in an abandoned encampment site not far from the Vatican.

Refugee status denied them, they are classified as nomads. Facing unemployment and hunger, they succumb to begging on the street as a last resort. An earlier film, *The Gypsies of Svinia* (1998), deals with anthropologist David Scheffel and his attempt working with international aid organizations to improve the lives of the Roma living in the town of Svinia, in the newly formed nation of Slovakia. The population consists of ethnic Slovaks, known as “Whites,” and the Roma, known as “Blacks.” Living on a drain swamp in appalling squalor, the children attend a segregated special school for the “mentally weak” in white Svinia. The apartheid-like segregation encouraged by the school system inevitably extends into adult life. Taking this theme even further, Mona Nicoara’s film *Our School* (2011) treats the blatant institutionalized racism facing Roma children in a Romanian school. The town in which the school is located had in fact, been awarded E.U. funds for the specific purpose of accelerating the integration process of the ethnically segregated Roma-separate, Romanian school system. Like others in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, the Romanian system had been sequestering Roma children in grossly ineffectual classrooms and in special schools for students with disabilities for generations.

Roma Rights (2005), directed by Di Tatham, was released at the start of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. The film focuses on the inclusion initiative and highlights auspicious events in Romani history that precede the Decade. The film begins with the celebration of International Roma Day, on April 8, commemorating the first World Romani Conference held in 1971. It was at this conference India officially recognized the Roma as a distinct people with their own language, culture, flag, and anthem. The film also records that the organization European Roma and Travellers Forum (Travellers, a common name for Romanichals or English Roma), was invited to join the Council of Europe. It also features an interview with the Hungarian woman who was the first Roma from any country elected to the European parliament.

The BBC documentary *Gypsy Child Thieves* (2009), directed by Liviu Tipurita, is a controversial film about the alleged involvement of Roma families with organized crime bosses in Romania. The specific crime is the trafficking of children to Spain and Italy for begging and stealing. The film stresses a pervasive culture of crime; it wears its bias on its celluloid.

United States and Canada

Of interest as well are documentaries dealing with Romani identity and the experiences of Romani communities in Canada and the United States. *Gypsies: The Other Americans* (1975), directed by Eric Metzgar and Penelope Willens, is marketed as the first documentary cinéma vérité study of the Roma in the United States. The film follows a Kalderash family living in Los Angeles. The family members describe Roma traditions and customs, and they make their desire clear for the children to continue to honor them. Still, they acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining their cultural identity given the American pressure to assimilate. They also recognize that a higher education standard would be required for them to be able to survive in the American economy. Experiences of prejudice and discrimination are also apparent.

Produced in 1999 and widely reviewed at the time, Jasmine Dellal's *American Gypsy: A Stranger in Everybody's Land* is of historic significance in that it contributed to a better understanding of the Vlax-Romanies, who account for roughly two-thirds of the Roma population in the United States, estimated at one million in all (Hancock 2008). The main narrative turns on a June 1986 illegal raid by twenty Spokane, Washington, police officers looking for stolen property in the homes of two Romani families. The invasion not only violated their civil rights, but also, in the strip search of the Roma women present and the scrutiny of soiled baby diapers, transgressed the very strict code of Roma honor, rendering the family marimé, or impure, and subject to community ostracism. The family was further shunned for breaking the Roma practice of passivity publicly suing the police for their transgression.

Tony Papa's film *Opre Roma: Gypsies in Canada* (1999), *opre* the Romani word for *arise*, tells the stories of several Roma coming from different parts of the world – Spain, Scotland, Czechoslovakia, England – and one a Montreal native. All proudly embrace their Romani heritage and try to dispel the many myths that caused their parents to hide their true identity.

Self-Representation

On the matter of documentary films made by Roma filmmakers – they exist though there currently aren't many – identity and representation are principle themes. Knowing he was of Romani descent and not much more, the American-Romani filmmaker George Eli, in his 2012 film *Searching for the 4th Nail*, sets out to make a film to discover his ancestral roots, his family, the traditions, the culture. The title derives from a potent though clearly apocryphal legend whereby a gypsy present at the Crucifixion steals the nail intended for Christ's heart and for which, the Roma are permitted by God to steal in order to survive. In the film Eli asks why his formal education ended in the fifth grade. He also learns of the prevalence of a strong evangelical movement among Romani Americans.

A Roma voice does come through in *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (2009), directed by Antonia Meszaros. In the film, Romani filmmaker Arpád Bogdán tries to understand why the Roma, Hungary's largest minority, have been subjected to increasingly widespread discrimination and violence over the years. Hard hit by the 2008 global recession, Hungary saw the radical right wing party *Jobbik* gain a strong political voice, in part on a platform exploiting anti-Roma prejudice. Bogdán, who grew up in a state-run orphanage where his heritage was denied, is himself the subject of the related film, *Looking for My Gypsy Roots* (2008). He is ultimately able to come to terms with his Roma past.

The role of women within the traditional Romani family structure is hardly a liberated one, as can be seen explicitly or by inference in many of the documentaries cited. Richard Lobo's film, *Taking Destiny Into Her Own Hands* (2004), explores the choices faced by a young professional Roma woman in Spain who, while wishing to retain Romani values and traditions as much as she can, aspires to an independent life and career beyond them.

Conclusion

For the longest time, in the vacuum of the willed or enforced absence of more objective voices, stereotypical, romanticized descriptions and images of the Romani people found in literature, song, and film filled the popular imagination. As a corrective antidote for the misrepresentation, a strategy is here outlined by way of building and growing a creditable collection of documentary films dealing with all aspects of Romani life. It is advised that librarians approach the task within the framework of the basic Romani historical, geographic narrative, together with a critical lens to distinguish the myriad of unreliable accounts ubiquitously available from the reliable. The paper makes the case that the visual evidence coming from the documentary film genre can weigh heavily in separating fact from fiction. Indeed evidence would make clear the true condition of the Romani people and perhaps continue to advance an interdisciplinary campus conversation about ethnicity, representation, human rights, and social justice. The present paper outlines a process for acquiring and critically reviewing pertinent resources and provides films that elucidate the process. The films discussed comprise only a starting point in the further development of a collection. Also to be stressed is an effort to seek out more films made by Romani filmmakers. There is still a long way to go, practically and theoretically, in giving the Romani people a proper, fair, unprejudiced hearing before the court of the family of peoples. Librarians can play a significant, if only minor role, in the endeavor.

Appendix I Streaming Films

Docuseek 2

Darkness on the Edge of Town
Looking for My Gypsy Roots
Roma Rights

Films on Demand

Across the Tracks, Vlach Gypsies in Hungary
A People Uncounted: the Untold Story of the Roma
Taking Destiny Into Her Own Hands [Streaming version Destiny: Empowering Roma Women]

Kanopy

Opre Roma: Gypsies in Canada
Japigia Gagì Roma (Gypsy) Stories
T'an Bahktale! Good fortune to you!: Roma (Gypsies) in Russia

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Adventures of Dollie (1908) Directed by DW Griffith [Film] United States: American
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American Gypsy: A Stranger in Everybody's Land (1999) Directed by Jasmine Dellal
[VHS] New York, NY: Little Dust Productions.

Ceija Stojka (2010) Directed by Karin Berger [DVD]. Wien, Austria: Hoanzl.

The Child Stealers (1904) Directed by Alf Collins [Film] Great Britain: Gaumont Co.;
United States: American Mutoscope and Biograph Company.

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PA: Bullfrog Films.

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Katrin Seybold and Melanie Spitta [VHS] Frieberg, Germany: Barfuss film.

Everyday Life of Roma Children from Block 71 (2006) Directed by Ivana Todorovic
[DVD] Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources.

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Gypsies: The Other Americans (1975) Directed by Eric Metzgar and Penelope Willens [VHS] Los Angeles, CA: Triton Films.

The Gypsies of Svinia (1998) Directed by John Paskievich [DVD] Alexandria, VA: Filmmakers Library.

Jaisalmer Ayo! Gateway of Gypsies (2004) Directed by Pepe Ozan and Melitta Tchaicovsky [DVD] Oakland, CA: ArtNetwork Productions.

Japigia Gagì Roma (Gypsy) Stories (2003) Directed by Giovanni Princigalli [DVD] Watertown, MA: Documentary Educational Resources.

Latcho Drom (1993) Directed by Tony Gatlif [DVD] Waterville, ME: Shadow Distribution.

Looking for My Gypsy Roots (2008) Directed by Antonia Meszaros [DVD] Reading, PA: Bullfrog Films.

Opre Roma: Gypsies in Canada (1999) Directed by Tony Papa. [DVD] Watertown MA: Documentary Educational Resources.

Our School (2011) Directed by Mona Nicoara [DVD] Harriman, NY: New Day Films.

A People Uncounted: the Untold Story of the Roma (2014) Directed by Aaron Yeger [DVD] New York, NY: First Run Features.

Roma Rights (2005) Directed by Di Tatham [DVD] Reading, PA: Bullfrog Films.

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Sterile Dreams (2007) Directed by Jehan Harney [DVD] Alexandria, VA: Ziyara Films LLC.

Suspino (2003) Directed by Gillian Darling Kovanic [DVD] Reading, PA: Bullfrog Films.

Taking Destiny Into Her Own Hands (2004) Directed by Richard Lobo [DVD] Lanham, MD: National Film Network.

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When the Road Bends: Tales of a Gypsy Caravan (2006) Directed by Jasmine Dellal [DVD] Waterville, MA: Shadow Distribution.