



The Roma Heroes at the Department of ELTE Media

by András Müllner

Abstract

As organizers of a community film club at the Department of Media and Communication (ELTE University, Hungary) in the past eleven years we have been presenting theatrical dramas in our film program. How is it possible, you may ask, to share theatrical experience in a film club? To answer this question, I need to describe the work of Roma Visual Lab, its mission and its artistically and scientifically diverse agenda, its collaboration with different theatrical projects in Hungary, and then its involvement with the Roma Heroes project, launched by the Independent Theatre in 2018. The latter collaboration resulted in a university course centered around four Roma Heroes monodramas. At the end of my article I explain our drama interpretation, as it is embedded in a learning process.

Key words: Roma Visual Lab, Roma Heroes, Independent Theatre, Roma representation, interdisciplinarity, liminality, storytelling, translation, identity, deliberative pedagogy

Roma Visual Lab

The Roma Visual Lab (RVL) is a documentary film club with a special interest in visual representation of Roma people. The program was founded by Andrea Pócsik in 2011; in 2012 I joined the program, and few years later I took it over from Andrea, with whom I have been working together in various projects since then. In 2017 I founded the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre at ELTE Media, and started more research projects, among which the RVL-program remains one of the most important. Currently we have a four years long research on participatory film culture, its history and its current practices, like participatory video applied as visual method in social research.

The Roma Visual Lab was launched as an university film club, organized by the professor-student community itself, and open to the wider public. The club has been and is a platform, a performative scene for the cultural resistance, where the audience, together with the guest experts and filmmakers are discussing the documentary films about Roma people and Roma communities, from various (anthropological, sociological, cultural, aesthetic etc.) aspects. But we have been

talking not just about films, but other artistic contents, like contemporary photography, fine arts, media – and theatrical performances, too. We believe that as a university course the RVL is a progressive learning and educational form, based on different progressive methodologies and inspired by scientific fields, like deliberative pedagogy, gender and cultural studies, postcolonial studies and critical race studies. We make efforts to connect the advantages of the non-formal knowledge production with the democratic tradition of the higher education. One of our most important task is to teach proper race and gender representation, mostly because our students working predictably in media and creative industries as socially responsible experts, need to be sensitized to the state of vulnerable minorities in society, and also need to be informed about their resilience.

The images of minorities are often blurred and obscure in Hungarian and global media spaces, and in most cases disadvantaged minorities don't have access to the means of representation. Members of RVL would like to work on balancing the situation, and RVL would like to become a place for democratic knowledge production to which everyone has an equal access. In order to reach this aim we are working together with different social and civil organizations, and other democratic formations on the basis of deliberative pedagogy. You can call what we do as engaged science and cultural resistance: we criticize the essentializing and stereotypical images produced by official media – both public service controlled by the state, and the commercial media controlled by the market; we are making efforts to be autonomous intellectually and financially, independent from political power structures, gaining power from the civil courage.

Dramas in a Film Club?

The RVL had several programs in the past eleven years when theatrical recordings were screened and discussed. We arranged a show for the film titled *Gypsies Are Near Heaven*, and doing this we had the opportunity to discuss not only the romanticizing tradition of fiction film regarding Roma characters, but the theatricality of the Teatr Romen in Moscow (who were extras in the film), from both the aspects of ethnic theatre and anthropological research. With help of Aleina Lemon's research among Russian Gypsy people in the post-Sovjet period, and her book titled *Between Two Fires*, it became clear how difficult could be to perform Roma identity when both theatrical and everyday scenes are laden by stereotypes and expectations from the majority of society. Another drama screening took place in the RVL, when more than a decade after its live performances we screened from record Federico Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. The piece was performed by the Vareso Aver Theatre, and directed by Dragan Ristic in 2001 in the Roma Parliament, Budapest. Also with a special permission we screened *Live Long, Regina!*, which is a community and participatory „sociodrama”, with experienced Roma women in the main roles. Here I have to mention, that the method of the production of Regina-drama was the (digital) storytelling, and by this way it has a strong connection to the Roma Heroes project.

Andrea Pócsik as the representative of the Roma Visual Lab at that time, started to work with members the Independent Theatre in 2013, Márton Illés and Rodrigo Balogh, and as a result of this an educational-political Brecht-like performance was put on stage in the Roma Parliament, Budapest. The title of the drama was „Expanded spaces – half century in Gypsy and Red Neck manner”. The play was written about the Hungarian official „Gypsy politics”, sarcastically using keywords like assimilation, „closing up”, integration, emancipation etc. The live drama was sectioned regularly by film excerpts from the semi or fully progressive critical documentaries of the past sixty years about Hungarian Roma people. The performance was recorded, and later we screened it in the RVL. Somewhen in 2018, after the performance of „Expanded spaces”, I invited the „Feather Picking” workshop to the ELTE Media, and fifteen-twenty students took part in the event. This workshop was based on the drama with the same title, made by the Independent Theatre. Finally in 2017 and in 2018 the community of the RVL joined

the Roma Heroes project as audience, and with the support of the Student Government of Faculty of Humanities at ELTE, we attended the performances of the 1. and 2. International Festival of the Roma Heroes in Budapest, in Stúdió K. Theatre.

The Course

2017 was the year when I started a university course, in which we were analyzing the four monodramas of the I. Roma Heroes Festival. Here I inform the reader about the stations of interpretation through which we proceeded. The course aimed at revealing the historical, social, cultural, artistic and media-contexts of the four performances of the Roma Heroes. After an introductory seminar, Rodrigó Balogh visited the course and explained us the project and the festival. On the next week we discussed the monodramas on the basis of excerpts of performances and dramatic texts; then we made an overview about the media reception in Hungarian context of the I. International Roma Storytelling Festival. *Vita mia, parla* serves as a proper example of theatrical adaptation of a literary work. Here the performance and its literary background Mariella Mehr's novel titled *Stone Age* (steinzeit) were our topics. In order to have deeper knowledge about the sociological-cultural backgrounds of the narrators of dramas, we searched after Scottish Travellers, Romanian Roma people and Jewish people in Switzerland. At a point of the semester, the Roma Theatre (Tyeatr Romen) proved to be an excellent example to be compared with the Roma Heroes. What are the social and cultural circumstances, we asked, for such an essentializing theatre, and what is the strategy of the Russian-Gypsy community for resisting and for surviving the oppressional expectations outside of the stage. In case of the Roma Heroes, resistance became part of the theatrical monologues and thus of the play. Since we felt that there were some connection between the dramatic monologue and the storytelling as a participatory and biographical research method applied in social sciences, we became interested in comparing the two and the method of the *mise-en-scene*. Critical cultural studies and postcolonial studies about „new ethnicities” (Stuart Hall) helped a lot to contextualize what Hall calls as „shift” in representation: from the mimetic to the constitutive. The former paradigm is based on the belief that identities are fixed in reality, and the latter is facing with

the challenge of social and cultural construction of the identities. According to Hall, this recognition will lead to the new politics of representation, in which black communities claim back the control over their own image, on basis of „cultural diaspora-ization”. With these theoretical and theatrical knowledge they had gained, the students took part in a two-parts workshop led by the facilitators of the Independent Theatre (Vivien Balogh and Tamás Boros), in which they consciously relate themselves to the storytelling and its sensitizing potential. Getting closer to the end of the semester, we organized a last consultation about the drafts of final papers, titled „A hero of mine”, or „An everyday hero”. Then comes the evaluation and close of the semester.

Interpretation of the Dramatic Voices

We started the course with analyses of monodramas, from four aspects: Who is speaking? To whom is he/she speaking? Who is represented by the speaker, or in other words, in whose name is she/he speaking? What kind of identity does the speaker have, what kind of identity is performed on stage? In analysing the aspect of „who is speaking”, we tried to reveal the fiction-reality relationship of the stage. The fiction-reality relationship is a very complex one, especially in case of representing the (non-) Other, and is consequently postcolonial in its very nature. Usually, the theatrical spectator is able to make a difference between role and actor, between fiction and reality. In case of an actor with Roma cultural identity in an ethnic theatre, his or her position is much more fixed, or as Aleina Lemon says, „authentic” (Lemon). According to her, Gypsies in the Russian cultural tradition are seen as the Others of the modern Russian national society. On the one hand performing arts, and especially acting is a ghetto profession for Roma people; on the other hand, it is an opportunity for Roma performers to gain legitimate cultural and symbolic capital in the otherwise exclusionary and discriminatory Russian society. Acting is a „real” Gypsy characteristic in Russian mind. (Let me add to this that in Hungarian context the majority insists on the same image about the Gypsy music and Roma musicians.) Lemon adds that despite the idea that acting is an authentic Gypsy profession, the Romen Theatre is an inauthentic space in the Russian culture, since it is seen as romantic, illusionary, unreal. This ambivalence is the „discursive paradox” of the Romen Theatre in Moscow, according to the anthropologist.

However, in case of the Roma Heroes, as we listened to storytelling characters, our spectatorial experience is much more different than in cases of the Russian ethnic or ethnicized performances, since these latter are targeted at spectators consuming exotic and stereotyping Gypsy tableaux. The challenge for us, audiences of the Roma Heroes, and members of the RVL among them, is that we need to verbalize the fiction-reality relationship in another level. We wonder if it is important for us to know the actor's Roma cultural identity, or not, in order to interpret the story, that is always exclusively a Roma story, heroic in its very nature. How can we raise the question of authenticity in the age of Black Lives Matter movement and from the aspect of Critical Romani Studies? To what extent must we politicize the question of ethnic authenticity on the stage? How can we relate ourselves to the question of „Roma authenticity“? How high can the „Roma“ as floating signifier fly (a term used in (post)structuralist theories), and how deep is it rooted and fixed?

The second question is „to whom is he/she speaking“, and again, it is a very productive aspect, as far as the Roma Heroes usually use invocation, or interpellation (Althusser). On the stage storytellers are interpellating their family members, participants of their own life, the representatives of the power, politicians, and last but not least the members of the audience. Interpellation is always an ideological and performative verbal act, fixing the speaking and listening subjects in positions. How are we the spectators fixed as being interpellated by the storytellers? Like those who are bearing witness? Like those who have guilt? Allied peers or those who are offered the chance to be „Roma“ for the time of the performance?

„In whose name is the speaker speaking, or who is represented by her/him?“, asks the third question. This aspect concerning the representation is as much exciting and important as the previous ones, because the speakers are individual characters, but at the same time they embody and symbolize the trauma that all members of the community had gone through, or at least all members of the community could testify. That is why these figures are „advocates“ or so-called strong voices – representatives of the community, in the name of which they speak as activists, according to their roles. That is why, on the stage of the Roma Heroes, the two meanings of the representation are coming together, strengthening each other as performative acts: political advocacy and theatrical performance (Spivak).

Finally, we were trying to answer the fourth question: „What kind of identity is performed on the stage?” According to our interpretation, the aspect of identity connects to the act of speaking, in which the cultural identity is gendered, evolving in its traumatic nature, proceeding toward being set free. Although this process is very similar in all cases, there is no need to emphasize, that in the four stories there are four very different Roma identities even if they share the subaltern life in different oppressive regimes.

Keywords and Binary Oppositions

Beyond the above mentioned four aspects, in the classroom we were creating keywords for the dramas. *Del Duma*: exoticization, hibrid (Romanian and Gypsy) identity, interviews with Roma women, virginity and marriage, tradition, „helplessness in community”, cleanness/uncleanness, fashion/clothing, school, religion. *I declare at my own risk*: education, disadvantage/discrimination, Roma identity, self-fulfillment, exoticization, settlement, diary/remembrance, role, Bucharest, Roma woman. *Hardest Word*: Travellers, apologizing, political campaign, female identity, racism, power, words, Scotland, letter, archive, recognition, reparation, justice. *Vita mia, parla!*: injustice, remembrance, lie, pain, victimhood, forced sterilization, motherness, psychiatric clinic, Mariella Mehr, Jenish minority, Jenish language, nomadism, Pro Juventute Foundation, Children of the Road Aid Organizaion, Teresa Wyss, hybridity, heritage, archive. These keywords are mostly variations of a Roma female identity, and its sometimes traumatic, sometimes joyful life experiences. Most of these words can be arranged in binary oppositions, e.g. Roma vs. Romanian, Traveller vs. English, Jenish vs. Swiss, but the storytellers are speaking in-between these categories, in the state of liminality.

Speaking of liminality, the Roma identity (Romanian, Traveller, Jenish) is opposed to the majority identity, but the storytellers are culturally and linguistically hibrid. They are „translators” between two cultures, which is a term coined by Stuart Hall for Salman Rushdie (Hall 1992). The heroism of the dramatic persona is based exactly on translation, as the speaker is moving across cultures and identities, from one to another, back and forth. Sometimes she doesn't need to move at all, since

her very intersectional human state is provoking, embodying more than one identity. By doing or simply representing the collision between identities, she opposes and challenges the majority power structures which intentionally aims to fix and to simplify the identity positions. Of course the „transing“ maneuver is laden with conflicts. For instance, the *Vita mia, parla!* is an adaptation from Mariella Mehr's novel titled *Stone Age*. Silvia, the main character of the novel applies a doubled identity, and creates for herself a male alter-ego called Silvio. She proves her capacity for bordercrossing, when she reports from the border of holding and loosing of consciousness, or from the border of her body and its sensations in medical terror. These bordercrossing „translations“ expel her to the frontiers of the language. The theses of this drama is that the act of translation is heroic in closed, hierarchic, terroristic, dominantly white societies.

Interdisciplinarity

Here I don't have enough space to tell in detail the themes and topics that emerged in our classroom meetings years ago. Instead, I would like to explain the interdisciplinary nature of the seminar. To be interdisciplinary means a sort of liminal state, that is informed by more than one scientific fields. Regarding the bibliography on which the seminar was based, it seems justifiable that our scientific material is heterogenous and consequently interdisciplinary. E.g. interpreting the dramas we were drawing on social sciences, like the essay titled „Dealing with Multiculturality: Minority, Ethnic and Human Rights“ written by Nicolae Gheorghe and Thomas Acton, or a chapter translated into Hungarian from „Between Two Fires. Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism“ written by Aleina Lemon, and „New ethnicities“ written by Stuart Hall (Hall 1996). In short, the Gheorghe-Acton-paper analyses critically the term of „national minority“, a term coined by Stalin. By doing so the authors make it clear that the political frames determined by the nation state are insufficient to invest vulnerable minority groups like Roma with fundamental rights. Lemon examines the cultural construction of the theatrical (in)authenticity of the Roma actors in Russian context. Finally, Stuart Hall's scrutiny aims at the chances and opportunities of the „new ethnicities“ under the oppression of the hegemon nation state.

Following the critical discussions on nation state, ethnic theatre and hybrid identities, we touched upon the role of the storytelling in a dramatic monologue, and more widely, the role of the storytelling in the human communication. At one point of the seminar we listened to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx-lecture about the „The danger of a single story” (Adichie). In her lecture the young Nigerian novelist warns us that from a distance people tend to recognize other communities and their representatives through the filter of one homogenizing story. In critical cultural studies it is called essentialism – when spectators reduce the Other to one (more often than not, imagined) element. It was a hard work for Chimamanda to make her college roommates understand, that she in Nigeria didn't use to fall asleep listening to roar of lions. This is because in Western eyes Africa is usually essentialized in the image of lion-roaring.

Conclusion

To sum up, the seminar brought new experiences in bordercrossing and liminality from more point of views. First, storytellers in the Roma Heroes dramas are permanent bordercrossers/translators, that is why they are heroes. Second, the course can be characterized as interdisciplinary, which is also a bordercrossing practice. Third, the course was based on deliberative pedagogy, which aims at building connection between inside and outside university groups, between campus and community, between students mostly with middle-class background and civil artist-activist group. In our case, students of the Department of Media and Communication had the opportunity to learn from activists and facilitators of the Independent Theatre, who represented the Roma communities for them. Fourth, it let students practice themselves in a performative sensitizing project. Our enormous lesson was the immersion both in performative identity theories and practical workshops. University classes are those spaces that desperately need to be targeted by experienced activists, who give students access to ritual and performative practices. In this way, the discursive reflection and the dramatic process can complete each other in order to sensitize young people more effectively.

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Biography

András Müllner (1968) is associate professor at the Department of Media and Communication in Eötvös Loránd University of Sciences, Budapest, and head of the Minor Media/Culture Research Centre affiliated with the department. Müllner is holding a PhD in Literary Theory (2001). Müllner's main research interest is Hungarian neoavantgarde art, the visual culture, especially the representation of minorities. As far as this latter is concerned, Müllner, together with his students, organizes the Roma Visual Lab, which is a university course and also a film program, where documentaries about Roma people are analyzed in frame of critical theories. In recent years he edited more collections of essays in different subjects, like e.g. the special issue of the *Apertura* journal about the blood libel in Tiszaeszlár and its visual memory, and the special issue of the *Replika* journal on Marshall McLuhan. Müllner's latest book is the *Mirror to Darkness*, which is a monograph based on close reading of Miklós Erdély's *Collapsus med. (Kollapszus orv.)*. In 2019 Müllner and his research group won an OTKA-grant (for 4 years, supported by National Research, Development and Innovation Office, Hungary). The title of the project is "The history and current practices of Hungarian participatory film culture, with an emphasis on the selfrepresentation of vulnerable minority groups".

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