



Film-making and Police-minority Relations: Slovenian Police and Roma in *Shanghai Gypsy*

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Abstract

After experiencing riots involving police and a Roma village, a community in north-eastern Slovenia hosted the million-dollar production of a major motion picture, *Shanghai Gypsy* (2012), which focuses on Roma and criminal justice themes. Several current Slovenian police officers played the role of police while local Roma were 'extras' as Roma villagers. This research explored the meaning of cooperating on production of the film for participants from two groups formerly in conflict. The current study consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted approximately 18 months after the film was produced with a sample of participants. We hypothesized that the film participants were able to interact with each other in ways that opened up new modes of communication, improved interpersonal relationships, and aided mutual understanding. Participants indicated that the film was regarded as a powerful means of generating Roma cultural awareness. Both police and Roma tended to downplay the intensity of the original conflict, yet often offered stories and anecdotes that seemed to indicate that relations between the groups had indeed improved as a result of their participation in the film.

Keywords

Policing; Roma; popular culture; police-community relations; Eastern Europe.

Introduction

In 2003 the Roma village of Pušča in north-eastern Slovenia erupted in a riot stemming from a dispute between Roma families. The tension continued and intensified for many months leading to another riot two years later in 2005. Police officers with dogs and firearms attempted to maintain control of angry Roma villagers armed with rocks and household objects; the villagers

had turned against the police after years of what they alleged to be discriminatory police services in responding to the conflicts among themselves and with non-Roma. The violence in 2005 took two lives. This study explored how the production of the Slovenian motion picture *Šanghaj* (*Shanghai Gypsy* is its English subtitle), featuring Roma and police as main characters, resonated among police and members of the Roma community. The film underwent production a few miles away from Pušča in the summer of 2011, just six years after the Roma-police violence. Notably, people who had experienced the 2003 and 2005 riots were invited to act in small 'extra' parts in the film as Roma and police, 'roles' they played in real life.

In 2012, the Slovene film, *Šanghaj* was released to critical acclaim. The film premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival where it was nominated for eight awards and won the award for Best Screenplay. This fictional tale of several generations of a Roma family is a beloved motion picture in Slovenia and is reported to be 'the most expensive film in Slovene history' (Charney 2012; Slovenia.si 2012). The film is the result of collaboration between bestselling novelist Feri Lainšček and writer/director Marko Naberšnik. The two previously paired on the motion picture *Petelinji Zajtrk* (*Rooster's Breakfast*) (2007) that won numerous awards and is considered one of the most successful of all Slovenian films (New York Film Academy 2012). Like *Rooster's Breakfast*, *Šanghaj* is based on Lainšček's novel of the same name and is directed by Naberšnik.

Ultimately, *Šanghaj* is a fictional historical account of police-community relations viewed through the lens of several generations of a Roma family. The film centers on a Roma family's business of smuggling durable goods into Yugoslavia during the Cold War, which transitions into a black market for weapons. Along the way, the family, including second-generation patriarch Belmondo Mirga (played by the famous Macedonian actor Visar Vishka), squats on state land and subsequently founds an all-Roma village in the north-eastern countryside called *Šanghaj*, a utopian vision for a historically-maligned minority group. The village relies on complicated and sometimes corrupt political arrangements with the local police and Yugoslav authorities, strained when the stakes become higher in the weapons trafficking business as the Cold War is winding down and organized crime is ramping up. Belmondo finds himself on trial for his illegal enterprise after he decides not to go into business with a larger-scale criminal organization; he then becomes the victim of sabotage by this organization and the local authorities. He subsequently spends several years in prison only to find that his son had meanwhile developed a serious drug addiction, and become estranged from the family. In many ways, the conflict between the authorities and Roma in the film mirrors the real-life conflict that has historically characterized the police-community relations in the area. Whereas during Yugoslav times, Roma patriarchs found ways to cooperate with the government in pursuing economic and social ambitions, this relationship changed significantly with the decline of the Communist era. This was attributed largely to emerging nationalist identities in newly independent republics altering social and political relations between ethnic groups, arguably making them more contested and less cooperative (Pogany 1999, 2004; Savelsberg 1995; Strobl 2014). What is unique about this particular production is that, given the fictional focus on police-community relations, the director chose to populate the film with community members as extras who represented themselves. For example, several current Slovenian police officers played the role of police from the former Yugoslavia while local Roma were 'extras' as Roma villagers.

In a general sense, it would seem the significance of the film *Šanghaj* to the local community has been substantial. Although main actors playing the Roma characters were not themselves Roma – but, rather, famous Balkans movie stars – the film took on great importance in the community. It is relatively uncommon for a feature film to be produced in Slovenia, especially one that achieves international acclaim, and rarer still for local community members to act in roles that reflect their own ethnicity and/or occupation, fictionalizing actual historic and social conflict

and conditions.⁴ In his coverage of the film's premiere in Europe, art historian Noah Charney explained the diversity of the cast:

The acting is a particular treat and will feel wonderfully exotic to Anglophone viewers, as the cast boasts actors from a wide variety of countries, speaking more than half a dozen languages. The film is Slovenian, but features Bosnians, Macedonians, Italians, Serbs, and Croats, to name a few, and languages range from Italian to Slovene to Albanian to the Prekmurje dialect of Slovene to the gypsy tongue. (Charney 2012)

Given the historical stereotypes that typically represent Roma as nomadic criminals and deviants, Roma can be particularly sensitive of their portrayal in news and entertainment media. However, *Šanghaj* was roundly embraced by Roma in production, as well as other Slovenians. One of the reasons that Roma so readily welcomed Naberšnik's project was that they were generally aware of Naberšnik and Lainšček's past partnership on the acclaimed *Rooster's Breakfast*, and they had confidence in the ability of the director to provide an authentic and compelling representation of their people.⁵

Many of the locals that we spoke with indicated Naberšnik spent considerable time with Roma in Prekmurje in order to learn as much as he could for the purposes of making the film culturally accurate. The director made an effort to ensure that the community understood he respected their culture and their land. The set, a fake Roma village, was built in Prekmurje. The production secured an agreement with the landowner that, after filming, they would tear down the set and leave the land exactly as it had been. Actions such as these, that serve to respect and honor the local residents, have contributed to the warm reception that the film has received across the country.

The Roma in Slovenia and persistent prejudice

Understanding contemporary police-community relations in Slovenia and why media portrayals of those relationships hold significance to those in the region requires some background on the country's population demographics as well as an understanding of the ways that Roma have historically been linked to crime and deviance. The Republic of Slovenia, an independent nation of approximately two million people since 1991, was previously part of socialist Yugoslavia but has been a member of the European Union (EU) since 2004. Approximately 83 per cent of the country's inhabitants are ethnic Slovenes (Central Intelligence Agency 2014). According to the 2002 census minority groups include Serbs (2 per cent), Croats (2 per cent) and Bosniaks (1 per cent) as well as two autochthonous Hungarian and Italian national minorities (together 0.5 per cent). Approximately 60 per cent of the people identify as Catholic, 2 per cent as Orthodox Christians, and 2 per cent as Muslim (Central Intelligence Agency 2014).

Roma people have resided in Slovenia since at least the fifteenth century (Stropnik 2011). According to the 2002 census, approximately 3,200 people self-identified as Roma, but many government officials believe that this figure represents under-reporting due to social stigmatization. The true population numbers are more likely to be between 7,000 to 12,000 people representing less than one per cent of the total population, according to many police officials encountered during this research. Approximately 85 per cent of them are reportedly native born (Republic of Slovenia 2010). Roma are present in 20 municipalities in Slovenia (Portal Romskih Svetnikov 2015) and primarily reside in 102 small settlements and hamlets (Zupančič 2006). Those settlements are still not fully regulated and settled, with some showing more orderly and modern image while others are stagnating as poor and disorganized residential areas (REDUPRE 2011-2013). They are mostly located on the perimeter of country villages, towns or suburbs – but separated from them – or at the edge of forests, with many still illegal because they were built on private or municipal land (Devetak 2013; Zupančič 2007). In

the movie, the founder of the fictional village of Šanghaj explains to another character that the land he proposes to settle on in the 1960s is ‘... a no man’s land. It’s the state’s’. He simply confiscates it for his purposes, bribing local officials to turn a blind eye.

Slovenia is often considered a country that is particularly tolerant of its Roma population when compared to other European countries. Notoriously, in 2010 France demolished dozens of Roma encampments and deported many of the Roma inhabitants to Romania (whether or not individuals were actually from there) for lacking work permits, despite EU law to the contrary (BBC 2010). Although Roma are not a protected minority in Slovenia, as are the Hungarian and Italian ones,⁶ they are provided with unemployment aid. Moreover, the Office for Minorities in Slovenia has embarked on several programs to improve the dismal education statistics related to the population – most Roma drop out long before they can graduate from secondary school – such as through the use of Roma teacher’s aides and the development of Roma kindergartens. In 2010, the *National Programme of Measures for Roma of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia for the Period 2010-2015* was adopted in order to generate public awareness in both majority and minority populations of ‘... the existence of discrimination and how to fight it, in particular of public servants who come in contact with members of the Roma community’ (Republic of Slovenia 2010: 6). Nonetheless, prejudice against the group for allegedly over-relying on social aid, eschewing work, and having a disproportionate tendency toward crime, particularly related to drug crimes, remains prevalent in Slovenian society. It should be noted that criminal statistics by race or ethnic identity are not recorded in Slovenia; therefore, it is difficult to counter the stereotype related to crime. Most, but not all, police believe that numbers of crimes committed by Roma are disproportionately high based on their population distribution, but many also concede that social factors, as well as differential enforcement, may also play a role (Strobl et. al. 2014).

Slovenia has experienced anti-Roma sentiment and hate crimes, although official data on hate crimes is not collected. The biggest flashpoint involving Roma rights in Slovenia happened in 2006 when riots erupted in the town of Ambruš, targeting the Strojans, a family of 31 Roma, against whom more than 120 criminal charges had been filed in previous years for theft, burglary and arson. An angry mob, formed in response to the family’s criminal history, threatened to kill the Strojans and demanded their eviction. The police kept crowds back and successfully negotiated the family’s removal to a temporary shelter. Subsequently, other government agencies sorted out permanent responses but the police, as first responders, minimized the violent harm to the community and the Roma family. Government officials never permitted the Strojans return to the property, a situation which The European Roma Rights Center refers to as setting a dangerous precedent (Human Rights First 2008; Wood 2006).

The police-community relations are complex and some Roma view the police as unfairly targeting their community. The 2003 and 2005 riots in Pušča arose after years of discontent but ultimately led to efforts to improve police-community relations. After the violence in 2005, the Slovenian police responded, in part, with the development of a joint training program between police officers and Roma community members. Slowly garnering the support of local Roma leaders, the joint training program, which began in 2005, consisted of a multi-cultural curriculum delivered over two days. Police officers delved into cultural sensitivity training, Romani dialect lessons, and intercultural dialogues with Roma leaders. In addition to concerted efforts to develop community policing models, the response appears to have made a dent in the tensions with more members of the community working together to prevent future violence (Strobl et. al. 2014). In a general sense, multicultural skills have increasingly been deemed important as a subset of desired police (leadership) competencies in multicultural environments (Banutai 2012; Pagon et al. 2010) because they are regarded as a means of meeting the challenges of democratic and community-oriented policing.

The European Roma 'problem'

A perception of the Roma as a problematic population has dogged the group since their arrival in Europe from North India in the Middle Ages. In fourteenth century Europe, laws were passed by ruling bodies to expel Roma. Many people felt that their nomadism, distinct culture, and syncretic spiritual beliefs could be linked to disease and crime. In the subsequent century many Europeans expressed the trepidation that Roma were carriers of the plague; Hungarians and Romanians enslaved them (Liégeois 1983/2005). Since the Middle Ages, Roma have endured cycles of pogroms and were the convenient scapegoats for a variety of social ills from unemployment to crime to disease. The socially constructed, so-called criminal classes in the United Kingdom in the late nineteenth century included Roma among other groups such as the Jews. The phenomenon drew on scientific classification and an ethnology that presented certain ethnic groups as habitually and inherently criminal. Later, the Nazis exterminated them in the Holocaust as part of their even more extreme ideologies of racial hierarchy. The Roma faced forced settlement and assimilation in the post- World War II years in socialist countries like the Czech Republic and Poland. Although part of the communist ideology involved bringing all people, including the Roma, into the social fold of the proletariat, it often instead led to Roma 'rootlessness and squalor' (Fonseca 1995: 11).

Today, Roma are often viewed as trouble-makers and criminals who should be excluded from mainstream society and even driven out of local and national borders (Liégeois 1983/2005). Penal populism, in which foreigners, immigrants, and those seen as outsiders are particularly targeted by law enforcement, has oppressed Roma people. The criminalization of behavior associated with being Roma, such as travelling with false identification or begging, has proliferated in Europe in the early twenty-first century (Fekkete and Webber 2010). This often places the police on the frontlines of enforcing rules that a penal majority favors, thereby leading to unfavorable reception by minorities like the Roma people. In addition to over-enforcing laws against Roma, there are also numerous reports of the police failing to protect Roma communities from hate crimes against them. Human rights groups routinely report numerous incidents of anti-Roma hate speech and violence against Roma, but little effort by most governments has been made to address the problem (Amnesty International 2012). And, in some cases, police perpetrate violence against Roma directly. In Bada's (2006) study of a Greek murder trial involving a Roma husband who killed his wife, tensions between the police and the Roma devolved into violence as police seemed over-zealous in their controlling of a gathering Roma crowd outside the courthouse. Worse, using a vendetta narrative in describing the events, the Greek media cultivated an image of Roma as uncontrollable, passively excusing what are in fact serious police violations of human rights.

'Stealing light-skinned children' and other media scares

Prejudice against the Roma, including the notion of Roma as inherently criminogenic, is routinely fueled by negative media portrayals. Brearley (2004) states that, within the European press of the late twentieth century, Roma continued to be stigmatized in language similar to the virulent anti-Semitism that was so commonly waged against the Jews. She found that news reporting tends to be 'sensational, exaggerated, and negative' with Roma presented as 'parasites', 'genetic criminals', and 'dangerous'. (Brearley 2004: 360). Similarly, *Traveller's Times* journalist Jake Bowers collected one week's worth of headlines in a local paper and found numerous instances that perpetuated myths linking Roma to criminality and dangerousness (Bowers n.d.). In addition to the overwhelming negative portrayals of Roma as criminals, Brearley also finds a staggering lack of 'positive portrayals of Roma life or sympathy with their widespread persecution and no interest in praising Roma values or outstanding public figures' (Brearley 2004: 360). Similarly, in a critical linguistic analysis of US and Canadian newspaper accounts, reports about Roma criminals were compared to white collar criminals in financial industries. Roma were consistently portrayed using the language of cultural and social deviance and framed as part of a 'Roma problem', whereas the white collar criminals were 'normalized'

through the use of details about their commitment to family or community life, and treated as individuals who were basically good people who made mistakes (Catalano 2014).

The media were seen perpetuating the notion of a 'Roma problem' in 2013 when a blond, blue-eyed girl named Maria was found and seized when Greek police raided a Roma village. Based on long-standing myths of Roma as evil, criminals, and 'gypsies who steal light-skinned children', rumors flew that the Roma family kidnapped the child and were involved in human trafficking, possibly to sell her organs (Dimitrov et al. 2013). Reuters (2013) reported that a police official remarked, 'The girl looks Scandinavian or could be Bulgarian. It is either a case of abduction or trafficking'. The article continues: 'Police are preparing criminal charges for abducting a minor and securing documents under false reasons'. However, after further investigation, it was revealed that the Roma family was given the child by her biological, Bulgarian mother. The family was vindicated, but evidence that the family was falsely collecting child benefits complicates the matter and further contributes to stereotypes that Roma are 'cheating' the system.

The worry from this sort of police action and media coverage is that stereotypes that Roma are inherently criminogenic – with a penchant for 'stealing light-skinned children' – will consciously, or unconsciously, influence further police actions. Such is the case in Ireland a mere five days after Maria was discovered. Another blonde, blue-haired girl was taken by Irish police from a Roma family upon suspicion that she could not possibly be their biological child. Tests later confirmed that the child was, in fact, their biological daughter (Alexander 2013; McDonald 2013).

Role-playing harnessed toward resolving cultural conflicts

We approached this study from a cultural criminological perspective, considering how the media both historically and contemporaneously continue to shape perceptions and attitudes toward police-community reactions. Cultural criminologists are attuned to the ways that the media intersect with crime and justice, specifically how the media play a large role in shaping perceived social problems (Ferrell et al. 2008). *Šanghaj* offers a challenge to this dominant ideology in one obvious way: the film presents the Roma in ways that do not reinforce longstanding prejudices against the group while recognizing, and not shying away from, the centrality of how crime and social control shaped the history of these two groups. In a more subtle way, behind the scenes, we believe the film is significant to police-community relations in that the production process itself provides a unique opportunity for intergroup interaction.

Given the negative stereotypes that Roma continue to endure, as well as the contentious history between police and Roma, we suggest that participating in the production of *Šanghaj* provided a type of role-playing that allowed participants to interact in ways that serve to create a more compassionate cultural understanding between the two groups. Role-playing has long been considered an effective method to shift attitudes and resolve cultural conflict, allowing both parties to understand and empathize with the 'other's' interests, concerns and values. Role-playing performances challenge widely accepted patterns of supremacy, fear, exclusion and repression and modify personal attitudes, values and beliefs (Cohen 2011; Zimbardo et al. 2000). In addition, it brings reluctant adversaries into conversation with hopes of restoring damaged relationships through transformation of the defensive structures of guilt, shame and rage (Cohen 2011).

Taken a step further, role-playing in the production of mass entertainment becomes a laboratory to explore relationships and conflicting values, allowing for experimentation of cross-cultural encounters that are recorded and shared more broadly. Depending on how the cultural product is disseminated and received by the audience, it can potentially open new channels of communication between the conflicting parties, heightening dialogue and

developing empathy by allowing a free flow of accurate and constructive information to the public (Manoff 1998; Melone et al. 2002).

Methodology

From 2009 to 2013, a team of police researchers from John Jay College of Criminal Justice in the US, the University of Maribor Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security in Slovenia, and the Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces (DCAF) conducted focus group interviews with police and Roma community leaders in the northeast province of Prekmurje about the joint training program.⁷ The focus group discussions centered on whether joint training with the Roma proved an effective means of ensuring more adequate police cooperation with the minority group on issues of crime and maintenance of order (Strobl et. al. 2014). During these conversations in the summer of 2011, several participating police officers revealed that they had just wrapped up filming scenes from an upcoming film about a Roma family and its relationship to police and the wider community.

That summer, the research team visited the film set on a day on which filming was not occurring, walking through *Šanghaj*, an artificial Roma village constructed to reflect how such a scene would look in the 1980s, without paved roads, littered with broken-down cars, and featuring a shanty town surrounding a grander home befitting a Roma patriarch. During this visit we learned how important the filming was to the 'extra' participants and how it ushered in a level of pleasant social excitement in the community, according to representatives from both the Roma and the police. Many were particularly delighted that a multi-million dollar feature film involved their corner of the world, a place not usually depicted in major entertainment. For example, one Roma gentleman who had been hired to act as security when the set was not being used had an autograph book and had everyone he encountered during the production sign it – including us, the researchers – so that he could remember all his new friends forever. He labelled the production the best thing that had happened to him in his life.

As researchers in police-community relations, we were aware of the history of the two groups and we could not help but wonder whether the film production also acted as a means of bringing the two groups closer together after a violent period in their history. We returned to the Prekmurje region of Slovenia in 2013 to conduct interviews with local residents (primarily Roma) and police officers who had participated as extras in *Šanghaj* to ask how the film had affected them at the time of production and whether there were any enduring consequences from their participation.

At the outset, we considered this research could have a few challenges. First, given that policing in any country is historically an insular organization, it can be difficult to recruit police officers to be interviewed by outsiders, particularly about an issue as sensitive as police-Roma relations. Further, given the history of tension between the police and the Roma community, gaining cooperation of Roma who were willing to discuss their experiences with outsiders from another country in a relatively short time span could be problematic. However, these challenges were overcome largely due to an earlier multi-year project conducted in Slovenia that focused on police-community relations in the country (Strobl et. al. 2014). During the four years of work on this previous project, from 2009 to 2013, the researchers had built a relationship of mutual respect and understanding among both police and Roma that subsequently paved the way for possible recruitment of interviewees for this research.

Since we were specifically interested in exploring the intergroup relations between police and Roma as they participated in an unconventional activity, we set out to speak with those who had small roles, or served as 'extras', in the film (that is, as Roma playing the part of Roma, and police playing the part of police). We chose to recruit participants using the snowball sampling technique, partly because interviewing every participant in the film would be an unwieldy and

impossible task, and also because we felt that recruiting participants in this fashion would yield some interesting findings regarding the participants' social networks and their intra- and inter-group relations (Handcock 2011; Heckathorn 2011; Noy 2008).

'Extras' drawn from the community included 11 real-life police officers playing police in the film. In addition, 296 Roma people participated in the film: 266 from the northeastern Prekmurje region and another 30 from Ljubljana. From among these approximately 300 participants in total, we conducted 16 focus group interviews with each consisting of eleven Roma community members, three police officers, and two Roma community representatives. One researcher acted as the interviewer in all 16 interviews; another researcher observed approximately half of these interviews. The interviews were conducted in the Slovenian language with an English interpreter for the interviewer. Interview notes were then typed up and coded for broad themes found therein. We describe the themes that were found most frequently, and the analysis that follows is intended to sort through the meanings behind the experience of being an extra in the film in an impressionistic and interpretive way.

Our interview questions were designed to tap into the feelings and perceptions related to participants' experiences in the film as well as the intergroup dynamics that occurred as part of the production process. The interviews were semi-structured and encouraged participants to discuss what they felt were the most important aspects of their participation. For all participants, however, we had some specific questions about whether they felt their role was an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the relationship between Roma and the police, both historically and in the modern era. We encouraged discussion about how their involvement may shape notions of prejudice, including any impact on police-community relations. We also inquired about if, and how, the film may have impacted on their sense of self, their identities, and any reflections the film may have prompted with regard to their personal, family or community history.⁸

The Roma extras from the Prekmurje region primarily came from the village of Pušča, site of the 2003 and 2005 aforementioned riots, although some also came from a village in nearby Dolga Vas. They were paid for their work although many of our respondents complained that the money was 'not very good'. The casting director did not indicate that past tensions influenced the decision to draw extras from Pušča. Instead, she chose it because she felt that the villagers would be the most comfortable with the production process and with each other, including the police. Indeed, the police-Roma joint training program had originated in the area, as well as community policing initiatives. The development of the village as the only autonomous Roma municipality in Slovenia seemed to match the vision for a settled and prosperous Roma community shared by the main characters in *Šanghaj*.

'We knew them already' but it was fun

We present three primary dimensions of interest, hypothesizing that participation in the film production process: 1) opened up new modes of communication between the police and Roma; 2) improved their interpersonal relationships; and 3) aided their mutual cultural understanding and trust. We suggest that these factors are important in shaping further police-community relations because they represent the seeds of a more tolerant and peaceful relationship planted since the 2003 and 2005 riots. The approach in general may also serve as a model for others in Europe wrestling with similar police-Roma conflicts.

In terms of opening up new avenues of communication, most of the interviewees indicated that they already knew the 'others' (police already knew Roma; Roma already knew police) before the production. This is unsurprising due to the fact that the size of the Roma community relative to the non-Roma population in this region is known to be the highest in the country. In fact, Lainšček, the author of the book on which *Šanghaj* is based and a non-Roma Slovenian, is

described in the novel's description on Amazon.com (English version) as having grown up closely with Roma friends and being very familiar with their customs. Police in particular emphasized that they already knew how to interact with the Roma community and that the film did not develop any new relationships. The implication was that the tension between the groups was in the past, a historical phenomenon, and not reflective of their current relationship. Both sides portrayed the others often as 'friends' who, when a problem arose, would 'sit down and talk about it'. They attributed this to their historic geographic proximity, rather than any deliberate intervention in terms of the police-Roma joint training program, the government investment in Roma education, or any other formal program. This sense that people already knew each other was also echoed in the original evaluation of the police-Roma joint training program (Strobl et al. 2014), most likely indicating that there was a tendency to downplay social barriers or past tensions.

Further, to the extent that any past tension was acknowledged, there was a tendency to individualize the problem. One respondent stated that the police-Roma relationship 'depends on each individual' more than any other factor. A police respondent said that to improve police-community relations 'every individual should be more open' and that results depend 'on each person'. He added, 'If you respect them, they respect you. Without prejudice'.

Because many respondents were not amenable to the notion that the production increased communication between the groups, many did not speak about a better relationship between them. At the same time, however, a majority of the respondents said that they greatly enjoyed the opportunity to socialize with the other group and some expressed that there was a closeness that developed from the experience. One interviewee spoke about the 'atmosphere' that the set had. 'It was relaxed and we could all socialize together'. One of the young adult extras enjoyed 'hanging out' on the set and being respected by his elders. Others described bringing photos of their family to the set or sharing them on Facebook. Some considered participation in the film a life-altering experience because their local culture and region were being portrayed in a major film and could gain greater meaning and importance as a result.

One police respondent noted, however, that the production did indeed open up new channels of communication between the two groups. He explained that it allowed inter-group socialization in a different context from the typical police citizen encounters, a relationship that continued to thrive even after the film production ceased. When the officer went into Roma villages, he reported that he was recognized by the people and was greeted in a friendly way, a marked improvement from situations in which police were likely to be feared. Further, the officer said that he attended an unrelated community event and the Roma in attendance asked him to join them in a posed picture, an experience that he attributed directly to the direct result of friendships made during the film production.

'Living for freedom is in their blood, and you can feel that with them'

Respondents had the most to say in relation to the questions about the film as a cultural and artistic product and the film's capacity to promote a positive image of Roma culture. The Roma were especially concerned with whether the film provided a positive – and more importantly, accurate – representation of their history. In particular, three Roma respondents talked about the sense of pride they felt in being involved in a production that showed the Roma beyond the stereotypes of being adverse to work or prone to criminality. One said he was excited that the films showed '... Roma striving to come to a better life'. He also emphasized that being in the film was paid employment itself.

Stereotypes related to 'Roma not working' or Roma criminality were mentioned by approximately half of the respondents. One said that Roma get 'lots of charity and non-Roma feel that the Roma receive social aid without working for it ... this is the main reason for the

“hate”. A Roma gentleman explained that ‘If politics and politicians were different then the Roma would not be in a [socioeconomic] position where they would have to break the law so often’. Another pointed to the taking of the land for the village in *Šanghaj* as an example of the need to break the law in order to better the community. In general, both Roma and police were aware of the socio-economic realities that have impacted – and continue to impact – the Roma in terms of employment and educational opportunities. A majority of Roma in Slovenia has not completed secondary school and most are not employed, receiving social aid instead. Many have pointed to historical discrimination in education and employment as a root cause of Roma social exclusion and socioeconomic difficulties (Stropnik 2011).

One of the main themes across the interviews was the notion that the film portrayed the police and the Roma in ‘realistic’ ways. A Roma respondent said that the film showed the historic ‘reality of the police-community relationship’ in the former Yugoslavia as it bounced from violence to corruption to cooperation. Another also spoke about the realism of ‘... the toughness of police. They would just take people without proper procedure’. He also reminisced about the ‘old police’ and how, as time goes by, less and less people remember them. The police respondents agreed that the portrayal of the police was generally a good one except for two respondents who cited an exception: the scene in which the patriarch’s house was being searched was not consistent with common police practice. The scene portrayed an overreach of government power because, in reality, the police would not be permitted to search with such disregard for the suspect’s property.

‘Realistic’ was the description given by a Roma respondent who indicated that the film’s theme of a whole village starting from the dream of ‘just one guy’ was very similar to the legend of Pušča being founded by a forward-thinking Roma knife-sharpener. ‘It was a village of musicians and knife-sharpener’, he said. Many respondents felt that the cultural portrayals were accurate; moreover, many also spoke about portrayals of personal relationships among the main characters as poignant and real. One said that the ups and downs of the relationship between the patriarch and his wife were very realistic. Others pointed to the scene in which the patriarch and his son were in a city park, as the patriarch attempts to bring his son home after a runaway drug binge. This had emotional and dramatic impact for several of the respondents who felt it was a realistic portrayal of drug addiction. One said that ‘even though [the son] had found himself in a bad [situation], he was able to listen to his father’.

The realism, however, faced one challenge in particular, according to many of the Roma respondents: the translations from the Romani dialect used in the film to the Slovenian subtitles.⁹ They explained that, because the main actors were not themselves Roma, they often struggled to pronounce the Romani dialect in an authentic way. One reported that the film did not stick to one Romani dialect but mixed them, which would generally not happen among people of the same clan as were the characters. Another railed against the scriptwriter for ‘translations containing errors’. Another was ‘... disappointed with the Slovenian translations’. Although none indicated that the translation problems changed the meaning of the film, they felt they were ‘distracting and irritating’.

The realism of the movie sparked personal and historical reflections for some of the Roma respondents. Others made reference to the distant past in order to talk about how the relationship between the police and Roma had shifted. In the 1990s, one Roma participant explained, the police would frequently enter her village to conduct home searches for drugs and weapons. ‘The experience was scary and frightening for the whole community, even for those who were not in possession of any contraband’. Roma respondents in general felt that, although conditions have certainly improved, prejudices remain, and one factor in shifting those prejudices may be found in cultural artefacts, such as the film, which offer portrayals of Roma that defy stereotypes.

The police respondents, however, did not engage in personal reflection much and tended to distance themselves from the portrayals of the 'old police'; indeed, most of them had not been Yugoslavian police but joined after independence. However, one officer was palpably moved by the exposure to Roma culture during the production process, saying of the Roma participants, 'They are more traditional [than us Slovenians]. We should encourage Roma to cherish their own culture – this must be our goal. It is something special. Living for freedom is in their blood, and you can feel that with them'. He explained that the Roma traditionally seek liberation from non-Roma society, preferring to solve their problems within their tribe, and have a strict loyalty to the patriarch of the clan.

Many Roma respondents felt inspired by the film and shared what the film unearthed for them:

I am interested in the history of Pušča, so I was very interested that the film presented a historical approach that covered several generations. [Criminal] cases from the film are the same that are happening now, that is after World War II. The police did want to move us ... what happened to the Roma is the same thing that happened to the Native Americans in the United States – they try to put us in specific areas.

For another Roma respondent, walking through the artificial village brought back memories of living in rougher conditions than he does now. He had a strong sense of nostalgia for the lack of material comfort. 'I was not ashamed and had no negative feelings', he added. A Roman woman had a similar reaction:

I lived without electricity and as a result there was more time for thinking and people used to sit and socialize more. Now, people are more individualistic. But I can't imagine living without electricity and water.

Another female Roma interviewee reflected on the scene in which the father of the patriarch told his son not to go to school, but rather to do what he does (which is smuggling goods into Yugoslavia from Italy). She faced a similar influence, being encouraged by her family to pursue only cooking and a home life and not going to school. She ended up running away from home at the age of sixteen because of domestic violence and, after having a child, struggled to return to school. She has done so and has a steady job and aspirations to be a social worker. She felt the scene particularly resonated because traditionally the Roma follow gendered social roles and did what their parents did. She indicated that tensions remain within the community between those that follow the old ways and those that are assimilating more with the dominant Slovenian culture (which has less strict gender roles).¹⁰

Some of the respondents believed that the film itself was important as a means of promoting Roma culture. In particular the two musicians interviewed, who performed in the film, were adamant about the importance of sharing and preserving traditional Roma music and work with local music schools, and performing at community venues. 'I would feel sadness if the culture of being a gypsy dies', he explained. He said that he believes that Roma culture is not necessarily popular right now and that is what threatens the lasting power of Roma music. Along these lines, one of the other Roma respondents displayed the movie poster and had a video projection of the movie trailer as a display at a recent community fair. He found that, although the fair was primarily of a culinary nature (for example, traditional cheese-making), attendees expressed considerable interest in the film in particular and Roma culture in general. The respondent indicated that local tourist offices also display the movie poster and that he has noticed that tourists in Slovenia increasingly want to visit Roma villages.

Discussion: 'It is close to my heart'

In terms of our hypotheses, the interviews strongly supported the notion that participation in the film aided in mutual cultural understanding and trust. Most of the respondents pointed to some experience of being in the film, or the film itself, as demystifying Roma culture and placing it in a positive light. There was less 'cultural' content around Roma understanding of police, but some Roma respondents said that they were closer to, or knew more personally, a police officer having worked on the film. Based on our experience researching the Roma and police in Slovenia, we have found that generally people are strongly inclined to talk about the richness of multicultural encounters but less likely to elaborate on the reasons that these encounters may be important for social peace and stability. Although Slovenia avoided the worst of the wars related to the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, the ethnic cleansing in the territories of their former country resonates deeply and perhaps makes ethnic tension a difficult topic to discuss.

The high-profile nature of the film, its release in North America, and its award at the Montreal Film Festival all contributed to many of our respondents attaching a 'once in a lifetime' label to the production experience. It was cherished, particularly by Roma respondents, as a positive example of their culture that many would experience in the movie theater and which they could point to in educating non-Roma. The film production as a cultural experience and the film as a potential transformative cultural product were supported by our data collection.

In addition, many of the respondents had poetic things to say about the film, but not necessarily in ways that we hypothesized. Many interviewees revealed more general, human reactions to the dramatic events in the film and their roles as extras. For example, a Roma respondent said:

This is the first film that touched me in my heart and soul because it is a simple story about life. This is the way people should live – what they feel they should do. It is close to my heart. The world has become too materialistic and the film was the opposite.

Sentiments such as these attest to the power of popular culture to present images of crime, conflict, and justice that reach individuals through affect and emotion in ways that intellect or rational logic cannot (Rafter and Brown 2011). The interviewees largely avoided drawing many literal parallels about the film and their lives, but rather spoke on the level of general culture and emotional attachments.

Unsupported was the notion that the police and Roma participants opened up new modes of communication or bettered their relationship as a consequence of participation in the film, save by the views of a couple respondents. The notion that the film acted as a way of restoring good relations or resolving decades old conflicts did not resonate with respondents who felt that they already had dialogue with the others, and that they had 'friends' among them. Indeed, the government's educational programs, the national police's joint-training program, and other multicultural initiatives in the area act as confounding variables. It would be hard to identify that the film resolved conflicts, given our methodology, in the absence of participants telling us so, which they did not. However, many of the interviewees did point to bad relations as recently as the 1990s (notably no one but the police, in passing, spoke about the 2003 and 2005 riots) and then characterized the present as 'good' or 'better' but there was a discursive black box as to how or why the shift occurred. We believe the absence does suggest that something has 'worked' to resolve conflicts in Prekmurje, but whether *Šanghaj* contributed directly remains elusive. Regardless, we found no evidence that *Šanghaj* damaged relations and some evidence that it deepened relationships between police and Roma that were already there.

At minimum, our research suggests that filmmakers have a unique opportunity to challenge social myths and help minority groups to be depicted in better ways than other media outlets

normally do. Many are probably aware of this but, more practically speaking, the take-away message is that the production process itself can be this opportunity, not merely the content of the movie. Filming on location and using local people to play the characters as much as possible can be an important contribution to challenging hegemony and showcasing under-celebrated cultures and people, much as *City of God* (2002) did for residents of Brazilian favelas. But there are also traps to this approach in which human suffering becomes an aesthetic backdrop and begins to move into the realm of exploitation (Oliveira 2008), so we offer this point knowing that it requires sensitive and responsible production teams.

Since participants were adamant of the film's role as a kind of cultural ambassador, it would seem million-dollar role-playing projects are worth doing – if they can be done. However, criminologists are not often in the position to commission major motion pictures for the purposes of resolving police-community conflicts. To do so would be to take up the charge put forth by Barak (2007), that the academy can be involved in 'newsmaking criminology': that is, criminologist activities in the mainstream media that interpret, influence or shape the representation of crime and justice for the public. Instead, this research contributes to notions that role-playing in more realistic and less expensive endeavors could also be useful for working with intergroup conflict, including police-community relations.

Others, such as Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, have explicitly recognized the power of performance and its potential for social change (Christensen 2014; Karabekir 2004; Mosse 2001; New Economics Foundation 1998: 49). Boal used theatrical language as a form of consciousness-raising to initiate discussion and analysis of oppression as a means of instigating positive social change (Howard, 2004). For example, Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, under a general rubric of what has been referred to as 'entertainment education' (Singhal and Rogers 2004) involves the transformation of passive audience members into active performers, inspiring actors to create original scripts to provide solutions to social problems (Christensen 2014). Boal states, 'If the oppressed himself (and not a surrogate artist) performs an action, this action, performed in theatrical fiction, will allow him to change things in real life' (Boal 1990: 42). Drawing loosely on Freire's (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed, it tries to shift interventions away from preconceived notions of problems and solutions, placing ownership of the framing and direction of problem-solving in the hands of those who live it (Singhal 2004), using entertainment to shape and understand social and cultural narratives. Acting is seen as particularly powerful because it engages the human body in sound and movement and opens up the expressive possibilities, helping to create and recreate social selves. It is an experiment in social management and problem-solving in a relevant but fictional setting (Singhal 2004). By deconstructing and reconstructing social problems in a non-oppressive manner, such performances hold the potential for better community relations (Christensen 2014). We suggest that, though scripted, the performances depicting the history of police-community relations by locals in the film *Šanghaj* offered an occasion for an expressive venue that we believe contributed to an overall shift in community relations.

In conclusion, we found that the film provided an opportunity to deepen relations between two formerly conflicting groups and gave them a new and exciting venue to socialize in, working together to perpetuate a positive portrayal of Roma culture and a way forward after a period of social conflict. The production might be considered part of the restorative landscape of endeavors occurring in early twenty-first century Slovenia to respond to Roma discrimination and anti-Roma violence. As one police officer told us, 'You need both formal activities, like training programs, and informal ones, like participating in the film or other community events, to improve police community-relations'.

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- ³ Danielle Reynolds is a doctoral student in Criminal Justice at State University of New York at Albany, USA.
- ⁴ The two generations of patriarchs were played by Visar Viskha (Macedonian actor) and Senad Basnic (Bosnian actor) and the second generation patriarch's wife was played by Asli Bayram (Turkish actress).
- ⁵ The producers of the film were Bostjan Ilovic and Franci Zajc or Arsmidia, a major Slovenian film production house. The cost of the film was 2.5 million Euros, with some additional funding coming from the Slovenian Film Center, a publicly-funded agency.
- ⁶ Slovenian law uses a principle of territoriality which provides special rights guaranteed to national minorities in their native settlements. These rights are guaranteed to the Italian and Hungarian national minorities regardless of the numerical strength of their population. National minorities are also officially encouraged to maintain contact with their kin-states as well as with diasporic Italian and Hungarian communities living in other countries. Anthems of the minority groups are permitted to be performed along with official Slovenian anthems during national ceremonies. The laws also secure to the national minorities the right of peaceful assembly and association and protect the use of their language in the country (Petricusic 2004).
- ⁷ The authors wish to thank Urška Hozjan, our Slovenian-English interpreter for the research interviews.
- ⁸ It should be noted that the director and producers declined to be interviewed for this research. However, the casting director for the extras in the film was interviewed and provided some insight into the production's intended purpose of using Roma and police extras for authenticity purposes. This was similar to the choice of location which was also true to the novel on which the movie was based. Other than seeking authenticity, we had little insight into the intentions of the directors and producers.
- ⁹ In the initial Slovenian release of the film, subtitles were used for dialogue in the Romani and Italian languages. In the North American release, English subtitles appeared for all the dialogue. It should be noted that the English subtitle also exhibited a few awkward moments.
- ¹⁰ Interestingly, one of our respondents felt that the film suffered from a male bias because the male characters were more developed and had more screen-time.

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