Are there differences between how Gadjo photographers have represented Romani people and how Roma photographers have represented them, and if so what are they?

Context
Romanies have long been cast as the archetypical ‘other’ by western society – mysterious outsiders, different from us and not to be trusted. Even today they remain, as the Palestinian writer Edward Said put it, the only group about which anything can be said “without challenge or demurral” (Economist, 1999).

Said’s book Orientalism deconstructed historic western attitudes towards the Islamic world, but many of his ideas extend comfortably to these ‘strangers within’. Just like Said’s Arab, the Roma have been reduced to stereotypes. Historically, Gadjo (non-Roma) artists have always spoken for them, arguably reducing them to role players within their own narrative (Saul and Tebbutt, 2004: 1). This paper considers how far this dynamic extends to photography, through first-hand interviews.

Terminology
In this paper, except in quotes from other sources, the word Gypsy is not used. Although many English Romanies have reclaimed the term and use it freely, it was created by outsiders and has negative connotations in many countries. The Romani word Gadjo – non-Roma person (plural: Gadje) – is not pejorative.

Stereotypes
“The mental age of the average adult Gypsy is thought to be about that of a child of ten. Gypsies have never accomplished anything of great significance in writing, painting, music, science or social organisation. Quarrelsome, quick to anger or laughter, they are unthinkingly but not deliberately cruel. They are ostentatious and boastful, but lack bravery.”

The above quote is taken from the 1954 edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica (Bowers, 2010) but 55 years later, stereotypes of Romanies are still informing – and being reinforced by – their representation in the arts and media.

First there is the image of the ‘true’ Romani, frequently depicted in “in quaint rural settings, typically engaged in peg-making or basketry, with a bow-topped caravan in the background” (Taylor, 2008). Horsemanship, musicianship and other traditional occupations could be added to this list of clichés, as can the concepts of nomadism and freedom. Arguably, the highly aestheticised work by Magnum photographer Josef Koudelka often plays up to these kind of romantic stereotypes.

A romantic view of a Roma man and his horse. Romania, 1968:

© Josef Koudelka (Taken from Lardinois, 2007: 293)

While this simplistic but relatively benign view of the Roma persists to some extent, the prevailing stereotypes are arguably far more damaging. When most people think of Romanies today, the image which springs to mind is more likely to feature poverty and backwardness, the pestering beggar on the street, the petty criminal or – more recently, in western Europe – unauthorised encampments, conflict with the police and benefits scroungers. I would argue that news photography in particular is partly to blame for this.
Search
If one accepts that Gadjo photography has played a part in stereotyping Romanies then it makes sense to explore whether ‘insider’ photographers would create different images. This is easier said than done. There are thought to be about 10 million Roma worldwide, but the majority remain socially and educationally marginalised, with limited opportunities to self-represent. Extensive research and enquiries through advocacy groups such as the European Roma Rights Centre and activist networks on Twitter proved that there are few working photographers who openly identify as Romanies, who are known within the advocacy community and who are active online. Eventually I did, however, find two Hungarian Roma photographers, who I questioned by email, along with a Scottish photojournalist who has documented Romanian Roma.

The outsider
Scottish photographer Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert started photographing a community of Roma he chanced upon in Sintesti, Romania, in 1990 and visited them once or twice a year until 1997, staying several weeks at a time and taking prints back to the families. He returned in 2004 and 2006 to see what had changed.
“I was fortunate to begin the project when Romania was just opening up after the revolution of 1989. The Roma were as curious about me – and about someone from the West – as I was about them. I was a novelty to them,” he says (Sutton-Hibbert to Leeming, 2011).

“It took a couple of visits before I became more accepted, but even to the end there were still some people who did not accept me or want me to be there and whom would not let me photograph them, their homes or families.”

He would spend his time at the camp hanging out. One family became his adopted family and he would rest, drink coffee and sleep on their couch in their one-room, basic home. He photographed their ceremonies, their baptisms, weddings, Orthodox Easter celebrations, documenting their changing lifestyle.

“The prints became almost like a currency, helping me bargain access into people’s homes and lives. They were happy, I was happy, and in time they regarded me as their private photographer, postponing weddings until I arrived, requesting photo favours for driving licences and tombstones” (Sutton-Hibbert, 2006: 38). Sutton-Hibbert is certain the only way an outsider could to gain the kind of intimacy he did is through investment of time but even then there are limitations.

“If you were an outsider and visited only once, then you would not get the access or be able to have any depth to your work,” he says (Sutton-Hibbert to Leeming, 2011).

“The majority of photographs of Roma by non-Roma do not tell us much, and present only stereotypes. I feel with the cooperation of the Sintesti Roma, and the access they gave me, that my work goes a little further. “But even then there were things which I was not privy to, that I was not allowed to photograph, or didn't get to see, because I was not one of them, I was an outsider.”

The insiders

Andrea Annamária Duka and Angelika Biro are less experienced than Sutton-Hibbert and neither works full-time as a photographer, but their perspectives as Roma women are valuable. Both young women have supplied images to the media and NGOs, arguing that their cultural awareness is an advantage when it comes to gaining access and photographing Romani communities.
Biro says: “Let’s take a wedding, where only friends and family are. It’s not enough that a Gadjo is there and doesn’t even know anybody. This is in contrast with me, who – even if I don’t know them or they me – knows their dance, their music, their customs, and therefore fit better into their company. They behave naturally in front of me.

“Unfortunately, this is why there is so much bad feeling towards us: because if we are looking at photos of a [Romani] settlement, these are a non-Roma photographer’s photos. These show only the negatives, like how much poverty there is. Therefore, non-Roma viewers of these photos only get this limited view of Roma life. While I personally don’t want to gloss over these elements of Roma life, I do want to show the truth. But the true reality also includes children playing or people studying with or reading to their children or they’re sewing, washing, cleaning, dancing, singing, etc.

“In other words, it is important to photograph from all angles, taking all these facets of life into consideration. When I am in the position, this is how I try to photograph” (Biro to Leeming, 2011).

Duka says she finds subjects open up more quickly to her if she presents herself as Roma. Once inside a home she deliberately avoids stereotypical images.

“I first and foremost try to capture relationships – the mother-child relationship, for example, and sibling relationships. Symbols that seem to be in every household are given foreground – for example horses or hooves, as well as faith images. Indeed, images of Mary or Jesus or the crucifix are practically ubiquitous,” she says.

“Since poverty is an interesting topic, I like to photograph the street from the inside the house to make the worlds inside and outside of the house jutapose. I do not photograph dirtiness because I am personally not
interested in it, though sometimes it is unavoidable and can sometimes appear here and there” (Duka to Leeming, 2011).

The politics of engagement
One striking difference between these photographers is how they found their subject. Whereas Sutton-Hibbert’s project began after he chanced upon the Sintesti community while driving through the Romanian countryside, found it interesting and returned the following day with his camera, the two Hungarians had a different starting point.

Biro in particular recalls that although she loved all photography while growing up, it was images of Romanies that attracted her most. “I saw myriads of amazing photos, but something was still missing from them. I couldn’t put my finger on what was missing, and I saw many photos that seemed really affected or artificial. Knowing our own culture and customs, I know that we don’t behave or pose like this. I don’t want to type-cast myself into one topic but I feel that it’s my duty to also deal with Roma things, and I like it” (Biro to Leeming, 2011).

For Duka too, her love of image making dovetailed with a desire to do something worthwhile. “While I was snapping away, I kept thinking that I could be doing something meaningful with the camera in my hand. The Roma settlements interested me greatly,” she says (Duka to Leeming, 2011).

Romani eyes?
While seductive, the assumption that Romanies are automatically best placed to photograph their own communities – or will produce different images – is naïve. It is important, too, not to fall into the trap of judging all Gadjo images to be inadequate. Authenticity, too, can be a sticky concept. While those with Romani heritage are often regarded as having embodied knowledge and validity, those who become ‘too educated’ or modern risk being seen by some as “too far from the grass roots to be representative” (Saul and Tebbutt, 2004: 99).

Interestingly, Biro and Duka identify with both Roma and Gadjo culture – Biro’s mother is ethnic Hungarian, although she was raised predominantly in the Roma tradition. While Duka uses her Roma identity to gain access, the background of the photographer matters less to her than the images themselves – and could even be a problem.

“I personally do not think it is vitally important that more Roma photographers should be the ones to photograph their ‘own people’. It is uncertain whether they can be objective enough to stay honest in their photos,” she says.

“It works for me because I identify myself as bi-cultural. I am as much Gadjo as I am Roma. I also think this dual identity is important from different standpoints, as well. A person who identifies only with the Roma culture will start a battle with his or her photos or will create photos that don’t really say anything.

“Think it’s important that thinking should be parallel: what does the majority society prioritise, and what does the Roma culture find important? It is imperative that these two elements should be forged together, otherwise the photo will have no point” (Duka to Leeming, 2011).

Hungarian-German artist André J Raatzsch, who also has Boyash-Romani background, is behind Rewritable Pictures, a project which aims to create dialogue about these issues of representation. He feels that a heightened awareness of visual representation cannot fit with a genuinely Roma point of view.

“I know photographers with Romani background but not with Romani eyes,” he says. “Romani people who live in slums don’t deal with the problem of visual representation. Why would they? They don’t need to, because they don’t have that problem there.

“Those who left the slum and return as Roma photographers don’t fit there anymore. They are in some sort of schizophrenic state, because they are no longer able to stand with the people who they are taking pictures of, because they moved to the other side” (Raatzsch to Leeming, 2011).

Control

“Like any set of durable ideas, Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental, European or Western; in short, Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine” (Said 1978, 42).

While it may be tempting to assume that Roma photographed by Gadjo have no say in their representation, this is not necessarily the case. In some cases subjects have absorbed the stereotypes to the point that they try to replicate them.

This was the experience of Swiss photographer Yves Leresche, whose images of Roma from across eastern Europe were shot over 18 years.
“The poorest ones are ashamed of their destitution; the integrated ones do not want to be recognised as Roma; and the businessmen only barter their image for a reward. This experience also confirmed to me that they would rather be portrayed from their favourable traditional side, or even by the romantic clichés that are appreciated by the majority,” he writes.

“As a result, I had to work with restraints on all levels: from the reactions of the Roma refusing to be photographed or wanting to control their image, to the filters set by Roma activists and donors in the choice of images…” (Leresche 2009: 176).

This chimes with the experience of Sutton-Hibbert. Early on the women – who wore colourful skirts and gold coins in their hair – would admonish him for shooting black and white. And he learned that while the Roma liked to be photographed having a good time, they were less keen to be documented in the winter mud and rain “when their situation looked miserable” (Sutton-Hibbert, 2006).

By the time he returned to Sintesti in 2004 and 2006, the community were more worldly-wise. He recalls: “They were making a lot of money from their scrap metal businesses, some had travelled abroad. And, one young boy had managed to access the internet and found my images online. Some families took exception to this, they didn't like the old images of themselves being seen, the old black and white images I'd taken in the early years were deemed by them to be ‘poor looking’.

“Now they wished to be seen in colour, to show off how rich and wealthy they'd become. The Roma were more worldly wise, and more conscious perhaps of what it meant to be photographed” (Sutton-Hibbert to Leeming, 2011).

Conclusion
The idea that insiders would represent Romani communities differently from Gadjo photographers is overly simplistic. For me, the most striking difference is not the images produced but initial motivation. Whereas the Roma photographers I interviewed seem ideologically driven to cover these stories, Gadje may find this subject by chance and be initially drawn to it by aesthetics. Politics may of course follow later.

In terms of work created, I would avoid judging on a purely aesthetic basis since there is a danger that high artistic values can reinforce stereotypes. It is clear to me that the ethnic or cultural background of the photographer matters less than their photographic eye, their thought process and the quality of their engagement with the community they are documenting.

Whereas photographers who parachute into a story without much real understanding of its context or connection to the individuals are likely to fall back on stereotype, Gadje who invest enough time can create more authentic, nuanced representations – as in the case of Sutton-Hibbert. While he was not allowed to see or photograph everything in Sintesti, there is no reason to think a Romani photographer would have been given greater access.

Arguably, by picking up a camera with the intention to document, a Roma person may become an outsider to some degree – and they may no longer see their surroundings with truly Romani eyes, to quote Raatzsch. In any case, no matter who is wielding the camera, they are likely to face challenges to their photographic vision from their Roma subjects, who wish to control how they are represented in today's media savvy world.

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