

# Engaged scholarship Roma Visual Lab

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**Noordkaap's investigation into populism and the reactions to it in big European cities is a fascinating project and being part of it is an honour especially for those who honestly appreciate political, activist art, and the new, radical efforts that turn spectatorship into citizenship, and participatory projects. It also gives a good opportunity for self-definition. What made me think in this new interpretational framework are the useful theoretical assumptions behind, and an addition to them: populists' most important tool, emotional persuasion. It is present in all their symbolic acts and representational strategies.**

Among the many goals of our project is community building, which has to be mentioned first and foremost, for it is, as I firmly believe, an effective gun against populists. It is connected to emotions too, as each social act is. It does not persuade people (the audience, the participants) to represent certain ideas, but instead makes them think and formulate opinion freely but responsibly in an independent cultural space, and interpret the given social, political environment determinant in representations. It is a unique form of media and film analysis in which personal encounters between students, Roma and non-Roma experts of the field play an important role.

About the history of Roma Visual Lab in a nutshell. It has been gradually developed into a community film club. An important antecedent was a university course about Roma representation (Autumn Semester 2009) which I was leading as a PhD student at the Media Department ELTE about my research topic. The following year (Spring Semester 2011) I received a grant from the Central European University Curriculum Resource Centre, when I took part in a course development competition. Due to the financial support and the professional methodological training, I was able to turn this course into something else: inventing a new form of teaching and learning based on participation. Our structure was twofold: a more theoretical course at the university in the afternoon, and a film club open to the public in a small documentary film cinema near the university in the evening.

In the lecture-like course I partly used a frontal teaching methodology clarifying basic sociological, anthropological and cultural studies concepts connected to the topic. I also edited a digital course reader which contained film extracts, photos and readings. But since most of the students visited the screenings at the film club, we frequently discussed the program of the previous week, so the lecture format in the second half of the semester became more like a seminar. As part of the student assessment I offered them to choose a certain program to moderate. It was a responsible task and the students took it seriously. They also

participated actively in the follow-up discussions where we analysed the films together with film experts, filmmakers, and social scientists, and tried to interpret the underlying social phenomena. The program I organised contained important Hungarian documentaries which show the life worlds of certain Roma communities from several angles. We were approaching films as 'blurred genres' (borrowing the term of Clifford Geertz, 1980), whereas the participants' interpretations were discussed, their views on the represented issues confronting instead of analysing the usually poorly contextualised subject matters. Thus we did some efforts to find approaches (e.g. self-reflectivity, self-consciousness) that are able to reveal the constructed nature of Roma images.

The continuation in the Spring Semester of 2012 was even more interesting since together with the most enthusiastic and engaged students we decided to organise a community film club, the second edition of Roma Visual Lab in the same cinema, DocuArt. We all worked as volunteers, the only support we got from the National Cultural Fund covered the basic costs (e.g. travel costs) of the invited guests. In this program we tried to focus on 'visibility', the ways 'control over identity' can be retrieved, and reclaimed by Roma filmmakers, media workers, and artists. Thus we broadened the selection involving not just strictly documentaries but all sorts of new media contents, video messages, and artistic projects. We organised follow-up discussions with the participation of the authors themselves. The film club functioned as a Roma representation course at the Media Department of ELTE.

In the Spring Semester of 2013 I will have the opportunity again to develop the course similarly to the 2011 edition: a series of university lectures and a film club with connected topics, since I received a grant from Erste Stiftung Foundation and World University Service (WUS) Austria. 'Patterns Lectures' gives me a chance to invite guest lecturers (important members of Roma intelligentsia from Hungary and from abroad) and develop Roma Visual Lab further. We are planning to increase our organising team, invite more Roma students, create a website where we can archive all the recordings of previous years' follow-up discussions, and all sorts of connected materials.

Our main goal is, while deepening the students' knowledge about the field, to develop all sorts of competencies needed for program organising to gain credibility for the project itself: to show and prove by our stubborn existence and programming that community building can play a crucial role in cultural resistance, and what new media can mean for democratisation.

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