REPRESENTATION OF THE EXOTIC OTHER IN *VENGO* BY TONY GATLIF

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Few filmmakers have pursued a single topic more persistently than Tony Gatlif. Born in Algeria to Spanish Romani parents and residing in France since the 1960s, Gatlif has devoted a signifieant portion of his cinematographic production (*Les Princes, Latcho Drom, Mondo, Gadjo Dilo, Vengo* and *Swing)* to the culture and the history of discrimination and persecution of the Romanies, that is the people who have often, though inaeeurately, been referred to as *Gypsies*. [1] Though not very well-known in the United States or in Spain for that matter, Gatlif has enjoyed undeniable success in France and at film festivals throughout Europe. Four of his films were shown at the Cannes Film Festival and he received the award for Best Director for *Exils* at the 2004 edition of the festival. While he is best known for his celebration of Romani culture, all his films deal with groups who have been marginalized in contemporary European society. In *Vengo,* Gatlif turns his attention to the flamenco culture of the Spanish Romanies of Andalusia, who have inspired, from Cervantes' *La Gitanilla* to Merimée's *Carmen* and beyond, an abundant literature, in which they were systematically assigned the role of the exotic other. As in the other films he has devoted to the Romanies, Gatlif's overt intention in *Vengo* is to offer an alternative to the stereotypical and distorted views of their culture that are so widely disseminated. In this paper I will attempt to gauge how successful he was in this endeavor.

The Romanies as exotic others

I would like to begin by spelling out just what I mean by the terms

exoticism and *the exotic*. I will be relying primarily on the formulation proposed by Graham Huggan who defined exoticism as "the systematic assimilation of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings to unfamiliar things" (Huggan 14). Huggan contends that the exotic is not a distinctive and intrinsic feature of people or ways of life, but rather it is a mode of presenting or representing them. Thus, there is nothing exotic *per se* about Romanies or other non-Western peoples, it is simply the way that Europeans have historically tended to view them. Exoticism is, thus, profoundly egocentric and ethnocentric in that it places value on other cultures in terms of the values of those who deem them exotic. Huggan also insists that exoticist representation has a dual nature. While it presents other cultures as radically different from one's own, it reduces, by the same gesture, these cultural differences to familiar clichés or stereotypes. For their part, such stereotypes provide "a needed sense of difference between the 'self' and the 'object', which becomes the Other" (Gilman 17). Exoticism is also dualistic in the sense that the very same culture or practice can inspire in successive moments fascination or rejection, a polarity which has historically been true for the Romanies. In either case, exoticist representation reduces the complexity of Romani culture to a single dimension, be it picturesque or tragic, and typically reveals more about the biases of the beholder than about Romani culture.

It is generally accepted that the Romanies left Northen India in the 10th Century, made their way in an arduous migration across Asia and Europe and settled in differents places along the way. As a result, Romanies constitute a pocket of irreducible alterity within several European societies. In her recent book, *The Spanish Gypsy,* Lou Charnon-Deutsch has conducted a thorough study of the exoticist representation of Romanies in Western European literature over the last four centuries. Central to this project is her use of the term *Gypsy*, which she employs to designate the stereotypical image of Romanies in the Western imaginary. She writes:

The Gypsy stereotype was a collective expression of national

> interests and anxieties that determined aesthetic conventions. In turn artistic and literary convention relied heavily on stereotypes as a type of cultural currency that united the classes of Europe's traveling bourgeoisies and marked off Gypsies as different from the economic, moral, religious standards of everyday bourgeois life. (Charnon-Deutseh 242)

And on the dichotomy between the place that the Romanies hold in the symbolic space of the Western imaginary and their marginalization in the real world, she has the following to say:

> While the Roma have led a largely ghettoized existence, however, in literature the Gypsy milieu is a place of freedom, unboundedness, and excitement. The lives of flesh and blood Roma bear little resemblance to the idealized or demonized Gypsy portraits that have been studied here, and yet the unchanging, independent Gypsy persists as a useful rhetorical figure of nostalgia for a simpler, more natural way of life. (Charnon-Deutsch 239)

We will need to return to this question later to determine to what extent *Vengo* manages to escape the pull of this rhetorical figure.

Tragedy in Andalusia

As its title in Spanish suggests, *Vengo* tells the familiar story of two Romani families engaged in a blood feud that plays out with all the inevitability of a Lorcan tragedy. The central character is Caco, a proud and powerful man, who is played by Antonio Canales, a prominent flamenco dancer. The name that Gatlif chose for this character merits closer attention. The *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* defines *caco* as "*ladrón que roba con destreza*," a usage derived from the name of the thief in Virgil's *Aeneid.* One of the standard stereotypes applied to the Romanies is that they are thieves[2] and, for centuries, they have been scurrilously accused of kidnapping non-Romani children (Charnon-Deutsch 35-38). By using the term *caco* as the name of his

main character, Gatlif reappropriates the stereotype, neutralizes it and undermines the power of those who would use it as an insult.[1] An additional semiotic layer of this name becomes visible if we consider that a secondary meaning of *caco* is "*hombre muy tímido, cobarde y de poca resolución.*" As we will see, Caco is not without flaws, but a coward he is not. Quite to the contrary, he confronts a difficult situation with great resolve. Gatlif thus uses the name *Caco* to evoke his character's courage by antithesis.

Caco is a tragic figure: he is beset with sorrow over his daughter's death and, as the head of the family, he must also confront the challenge posed by the Caravacas, a rival clan, that seeks to avenge the death of one of its members at the hands of Caco's brother, Mario, who fled after the fact to Morocco. In the Mario's absence, the Caravacas set their sights on Diego, his handicapped son, whom Caco is intent on protecting. For Gatlif, Caco's inner struggle is a noble one that opposes his determination to defend his family's honor and his realization that there can be no end to the cycle of vengeance. In the film's final sequence, Caco allows himself to be fatally stabbed by Fernando Caravaca. His solution to his dilemma is thus to offer himself as a sacrificial victim, in the hope of saving Diego's life by surrendering his own and of stopping the cycle of violence by granting the Caravacas their revenge. This juxtaposition of inevitability and expiatory sacrifice offers undeniable parallels with Greek tragedy and with the poetic vision of Federico García Lorca, who was acutely aware of the deep cultural roots linking Andalusia to Ancient Greece.

A hymn to the Mediterranean

In an interview with Jacques Maigne, Gatlif declared that "*Vengo* is a cry, a chant, a hymn to life, love, mourning and the price of blood. A hymn to the Mediterranean" (Gatlif 2001a). There is good reason for Gatlif to have set his celebration of Mediterranean culture in Andalusia: this region was home to one of the oldest civilizations in Europe and, throughout its history, it has been a crossroads for many of the

different cultures that developed in the Mediterranean basin. Greeks, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Jews and Moors all left a lasting mark on Andalusian culture. One product of this cultural fusion was flamenco music and dance, which can be considered a quintessentially Mediterranean art form.

We have already seen two layers of this Pan Mediterranean thematic: the echoes of Greek tragedy that resonate throughout the film and the link between Caco's name and the *Aeneid*. As befitting a "hymn" to the Mediterranean, Gatlif makes skillful use of music to further develop this theme. The film begins with a musical sequence that, at first glance, seems to have little connection with the rest of the film. We first watch a group of North African musicians that is being ferried by boat up a river; this troupe is led by Sheikh Ahmad Al Tuni, a noted exponent of Sufi music from Egypt. The scene then switches to a gathering where flamenco guitarist Tomatito and his group are playing. They are soon joined by Sheikh Ahmad Al Tuni's troupe and a stirring rendition of a rhythm that Gatlif remembered from his childhood in Algeria ensues. This scene is a vivid reminder of the cultural dialogue that gave rise to flamenco[4] and, by bringing together Andalusia and North Africa, it introduces the filmmaker's "hymn to the Mediterranean" theme.

At several other points in the film, Gatlif uses traditional music from North Africa. In one sequence, Diego, Caco's nephew, listens to a recording of Sheikh Ahmad Al Tuni's music. Later an Egyptian flute joins a group of flamenco musicians as an all-night *juerga* is greeted by the dawn. And, in still another scene, three dancers from the Egyptian troupe appear as part of a dream sequence that dramatizes the conflicts that are tearing Caco apart. Their appearance can also be seen as an attempt by Gatlif to suggest that "the culture of instinct" (Gatlif 2001a), that he associates with the Mediterranean, rises to the surface of awareness as he dreams.

Gatlif further develops of this theme by including several scenes that feature flamenco, which emerged in the Romani communities of Andalusia and which has the cathartic function of giving voice to

their deepest emotions. On the role of flamenco in this film, Gatlif has declared:

> With Vengo, I did away with anything that smacked of folklore, ethnology or reverence. I became like them, I lived flamenco from within... Vengo never deals with flamenco as such — the film itself is viscerally flamenco. (Gatlif 2001a)

We have already seen that Tomatito and his group appear in the opening moments of the film. Other scenes in the film, the all-night *juerga* under the stars and an exhilarating performance by La Caïta in a bar, put the festive portion of the flamenco repertoire on display. *Vengo* also showcases *cante grande*, the profoundly tragic side of flamenco. In one scene, three of the secondary characters in the film take special notice of the rustling of the wind through the leaves of a tree and one remarks "tiene duende, canta por siguiriya". Since the *siguiriya* song form generally deals with death, this reference is an omen that foreshadows the inevitable conclusion of the drama being played out. In the film's final moments, when the recently deceased Paquera de Jerez, who was one of the greatest flamenco singers of her generation, sings *por siguiriya* as Caco marches to his fatal encounter with Fernando Caravaca, the "cathartic liturgy" (Josephs 23) of flamenco and the tragic narrative of *Vengo* intersect in what is arguably the most powerful moment of the film.

The Representation of the Romanies

At this point we can take up more directly the question of the representation of the Romanies in this film. In an interview on the subject of *Gadjo Dilo*, the film that preceded *Vengo,* Gatlif summarized his approach to making films on the Romanies:

> I fight for the image of the Romani people, who since they arrived in Europe, have been accused of every vice and every sin. But above all I don't want to pontificate. I never say to viewers: you don't know the Romanies, this is what they are

> like. I never do that. What I love to do, what I have always done is, rather than leading them by the hand, I invite them to enter a house, without having done the cleaning. (Gatlif 1998)

Although the terms Gatlif uses differ from those employed by Charnon-Deutsch, it is clear that he considers his role as a filmmaker to critique stereotypical images of the Romanies and to promote a better understanding of their culture. Moreover, his desire to present the Romanies without embellishment is a welcome strategy for fighting the sort of idealization that is one mode of exotic representation. When presenting a people like the Romanies who have been so vilified and whose way of life has been subject to so many distortions, there is an understandable temptation to exaggerate their virtues for no other reason than to compensate for past and present injustices. Gatlif is aware of this temptation and struggles to resist it. One of his strategies is to use a preponderance of non-professional actors who are entreated not to act and to just be themselves. In *Gadjo Dilo* he also takes the viewer into the actual homes of the Romanies who appear in the film and achieves a rather candid look at their lives and their traditions. The settings of *Vengo* are less intimate and many scenes are clearly staged, but nonetheless it does plunge the spectator deeply into Gatlif's vision of Spanish Romani culture.

Returning now to Charnon-Deutsch's study of the literary representation of the Spanish Gypsy, this critic identified the primary literary narrative of this tradition as an impossible love story wherein a well-to-do European male falls for an irresistible Romani woman. The classic form of this tale is, of course, Prosper Merimée's *Carmen*, and its many subsequent versions. We should also note that, although Charnon-Deutsch does not devote as much attention to this element, *Carmen* also made popular another narrative thread that reappears obsessively in stories about flamenco culture: death at knifepoint. Other well-known examples of this theme can be found in Manuel de Falla's *El Amor Brujo* and García Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre*. It has also become a commonplace in Spanish films about the Romanies and Andalusia. For instance, the

theme reappears in Francisco Rovira Beleta's *Los Tarantos*, as well as in the three installments of Carlos Saura's flamenco trilogy (*Bodas de Sangre, Carmen* and *El Amor Brujo*). By having recourse to this theme in *Vengo*, Gatlif, despite his desire to counteract the distorted images so often associated with the Romanies, has resurrected one of the obsessive narratives from the exoticist representation of his people.

To understand how Gatlif arrived at this apparently paradoxical position, it is perhaps useful to examine his views on the theme of vengeance that dominates *Vengo*. In the interview with Jacques Maigne that I quoted earlier, Gatlif made the following remarks:

> Vengeance is part of the traditions of the south, as deeply rooted and prominent as jealousy. I was born in this culture of instinct, family, festivities, of music and tolerance of peoples who are different. In Andalusia, I rediscovered my Algerian childhood. I was no longer French, no longer Algerian. I was of the South, quite simply. (Gatlif 2001a)

In addition to establishing that—for Gatlif at least—vengeance is a distinctive feature of the Mediterranean culture that he seeks to celebrate in *Vengo*, this quotation also gives us a clearer idea of what his hymn to the Mediterranean actually involves. The idea of the rediscovery of his childhood in Andalusia is of utmost importance because it reveals that Gatlif's gaze in *Vengo* is a nostalgic one and one could argue that he is less interested in the present of the Romanies in Andalusia than his own past. It would thus seem that what Gatlif has attempted to capture is a timeless essence of Mediterranean culture that can only exist in memory. Perhaps a symptom of this fascination with the past is the surprising fact that in a film where the theme of Pan Mediterranean cultural contact occupies such a central place, Gatlif makes no mention of what is probably the most important current manifestation of this contact: the recent waves of North African immigrants arriving in Spain.

Another indication of Gatlif's nostalgic fascination with the Mediterranean culture of his youth is the marginal role assigned to women in the narrative of the film. The women we see are prostitutes

at work in Caco's bar, old women painting over the insults left by the Caravacas on the walls of the town, and various singers and dancers, but the drama of *Vengo* plays out among the men of the two families. One scene in particular illustrates the role of women in *Vengo*. It takes place in a boat that serves as an outdoor club featuring music and dance from North Africa. When Caco arrives with his cousins, he is told that the Caravacas are there. Ignoring the warning, Caco enters the club proudly and triumphantly with Alma, a young French woman, on his arm. It should be noted that Alma is the only woman in Caco's party or that of the Caravacas. At the end of the performance, one of the Caravacas' bodyguards takes aside a female dancer and persuades her to invite Alma, Caco's companion, to dance. As the latter dances, the bodyguard joins her and slips some bills in the strap of her dress. Alma, who doesn't seem to know who her new dance partner is and who obviously fails to recognize the cultural codes that are in play, goes along naively with the game. This calculated affront causes great mirth among the Caravacas and causes one of them to remark: "Es una puta." Caco apparently agrees with this assessment for as he and his party return home, they stop their car and drop off Alma unceremoniously on the side of a desolate road. This is no doubt an extreme example, but it is highly suggestive of the role assigned to women in *Vengo*.

I would like to consider one final consequence of the filmmaker's fascination with the Mediterranean culture of his youth. In other films by Gatlif, there is a questioning of the relations between the Romanies and the societies they live in, and especially the relations between members of the dominant society and the exotic other. In his most well known film *Lacho Drom*, Gatlif used music and dance to trace the long road traveled by the Romanies from Northern India across Asia and into Europe. The final scene of *Lacho Drom* takes place in Andalusia where a group of Romanies are expelled from the abandoned building where they had been staying. As they watch workers close off the doors and windows with bricks, we see that after their long journey, the Romanies are greeted not with a welcome but by a wall of exclusion. In other films, such as *Gadjo Dilo* and *Swing*, the main character is an outsider

who manages to penetrate Romani culture, or so he thinks, until, at a crucial moment in the film, events reestablish the barriers between cultures. In *Vengo* this sort of critical reflection is conspicuous in its absence and Gatlif's nostalgic fixation on the Mediterranean culture of his childhood would seem to be at least partially responsible.

In conclusion, *Vengo* is to be commended for the way it captures the beauty and magic of flamenco, its celebration of life, its acute sense of the tragic, its lush cinematography which showcases the grandeur of the Andalusian physical and human landscape and for the everyday feel of many of its scenes. In choosing to film the Romanies, Gatlif has assumed a heavy burden and it is no doubt unfair to expect him to successfully deconstruct in each film four centuries of stereotypical representation. The tragic tale that Gatlif weaves, for all its mythopoetic power, deals at best obliquely with the everyday trials and tribulations of the Spanish Romanies as they struggle to survive in the contemporary world while maintaining connections to their cultural heritage. In the final analysis, perhaps what *Vengo* best illustrates is the resiliency of the *Gypsy as exotic other* construct: even a filmmaker as determined as Gatlif does not always manage to resist its lure.

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NOTES

[1] I will be following the usage suggested by Ian Hancock in *We are the Romani people* (Hancock 2002). He suggests using *Romani* both as a noun (plural *Romanies*) and as an adjective to designate the people popularly called *Gypsies*. We should also note that the term *Roma* is used by some authors. In Spain, there is perhaps less of a concerted effort to replace the term *gitano*, but just to give one counter-example, author Joaquín Albaicín describes himself as an "escritor de raíces romanies." (Albaicín 2003)

[2] Cervantes began *La Gitanilla* with a memorable formulation of this stereotype: "Parece que los gitanos y gitanas solamente nacieron en el mundo para ser ladrones ..." (Cervantes 15). On the same page, he also speaks of "la ciencia de Caco".

[3] In *Gadjo Dilo*. Gatlif offers a different play on the belief that all Romanies are thieves. In this film, Stéphane, a young Frenchman, goes to live in a Romani village in Roumania. When he goes for a stroll on his first day in the village, a few of the villagers accuse him of stealing their chickens.

[4] This sequence also illustrates an important development in contemporary flamenco, that of fusing it with other musical traditions.

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