

Episode in the Life of An Iron Picker

Danis Tanović, 2014

Screenwriter: Danis Tanović

Place: Bosnia and Herzegovina

Studios: SCCA / pro.ba, Asap Films, Vertigo

Length: 75 minutes

Language: Bosnian, Balkan Romani

Francisco Vargas, University of Cambridge

Iron Courage: A Glimpse of Bosnian Romani Life

This short film powerfully depicts the struggles of a Romani family suffering from the social marginalisation to which this ethnic group as a whole remains largely subject in present-day Europe. Based on the real experiences of its amateur actors, *Episode in the Life of An Iron Picker* is a work of documentary fiction which offers an intimate look into the experiences of this real-life Bosnian family barely making ends meet. Nazif and his wife, Senada, live with their two daughters, Šemsa and Sandra. Nazif supports his family as an iron-picker tearing apart and selling metal scraps from old, abandoned cars. Senada manages the household by skilfully and creatively stretching their incredibly low income to meet the family's basic needs.

We discover that Senada has suffered from a miscarriage and requires an operation which the family cannot afford, since the Bosnian health service declines her request for financial assistance despite her state of emergency. While Nazif is a veteran and has two daughters of ethnic minority heritage, the family is ineligible for state benefits or insurance, thus Senada is at high risk of going into sepsis. The conviction that the state and social services fail the Mujić family is damning. Senada's sister-in-law saves the day by lending Senada an insurance card so that she can impersonate her in-law and secure a successful surgery in the nick of time.

Tanović's hand-held technique with long, lingering takes and tight shots, as well as the absence of a musical score, altogether creates an uncanny sense of intimacy between the viewer and the Mujić family. There is an intense focus upon the family's quotidian physical tasks from Senada's cooking activities to Nazif's meticulous dismantling of metal scraps, which imbues an element of vivid realism compelling the audience to greater sympathy for this family enduring tragic circumstances. Rather than creating the sense that one is observing events which have previously taken place, the documentary skilfully evokes the feeling that one is observing these events in real-time. Ultimately, the audience is left with tender feelings for Nazif, Senada and their daughters for whom an improvement predicament is deeply yearned.

Copyright 2022, Francisco Vargas. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI:<https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.0954-6839.1462>

The film delivers a strong educational message by such observation of the everyday life of the Mujić family, affirming the regrettably persistent fact that Romani people are a highly marginalised ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the European continent at large. Debunking a common misconception, Tanović demonstrates that not all Romani people are nomadic by turning an intimate lens upon this exemplary non-nomadic, Romani family facing extreme poverty and relentless hardship due to racial discrimination. The film's woeful — and unsurprising — conclusion seems to be that Romani people can rely only on one another since the rest of society offers them no support.

Despite winning the Jury Grand Prix at the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival and its selection as the Bosnian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 86th Academy Awards, the tragic real-life events which transpired following the film's release painfully reinforces the importance and urgency of Tanović's tale. Only a few years after winning the Silver Bear for Best Actor at BIFF, Nazif passed away under the crushing burden of his extreme poverty. Evidently, Romani people continue to face erasure in both life and art: they are victims of brutally oppressive social lives which remain remarkably under-represented on screen.

In the world of global cinema, we have recently seen the first Black, south Asian, and Arab Marvel heroes grace the big screen, and we are soon to see the first major Latinx Marvel heroes in the upcoming *Black Panther* (2022) and *Blue Beetle* (2023) films. Leading Hollywood production studios, undeniably dominating the global film market, have made notable moves to diversify their films in recent years. This shift has created a positive social impact by evoking sympathy and admiration for ethnic minority super-hero protagonists and the non-white actors playing these roles. Out with the major film studio system, it can be argued that independent cinema has generally fared better at placing a spotlight on the lives of marginalised ethnic minority groups due to a relatively lighter pressure for profit than films funded by major studios.

Nonetheless, Western cinema continues to suffer from a dearth of Romani representation whose voices and images need to be urgently amplified, not only in news headlines but also on the silver screen before which our minds are especially open and our hearts equally uninhibited. It is important that we begin to afford Romani people their long overdue place in cinema, both behind and in front of the camera, which we are now seeing occur with other ethnic minority groups. Undoubtedly, Tanović's *Episode in the Life of An Iron Picker* makes a promising stride in this direction.