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For the Sake of Entertainment:  
The Representation of Irish Travellers in 'Big Fat Gypsy  
Weddings'

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*Imagine a world where symbolic forms created by one inhabitant are instantaneously available to all other inhabitants; a place where "knowing others" means only that others know us, and we know them, through the images we all create about ourselves and our world, as we see it, feel it, and choose to make it available to a massive communication network, slaving and hungry for images to fill the capacity of its coaxial cables.*

*Imagine this place that is so different from the society within which we nourish our middle-class souls, in which symbolic forms are not the property of a "cultured," technological, or economic elite, but rather are ubiquitous and multiplying like a giant cancer (or, conversely, unfolding like a huge and magnificent orchid), and available for instant transmission to the entire world.*

*Imagine a place where other cultures (in the anthropological sense) and culture (as digested at ladies' teas) are available to all; a place where almost anyone (some will be too young or too infirm, physically or mentally, ever to be involved) can produce verbal and visual images, where individuals or groups can edit, arrange, and rearrange the visualization of their outer and inner worlds, and a place where these movies, TVs, or "tellies" (a marvelous word coined from television, and connoting the verb "to tell" so subtly as almost to be overlooked) can be instantaneously available to anyone who chooses to look.*

*What will the anthropologist, as the student of man and his cultures, do in this world? Imagine this place; for it is where we are at now.*

(Sol Worth, 1981)



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## Introduction

In an anthropology course at the National University of Ireland Maynooth a fellow student was apprising me of the documentary *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* when I told him that I was going to write my thesis about Irish Travellers. During my stay in Ireland and prior to this conversation, I had asked other Irish people about their fellow citizens. Being unaware of the degree of prejudice that exists towards the Traveller community in Ireland, I was rather struck by the invidious replies I received. Most of them advised me not to get in contact with any Travellers – for the sake of my own safety. People told me, that Travellers are a bunch of criminals who steal and fight at any given opportunity and who would – and I am quoting here word-for-word – 'even fuck their own children'. Some brought to my attention that it is unlikely Travellers would talk to me at all. Others considered that they would rather talk to me, as a foreigner, than to any Irish people, already pointing towards the often tense relationship between Travellers and members of the majority population<sup>1</sup> and the ambivalent nature of interactions between two different communities<sup>2</sup> in one, and rather small, nation state. (cf. Hayes 2006: 5) Either way, I would not understand them anyway because of the language they speak and the accent they have – more than once referring to *Snatch* in this context: Even if someone does not know who Irish Travellers are or how they speak, it is most likely that everyone knows Brad Pitt and the hugely successful movie by Guy Ritchie. However, at that point I had not decided yet what the guiding research question would be, and as these conversations left me slightly unfulfilled and with the awareness that the persons I had talked to were voicing a general sentiment that apparently exists in the wider public perception, I was hoping to get a more constructive-minded response from the fellow student mentioned above. It was either naïve to assume, that an anthropology student would think differently about Traveller culture or I was just unlucky. One way or another, what I got was a sigh accompanied by eye-rolling and after shaking his head in disbelief and querying why I would choose that subject matter, he told me to watch the new documentary about Travellers which Channel 4 has started to broadcast at that time. I did. And I was, once again, surprised. Furthermore reassured, that Grierson's definition of a documentary – a 'creative interpretation of actuality' – holds true, if not necessarily in its best sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the term 'majority population' or 'members of the majority population' will be used when referring to non-Travellers. While most commonly referred to as 'settled people' or the 'settled population' when set in contrast to Travellers, I find the former more appropriate given the fact that a lot of Travellers are 'settled' as well, meaning that they also do live in houses and not necessarily in caravans; a fact which, however, does not make the cultural element of nomadism obsolete, as it is still, even when not carried out actively, an intrinsic part of Traveller identity. Furthermore, the term reflects the unequal power relations that are at play in a nation state, in which an indigenous minority group has been, and often still is, pushed to the margins of the same.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring thereby to the majority of non-Travellers and the minority of Travellers, however, not alleging that these 'two communities' are in itself homogeneous.

What I saw on television was neither reminiscent of the Traveller image presented in *Snatch* nor was it anyhow reminiscent of Nan Donohoe's story – an Irish Traveller woman who has written down her life story in collaboration with American anthropologist Sharon Gmelch. However, an autobiography, a fictional movie, an observational documentary and the accounts people had given me on an informal level gave rise to and left me with four different versions of 'who' Irish Travellers are. That was precisely the initial impetus for me to further approach the issue of representation.

The 'Traveller community' is defined by Irish law as “*the community of people commonly so called who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland*<sup>3</sup>”. The latter indicates that Irish Travellers, although sharing a similar lifestyle with 'Gypsies', Roma and other Travellers in Europe, are native to Ireland. As an indigenous and ethnic minority, Irish Travellers constitute around 0.5%<sup>4</sup> of the overall population of the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, there are Irish Travellers living in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States. In contrast to other indigenous populations elsewhere and given the fact that Irish Travellers are fundamentally similar to the mainstream population, i.e. English-speaking, Roman Catholic, 'white' and Irish (cf. Gmelch 1986: 15), the dominant construction of Travellers as a distinct group has not been revolving around 'racial' difference, but notions of undesirable cultural difference. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 8) Irish Travellers, in the past referred to as 'tinkers' – a term coined on the basis of the occupational tradition as tinsmiths, are one of the minorities which have long been disadvantaged. While minority rights are, today more than in the past, a central political issue, the right to fully participate in the society in which they live, as different but equal, is still sought and fought for. (cf. McCann et al. 1994: xi)

Irish Travellers have often been constructed as a 'people with origins but without history'. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 29) No distinctions were made between the landless poor, Travellers and other itinerant groups prior to Irish independence. The British administration had no interest in keeping records and it was not until the 1950s that the new Irish nation state made an effort to comprehensively collect information on 'tinkers'. How a post-colonial nation, searching for a new self-identity in order to demarcate themselves from the former colonisers, constructed an identity for a minority group in their own terms of reference is examined in Chapter 1.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/2000/en/act/pub/0008/sched.html>

<sup>4</sup> The number of people enumerated as Irish Travellers in The Census of 2011 is 29,573. See: <http://www.cso.ie/en/newsandevents/pressreleases/2012pressreleases/pressreleasethisisireland-highlightsfromcensus2011part1/>

Before going into detail about the discourse of 'Otherness' and the evolution of a Traveller image as part of the redefinition of the Irish self and the new emerging cultural nationalism, an overview of the anthropological research that has been done about and among Irish Travellers since the 1960s is provided, thereby taking a closer look on the shifting paradigms within the scholarly approaches – from the initial use of 'culture of poverty' and modernisation theories through to more recent analyses in which ethnicity and anti-Traveller racism serve as a starting point and in which dominant power structures and the active construction of ethnic and racial boundaries are addressed.

The core of Chapter 1 is concerned with the question of how the public discourse – in which it is, most commonly, resorted to a generic Traveller image that has been established over time – is manifested in the various regimes of representation. Starting from Irish literature through to newspaper coverage, which constitutes the most important source for non-Travellers to gain information about the Traveller community and, finally, taking a look at films and TV series, this part of the paper examines the ways in which Travellers are represented and the question of how the portrayal contributes to and reproduces a discourse that is to a large part defined by the 'outside'.

As mentioned above, the right to full participation as equal members in Irish society is still fought for by the Traveller community. The last part of Chapter 1 gives a brief glimpse into advocacy work and the support groups that are campaigning for Travellers' rights and working towards a proactive participation and against all forms of social inequality.

Exploring the chosen research methods, giving an account of their strengths and weaknesses and, furthermore, embedding them in the wider subfield of visual anthropology as well as considering certain aspects of anthropologists' engagement with film and mass media seemed important to me, as the methods of inquiry are rather experimental and individual. The method can be described as a conflation of the classical qualitative content analysis and the use of selected criteria for the analysis of visual texts, as thoroughly outlined in Chapter 2.

The 'creative interpretation of actuality', i.e. the self-appointed observational documentary *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* is the focus of the present paper and subject matter of Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. The interest of the analysis is aimed at the representational strategies the producers have been using to portray the minority group in question. My intention was to critically examine the characteristics of the programme structure and the principles of construction, thereby taking into account the overall design, i.e. the content and the way information about the Traveller and 'Gypsy' community

is conveyed. The ultimate aim was to elaborate how the social discourses – examined in the theoretical part of his paper – are being materialised in the documentary series and the questions of how Travellers are represented as well as if and how the institutionalised Traveller image created over time is perpetuated. After the first series of the documentary was broadcasted in the United Kingdom and Ireland, both Travellers and Romani people started to challenge and protest against *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. Therefore, it is briefly elaborated in Chapter 4 which consequences and implications the huge success of the programme might have for the everyday life of Travellers and 'Gypsies', taking into account the voices of dissent and their criticism against the documentary, which has – according to the protesters – misrepresented them on a large scale.

## 1 Fellow citizens – distinct identities: Irish Travellers as the cultural 'Other'

*“One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around you would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.”*

(Zygmunt Bauman)

Ireland, as a post-colonial nation, had to face questions of identity and self-definition in the years after 1922 – subsequent to the long period under British rule. *“Who are we, and where do we fit in?”*, as expressions of that uncertainty of which Bauman speaks, are typical questions for newly independent nation states<sup>5</sup>. (cf. Lanter 2008: 2f.) The colonial history of Ireland was characterised by anti-Irish prejudice, self-evidently in the interest of the English<sup>6</sup> who depicted the Irish in essentialist and mostly negative terms by attributions ranging from backwardness, treachery, beggary, anarchy, sexual profligacy, violence and a repugnance for rules. (cf. Hayes 2006: 82ff.) These characterisations have a lot in common with the negative stereotypes surrounding Irish Travellers. Hayes argues that the search for a new self-identity in the early twentieth century, the new cultural nationalism emerging in the years after regaining independence led to a new essentialism in which *“Travellers became a useful projective outlet for those stereotypes and types which the 'newly nationalist' Irish population wished to jettison and to categorise as 'not us'.”* (ibid. 92f.) Henceforth, Travellers were the new 'Others' in the public discourse, a 'society within a society' so to say, because the quest for a new identity which would distance the Irish from the English left not much room for diversity and heterogeneity. (cf. ibid. 96ff.) However, in contrast to other minority groups in Europe, as for example dominant constructions of 'Gypsy' populations, Travellers – indigenous to Ireland – are 'othered' *“not by 'race', but rather by a negatively evaluated 'way of life', exemplified by specific features including itinerancy, trailer-living, particular occupations, and poverty.”* (Helleiner 2000: 8) Difference is therefore defined by cultural elements,

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<sup>5</sup> Leerssen (1996) illustrates the importance of the connection between a nation and a collectively defined identity and how nationality is profoundly linked to self-definition: *“A 'nation', which nationalism considers to be the natural unit of human society, is a group of individuals who distinguish themselves, as a group, by a shared allegiance to what they consider to be their common identity; and 'nationality' can be considered as the focus of a nation's allegiance, the idea (indeed, the self-image) of its common identity, the criterion by which a 'nation' defines itself as such.”* (ibid. 18 cited in Hayes 2006: 93)

<sup>6</sup> Discursive techniques can serve to justify colonial projects and suppression: *“By describing the colonised through the use of rigid representations which depicted them as inferior, it seemed possible to 'know' the Irish and 'manage' them in some way.”* (cf. Hayes 2006: 85) Such techniques as well as the dehumanisation and inferiorisation of the colonised, or the 'Other' respectively, are also outlined in Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

and anti-Travellerism – firmly rooted in history and still very present – becomes a 'racism without race', whereby exclusion based on essentialist constructions of culture is little different from forms of exclusion based on 'race'. (cf. *ibid*) The place of Travellers within Irish society is still at the margins of the same and while they faced similar questions as the new nation state did, questions about their own identity, 'how to place themselves among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns' to use the definition of Bauman once again, they did not answer these questions themselves. Well, they certainly did, but *“the only answers considered valid were those emanating from sedentary society, whose print media had the power and influence to shape the discourse about Travellers.”* (Lanters 2008: 3) The answers given are inextricably linked to the self-definition of the Irish<sup>7</sup>, or as Bhaba phrased: *“As narrator she is narrated as well.”* (1990: 301) Through an exposition of the history of representation and the specific way the media perpetuates and sustains a mostly negative image of Travellers, institutionalised over a long period of time, an insight might be gained into the anomaly that a tiny, and above all an indigenous group, is 'othered' to such a degree. As these representations in Irish popular tradition also define the boundaries between the majority population and a subaltern group<sup>8</sup>, they tell as much about the Irish 'Self' as about the Irish 'Other'. (cf. Hayes 2006: 105, Hayes 2006a: 49f.) As Ferguson (cf. 1998) discusses in his work on representation of 'race' in the media, identity is a relational concept and the three-way relationship between 'Self', 'Other' and identity has to be conceptualised. Establishing 'Otherness' stands in a symbiotic relationship to discourses of normality – as a representative of the 'normal' I can measure myself against the representative of the 'deviant', the 'Other'. This is crucial when it comes to media representations, which often tend to essentialise 'Otherness' in a way that depicts certain groups with apparently timeless and sometimes demeaning attributions, subsequently resulting in negative stereotyping which frequently seems to take on an eternal validity. Furthermore, social relationships which are characterised by unequal power structures and subordination are often constructed, and likewise presented, as something natural rather than the result of complex historical interactions. (cf. *ibid* 68ff.)

The post-colonial discourse which translated Travellers into the 'Other' in Irish society has *“taken on a life of its own”* (Hayes 2006: 112) and led to the construction of a Traveller identity in the

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<sup>7</sup> Fintan O'Toole, Irish columnist and drama critic for *The Irish Times* once said: *“What is going on is not really about Travellers at all but about the rest of us, the 'settled' people.”* (The Irish Times, 16 June 1995 cited in Hayes 2006: 109)

<sup>8</sup> Takaki (cf. 1979) discusses the control function of boundary maintenance: *“Deviant forms of behavior, by marking the outer edges of group life, give the inner structure its special character and thus supply the framework within which the people of the group gain an orderly sense of their own cultural identity...one of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is not.”* (*ibid*. 126 cited in Hayes 2006a: 50)

majority population's own terms of reference. This knowledge and understanding has often been, and is still, quite vague. Stereotypical depictions and misinformation have led to prejudice and contradictory feelings Irish people have towards their fellow citizens. What has become conventional wisdom and collective imaginaries over time is not only hard to deconstruct, taking into account that these images have seldom been challenged, it might also be strengthened, or as Hayes puts it: *“pre-existing prejudices can give rise to the further evolution of prejudice.”* (2006: 104)

There are various factors that contributed to the construction of a Traveller image and, subsequently, to the responses such an image can evoke. The relationship between the majority population, the state and the Traveller community in Ireland has, of course, changed over time due to different factors such as economic changes, class relations and the rapid urbanisation of the country. The exceptionally open Irish economy, as it developed since the 1960s was accompanied by politics of exclusion – leading to a substantial deterioration of majority-minority relations. (cf. Hayes 2006a: 45, MacLaughlin 1995: 69) The work of advocacy groups has certainly raised awareness and shows that Travellers are, maybe more than ever, trying to dispel what has become the 'truth' in public discourse, yet the increase of such organisations and other anti-racist groups reveals that the need for the same is felt in the public sphere. It might be a long way down the road before their vision of Travellers being accepted as equal members in Irish society is achieved, given the dubious governmental policy not recognising them as an ethnic group in the Republic of Ireland, in contrast to Northern Ireland and elsewhere within the United Kingdom. The ethnic status would be a big step towards the protection afforded by international human rights instruments, such as the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. It might be a long way down the road, given the fact that assimilative policy continues to have priority over recognising Traveller culture as a culture in its own rights – where nomadism, both active and spiritual, is an intrinsic part of Traveller identity – and that prejudice, discrimination and racism are ever-present in a country where equality<sup>9</sup> is supposed to be a fundamental value and where *“it remains acceptable [...] to say things about Travellers one would not dream of saying in relation to any other group”*. (Ní Shúinéar 2006: 71)

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<sup>9</sup> Colm Walsh (cf. 2000) hints at the paradox of Ireland, where the core principles of republicanism, namely liberty, equality and fraternity, are admittedly cherished by most of the members of the majority population but are notwithstanding flouted when it comes to relations with Travellers. (cited in Delaney 2003: 84)

## 1.1 Locating the field: approaches of anthropological interest

*“Anthropology is the science which tells us that people are the same the whole world over – except when they are different.”*

(Nancy Banks-Smith)

Anthropology also tells us that there is not one ideal way of living, not even in a small nation state as Ireland, thereby challenging the nationalist myth of homogeneity and the illusions of policy makers who continue to meet Travellers with assimilationist strategies. As a minority group in Europe and with an 'alternative way of life', Travellers have been studied by anthropologists since the 1960s and the research literature is rapidly growing. Yet, as Okely (cf. 1994: 1f.) encapsulates, an anthropological perspective is not restricted to looking at the 'exotic' or the cultural difference as such. Rather, approaching Traveller-related issues means to approach dominant power structures including the views and experiences of the majority population as well as political and economic circumstances, while simultaneously confronting an ostensible norm – most commonly called ethnocentrism. Anthropological research on Travellers has focused on the active construction of ethnic and racial boundaries within a post-colonial state, where cultural nationalism and the search for a new self-identity left no room for subaltern groups. In addition to challenging essentialist constructions of identity and culture, *“anthropological work continues to demonstrate, despite predictions of an increasingly globalized world where social inequality and cultural difference are erased, these phenomena are not disappearing but rather being created and / or reproduced in the course of economic and political change.”* (Helleiner 2000: 6) Questions of ethnicity and anti-Traveller racism are at the fore when it comes to the endeavour of understanding the complex web of relationships in a democratic state in which an indigenous minority group still encounters ostracism at various levels. Furthermore, several scholars and activists, anthropologists among others, have directed their attention to the portrayal of Irish Travellers and how these depictions have generated a popular Traveller image over time. These approaches will be outlined in the following chapters. At present I would like to give a brief overview of the research that has been done among and about Irish Travellers, taking into account certain topics that are especially relevant for anthropological concerns.

Early Traveller-related research, mostly conducted by sociologists and historians, was based on 'culture of poverty' and modernisation theories, very much for the benefit of the State-led approach where Travellers were seen as a problem to be solved in terms of rehabilitation. (cf. Hayes 2006: 3,

Helleiner 2000: 11f., MacLaughlin 1995: 69ff.) In this tradition stands for example Patricia McCarthy's thesis *Itinerancy and Poverty: a Study in the Sub-Culture of Poverty* of 1972, focusing primarily on kinship and marriage. Formulated by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis and based on his fieldwork among the urban poor in Mexico<sup>10</sup>, the 'culture of poverty' approach “suggest[s] that poverty is not simply a lack of material resources, but entails in addition a set of associated cultural values which drastically limit the capacity of the poor to change their own circumstances.” (Barnard and Spencer 2006: 600) The theory, by now rejected within the social sciences discourse<sup>11</sup>, applied to Irish Travellers fails to recognise Traveller culture as a culture in its own right and with its specific values<sup>12</sup> – very much concomitant with the perception of the Irish Folklore Commission<sup>13</sup> regarding Travellers, where the acknowledgement of a separate Traveller identity is virtually absent. (cf. Hayes 2006: 96). McCarthy herself sees the 'culture of poverty' approach applied to Irish Travellers as untenable by now and revised her arguments in *The sub-culture of poverty reconsidered* (1994). The rejection of the theory is also crucial in relation to questions of ethnicity and the claim to ethnic status. (cf. McCann et al. 1994: xvi)

The need for a change of attitude towards Travellers – from conceding them a place in Irish history and society via acknowledging a distinct cultural identity through to giving them a voice and ensure their rights – is highlighted in the publication *Do you know us at all?*, later renamed to *Travellers: Citizens of Ireland*. The contributors, members of the *Parish of the Travelling People*<sup>14</sup>, argue against the characterisation of the Traveller community as a 'culture of poverty', thereby advocating that Travellers be recognised as fellow citizens, while at the same time acknowledging their distinct identity. (cf. Delaney 2003: 82f.)

Not studied by anthropologists before<sup>15</sup>, George and Sharon Gmelch conducted extensive fieldwork among Travellers in Ireland in the early 1970s. Sharon Gmelch's dissertation of 1974 *The Emergence and Persistence of an Ethnic Group: The Irish Travellers* focused on the difference between Traveller culture and the sedentary population in Ireland and their interaction. Together

<sup>10</sup> See Oscar Lewis (1959): *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*

<sup>11</sup> For further elaboration see for example Leacock (1971): *The culture of poverty: a critique*.

<sup>12</sup> In accordance with McCann et al (1994: xvii) cultural elements include nomadism, patriarchal and extended family, independence and flexibility in economic adaption, a resistance to wage labour in favour of self-employment, rituals surrounding death and rituals of cleansing.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1.2

<sup>14</sup> The *Parish of the Travelling People*, working towards a more inclusive church and society, was established in 1981 as part of the Dublin Archdiocese in order to meet the pastoral needs of Travellers, as religion plays an important role for the Traveller community. For further information see <http://www.pt Trav.ie/>

<sup>15</sup> Judith Okeley (cf. 1994: 9) mentions the anthropological study of Scottish Travellers by Farnum Rehfis *The Tinkers of Perthshire and Aberdeenshire* already conducted in 1958, concerned with kinship and marriage patterns as well as pollution beliefs. Unfortunately, these are unpublished manuscripts.

they published *The Emergence of an Ethnic Group: The Irish Tinkers* in 1976. As outlined in the abstract of the paper, its objective was to trace the emergence of an itinerant population as well as to examine the development of an ethnic identity among the same. (ibid. 225) This was followed by George Gmelch's detailed ethnography *The Irish Tinkers: The Urbanization of an Itinerant People*, originally published in 1977. In 1986, *Nan. The Life of an Irish Travelling Woman* by Sharon Gmelch was published. Her extensive fieldwork and intimate observation among Travellers in the outskirts of Dublin led her to write the life story of Nan – “a form of ethnographic writing that allows us to see that societies are composed of specific individuals, not generalized men and women” (ibid. 23), as she states in the preface. It is, by all means, a remarkable biography which also makes visible the interactional character of anthropological fieldwork by including the anthropologist as the narrator while giving a voice to an individual<sup>16</sup>. However, influenced by their disciplinary background and the time when the fieldwork was conducted, the body of work by the Gmelchs did not remain uncontested. (cf. McCann et al. 1994: xi) Jane Helleiner (cf. 2000: 12) and Judith Okely<sup>17</sup> (cf. 1994: 9), for example, criticise the Gmelchs for their pessimistic analysis and its close similarity of the 'culture of poverty' approach, even if this was not the intention of the American anthropologists. In contrast to Okely, who accentuated the resilience of ethnicity and culture, George and Sharon Gmelch's angle of view was rather on deprivation and a cultural breakdown as a consequence of unequal and tense relationships both internal and external. Further, Okely (cf. ibid. 17) sees a danger in depicting a non-literate culture as a culture of poverty or its members as deviants or drop-outs from the majority population, inasmuch as such a judgement is based on own values and traditions, hence from an ethnocentric viewpoint. The importance of a contemporaneous appreciativeness will be additionally elaborated in the context of representation and the challenge of mis-representation.

Despite criticism, the American anthropologists were the first to delineate Irish Travellers as an ethnic group (cf. 1976) – a status, which is denied by the Irish Government until this very day. In the report of 2004 to the United Nations *Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* (CERD) the Irish Government declared that Irish Travellers “do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin”, leading to the conclusion that “Travellers do not appear to fall within the definition of racial discrimination”.

<sup>16</sup> Lanter (cf. 2005) sees the format of such studies, a mixture between biography and autobiography, rather critically. In his point of view, these accounts exoticise Travellers through isolating them as manifestations of 'folk life' and setting them apart from the majority population.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Okely, Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oxford, conducted fieldwork in England in the 1970s among a group which she called 'Traveller-Gypsies'. Among her publications are *Gypsy women: Models in conflict* (1975) and *The Traveller-Gypsies* (1983).

(Government of Ireland 2004: 90 cited in McVeigh 2007: 90) Not only the Traveller support groups opposed this position, even the committee itself expressed concerns about the decision, urging the Government to work towards the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group in order to carry into effect the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (cf. McVeigh 2007: 99), which was itself not ratified in Ireland until 2000. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 5) The process and causes of 'ethnicity denial' in Irish policy as well as the implications and negative consequences for the rights of Travellers is thoroughly outlined in *'Ethnicity Denial' and Racism: The Case of the Government of Ireland Against Irish Travellers* by McVeigh (cf. 2007), concluding that the denial of ethnicity is closely interrelated with the experience of inequality, inasmuch as “no ethnicity means no racial discrimination means no racism” (ibid. 103)

While the Irish Government denies the status, the acceptance of Travellers as an ethnic group among most academics and researchers is self-evident by now. Questions of ethnicity serve as a starting point for approaching and analysing Travellers, which is – according to McVeigh (cf. ibid. 92) – not surprising given the fact that most of the research is ethnographic in character. Works of this kind are, among others, Mary Anderick's *Ethnic Awareness and the School: An Ethnographic Study* (1992), concerned with Irish Travellers in the United States. From a more interdisciplinary background is the edited collection *Irish Travellers: Culture and Ethnicity*<sup>18</sup> (McCann et al. 1994), which is an outgrowth of a conference held by the Anthropological Association of Ireland, where new approaches for the understanding of Irish Travellers were discussed not only by academic researchers but also by Travellers, policy makers and the public, focusing on the importance of comparative work. Thus, papers in this collection take into account other minority groups in Europe, Travellers in Scotland, Wales and England as well as Travellers in the United States in comparison to the Traveller community in Ireland. Basically, the concept of ethnicity in this volume is discussed in two contexts. Firstly, its applicability to Irish Travellers is critically reconsidered. Only one of the authors, Dympna McLoughlin, speaks out against the claim for ethnic status, suggesting that Travellers should rather see themselves as a minority among others. In contrast, Sinéad Ní Shúineár<sup>19</sup>, for example, adopts Narroll's (cf. 1964) definition of an

<sup>18</sup> A critical assessment and summary of this volume is offered by Seaghán Ó Murchú (2005). See <http://indiamond6.ulib.iupui.edu:81/som2311058g.html>

<sup>19</sup> Dr Sinéad Ní Shúineár, holds a Master's Degree from Jagiellonian University, Krakow, on Irish Traveller ethnicity and a PhD from University of Greenwich, London, on the Irish Traveller ethnolects, marriage patterns, and conflict. She held an Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences post-doctoral fellowship and conducted research on Irish Traveller family trees and family histories. She has published many articles on Irish Travellers and Gypsies in Ireland in the *Encyclopedia of Ireland* and in a number anthologies. (Bhreatnach and Bhreatnach 2006)

ethnic group<sup>20</sup> in order to conclude that “*we are dealing then with a group that fulfills all the objective criteria to qualify as an ethnic group*” (McCann et al. 1994: 60) Secondly, ethnicity is discussed in conjunction with questions of origin. Surprisingly, these are of little interest for Travellers themselves and, as Sinéad Ní Shúinéar (cf. *ibid.* 6) argues, neither are they for academics. Questions of origin were part of the political legitimization for settlement programmes as introduced in the 1960s. If Travellers emerged in the course of the colonial oppression under British rule, therefore forced into this particular way of life characterised by landlessness and mobility – a view which is highly contested by Traveller advocates – it would be justified to 're-settle' them. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 30) The authors, however, plead in favour of seeking Traveller origins in earlier period of Irish history. (cf. McCann et al. 1994: xv) Also Michael McDonagh (cf. 2000: 21) remarks that it is no longer acceptable to say that Travellers once were settled people and that, therefore it would be permissible to resettle or assimilate them. Relating to questions of origin, Traveller activist and author Nan Joyce states:

*Some of my ancestors went on the road in the Famine but more of them have been travelling for hundreds of years – we're not drop-outs like some people think. Travellers have been in Ireland since St Patrick's time, there's a lot of history behind them though there's not much written down – it's what you get from your grandfather and what he got from his grandfather.*  
(Joyce and Farmar 1985: 1)

That 'there's not much written down' stands in contrast to ethnocentric understandings, where history is defined by and based on written records<sup>21</sup>. Travellers who do think about their origins, have their own theories. Theories which are neither immutable nor linear and theories which are certainly not immune from contradictions. But they do make sense to them and if those accounts were to be taken at face value instead of the common or academic understanding of 'history', they might be appreciated the same way. (cf. Ní Shúinéar 2006: 66ff., Lanthers 2008: 2)

Alongside ethnicity, culture and representation, a core topic of Traveller-related research is racism. Or, more specifically, cultural racism. A substantial contribution has been made by Canadian anthropologist Jane Helleiner who conducted extensive fieldwork and participant observation in

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<sup>20</sup> The definition of an ethnic group, found in Barth (1970: 10f.), reads as follows: *1. is largely biologically self-perpetuating; 2. shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms; 3. makes up a field of communication and interaction; 4. has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.*

<sup>21</sup> Graham Jones takes up this notion in the very first lines of his novel *Traveller Wedding* (2009): “*Our history has been passed down from generation to generation through talk, but the settled Irish have never understood that because of how important writin [sic] is to them.*”

Galway city during the 1980s and 1990s, combining that with archival research. She paid particular attention to the history of anti-Traveller racism and the way Travellers created a distinct identity and a different way of life while striving against discrimination. In addition, she took a closer look at gender constructions in the early anti-Traveller discourse and the way childhood-related topics became a justification for actions against Travellers through constructing various social problems as dangerous to children. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 4ff.) Judith Okely describes Helleiner's *Irish Travellers: Racism and the Politics of Culture* (2000) as honourable:

*This outstanding anthropological monograph instructs us in similarities and differences among Travellers and groups known as Gypsies or Roma beyond regional and national borders. It supersedes all previous work on Irish Travellers and should be a standard text in the field.*  
(Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute)

Anthropologists have certainly contributed a great deal for a better and in-depth understanding of Traveller culture. Yet, past practice of anthropological research among Travellers as well as the outcomes have to be discussed critically. As Nan Joyce once wrote: “*You get foreigners coming and writing books about us: some of those books are very hurtful – the people who write them should be sued*”. (Joyce and Farmar 1985: 116 cited in Helleiner 2000: 22) Drawing on the experiences of her own research, Sinéad Ní Shúinéar (cf. 2006: 71f.) points out the difficulties of an intercultural dialogue between non-Travellers (anthropologists in that case) and Travellers, as the latter tend to be cautious as to which information is conveyed to other non-Travellers. The author argues “*that a tiny, powerless minority dispersed among an openly hostile majority must, if it is to survive, placate rather than provoke that majority*” (ibid.), not to mention the fact that in formal interviews the interviewer and the interviewee never meet on an equal footing as far as social roles are concerned. Hence, real dialogue as characterised by equal participants tends to be elusive.

By now, there is a large amount of scholarly literature concerning Irish Travellers from various disciplinary backgrounds. Michael Hayes (cf. 2006) provides a good overview of the earliest scholarly interests in the Traveller community and discusses theoretical approaches from the sub-culture of poverty, theories of the 'Other' to ethnicity and racism, keeping the emphasis, however, on the discourses of representation. It should not go unmentioned, however, that there are studies and outstanding publications from different support groups, such as *Pavee Point* or *The Irish Traveller Movement*<sup>22</sup>, which take up on issues of anthropological interest as ethnicity, racism, social

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 1.4

exclusion and gender among others. As Hayes (cf. 2006: 110f.) outlines, when it comes to the issue of anti-Traveller racism, the body of academic work is still small, although it has been increasing during the last decades. Most of the literature, however, is produced by advocacy groups or other community-based and non-statutory organisations. Anti-Traveller racism and prejudice is approached primarily in the context of, firstly, experiencing racism and, secondly, the different forms of racism. What remains largely under-theorised is the roots of such an anti-Traveller attitude on the part of the majority population and the state, which is in no small part due to the lack of formal records and documents about the history, and above all, the social history of Travellers. (cf. *ibid.*, Hayes 2006a: 46f.) What we can do, however, is to look at the various representations and depictions of Travellers in Irish culture and popular tradition in combination with the nationalist discourse in the post-colonial era in order to get some insight into the process of 'Othering' and how a, mainly negative, Traveller image has been created over time.

## 1.2 The establishment of a Traveller image

*“Prejudice against Travellers is entrenched in Irish society.”*

(Michael Hayes)

In his book *Representing 'Race'. Ideology, Identity and the Media*, Robert Ferguson takes the position that “[i]t is less productive to ask where such discourses [media discourses about 'race' and normality] originate than it is to ask how they are sustained.” (Ferguson 1998: 174) In part, the present paper agrees with Ferguson's assertion, as its focus lies also on the perpetuation of the Traveller image and hence on how discourses about Travellers established over time and as a result of various influencing factors are sustained through popular media today. However, I would also like to follow Hayes' notion (cf. 2006: 6,103) that the analysis of the representation of Travellers in Ireland in the past<sup>23</sup> and the forces which have shaped this 'truth' is important as well since the attachment of particular labels to a group – very often essentialist and reductionist in nature – and other collective representations play a crucial role for the responses to and attitudes towards the Traveller community even today:

*At its simplest and worst, present-day perceptions of Travellers continue to build on a collection of primarily negative constructs – e.g. disorder, nomadism, laziness, dishonesty,*

<sup>23</sup> Also Helleiner with her exhaustive analysis (cf. 2000) has “contributed to a greater awareness of how important the historical context is in evaluating Traveller-settled relations” (Bhreatnach and Bhreatnach 2006: viiiif.)

*backwardness, dependency, etc. – most of which were at one time a mirror-image of the phenomenon that was once colonial-era anti-Irish 'Othering'. (ibid. 113)*

Little has changed in the majority population's perception of Travellers. Little has changed in the last sixty years – very precisely sixty years, as it was in 1952 that the Irish Folklore Commission showed interest in Traveller culture and conducted a survey, namely the *'Tinker'<sup>24</sup> Questionnaire* with the aim to document the *“tinkers' way of life before it is too late”*. (Helleiner 2000: 48) Hayes (cf. 2006, 2006a) uses the responses of the questionnaire – *“the first attempt by any Irish cultural body since the foundation of the State to evince any interest in Travellers or their culture”* (ibid. 2006a: 47) – to seek historical factors that contributed to the evolution of the Traveller as the 'Other' and, subsequently, to anti-Traveller prejudice. I would like to summarise his findings at this point in order to get closer to an answer on how the Traveller image has been established and what the same looks like.

The 1952 Tinker Questionnaire, reflecting the majority's perception of Travellers as all respondents were non-Travellers, was part of Ireland's attempt to re-define the Irish self, to re-nationalise and 're-Gaelicise' Ireland after British rule. Folklore was part of the new emerging cultural nationalism and part of the dissociation of the British both in political and cultural arenas. Travellers themselves had little say regarding the definition of their culture and identity. Answers given in this survey in combination with other sources such as anthropological work and advocacy literature mirror the nineteenth and twentieth century discourse about Travellers and how they were constructed as a group. (cf. Hayes 2006: 93ff.)

On the basis of the data gathered by the questionnaire, Hayes (cf. 2006: 116ff.) distinguishes different discourses regarding Travellers; reasons, in other words, why and how they were 'othered': the first discourse draws upon the notion that *“Travellers are 'drop-outs' from the settled community, by choice, or by force of circumstance.”* (ibid.) As outlined in the previous chapter, misperceptions regarding questions of origin have severe implications for Travellers as perceiving them as drop-outs from mainstream society provides a convenient justification for efforts on the part of the authorities to re-settle them. The post-colonial nation's search for and the ostensible

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<sup>24</sup> Travellers were referred to as *'tinkers'* at that time, an expression stemming from the occupational tradition of metal work on the road. The Oxford English dictionaries' definition of a *'tinker'* reads as follows: *“(especially in former times) a person who makes a living by travelling from place to place mending pans and other metal utensils. [...] British, chiefly derogatory a Gypsy or other person living in an itinerant community.”* As early as 1175 *'tinkler'* and *'tynker'* can be found in written records as trade or surnames. In both Ireland and Scotland, *'tinkers'* were well established as an occupational group (not as an ethnic group, however) by the sixteenth century. (cf. Gmelch 1976: 227, Helleiner 2000: 34, Sheehan 2000: 24)

recollection of a homogenous history left no room for alternative historical traditions of a subaltern group. According to Helleiner (cf. 2000: 75ff.), the settlement policy which came to the fore in the 1960s is inextricably linked to the development of an open economy in favour of global capitalism and the political project of economic and social 'modernisation'. In the early 1960s the *Commission on Itinerancy* was brought into being with the purpose to develop a comprehensive settlement programme for the Traveller community by systematically documenting their living conditions and needs. Sponsored by the government, the 1963 *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* proposed such a programme in order to solve the 'itinerant problem'<sup>25</sup> and advance towards the government goals of economic and social 'modernisation'. The Commission defined 'them' as follows:

*Itinerants (or travellers as they prefer themselves to be called) do not constitute a single homogenous group, tribe or community within the nation, although the settled population are inclined to regard them as such. Neither do they constitute a separate ethnic group.*  
(CI 1963: 37 cited in Helleiner 2000: 77)

That Travellers were seen as a problem to be solved was, as Helleiner (cf. *ibid.*) suggests, a successful pairing of post-colonial nationalist discourse, or the rise of bourgeois nationalism respectively, with the new modernisation project. (cf. also MacLaughlin 1995)

The second discourse as outlined by Hayes “*is one whereby Travellers are 'othered' as a morally suspect group.*” (2006: 118) Although the author discusses this discourse separately from the third, which “*is one where Travellers are described in terms which imply a countercultural threat*” (*ibid.*, 2006a: 45ff.), these two discourses of the 'Other' are overlapping, if not to say coinciding, and inseparable, which is why I would like to conflate them in the following elucidation. The respondents of the Irish Folklore Commission's survey represented Travellers in terms of what was considered as anachronistic and anti-social behaviour which has to be encountered with suspicion – a discourse very similar to the 'European imaginary' regarding 'travelling groups'<sup>26</sup> in general. (cf. Hayes 2006: 143f.) Stealing is one of the many reductionist stereotypes ascribed to Travellers

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<sup>25</sup> The intention of the report and the dismissive attitude towards Travellers, seen as a problem to be solved, becomes quite clear if we look at excerpts from the report (cf. URL 1): “*It will be vitally necessary for the success of any scheme for the absorption and rehabilitation of itinerants, to have...local authority committees...who are prepared...to obtain [the Travellers'] confidence and then encourage them to learn and adopt the way of settled life*” Furthermore, it reads as follows: “*All efforts directed at improving the lot of itinerants and at dealing with the problems created by them...must always have as their aim the eventual absorption of the itinerants into the general community*” (CI: 106)

<sup>26</sup> Repressive attitudes towards nomadic groups, with their 'secretive practices' and 'taboos', has old roots in the European imaginary, as Hayes argues, and was further strengthened with the transition from feudalism to capitalism, when the centralisation of the state became paramount. (cf. 2006a: 58)

and one that has been associated with them for centuries: *“So long as they are in the locality they are stealing and plundering. The people can't wait until they are leaving.”* (cited in Hayes 2006: 145), said one female respondent from Galway. Others even implied that such behaviour is part of Travellers' nature: *“They are given to stealing and brutality, they are given to fighting and to telling lies as was natural for their ancestors.”* (ibid.) The 'uncivilised' lifestyle characterised by fighting and feuding and the 'culture-of-crime stereotype' (cf. Kabachnik 2009) is probably one of the strongest images of Travellers still very present in the Irish imaginary<sup>27</sup>. Apart from ascriptions such as violence, beggary, crime, dishonesty and (sexual) licentiousness, Travellers are seen as a countercultural threat or a morally suspect group because they are, apparently, an exclusive and secretive society and refuse to integrate into the wider community. (cf. Hayes 2006a: 55) One of the cultural attributes giving rise to such a perception is the use of a 'secret' language, in academic circles referred to as 'Shelta', whereas Travellers themselves usually call it 'Cant' or 'Gammon'<sup>28</sup>. As members of the Traveller community were traditionally seen as deviant members of the majority population and not a distinct group, Shelta has previously been treated as a form of jargon. (cf. Binchy 2006: 105) IFC respondents described the use of Shelta mainly in its function as a secret form of communication in presence of non-Travellers:

*The tinkers are supposed to have a language known as 'gibberish', which is told as being mostly a concocted Irish. They break into this when unwilling to be heard at their business. I heard them more than once in my parent's shop when I was a little girl, but of course never understood.*

Another respondent was rather glad that he did not understand, because *“its translation are so immoral I would not dare to mention it.”* (cited in Hayes 2006a: 70f.) Although the function of Shelta as a form of private communication when among settled people is confirmed by Nan Joyce, it is certainly not the only one. While IFC respondents only referred to the language as a means of consciously separating themselves from others who do not understand it, Shelta is also an important marker of identity and has a wider range of functional uses. (cf. ibid. 69)

To sum up – and with the reservation that the above characterisations do not have the same strength today than they had about fifty years ago – Irish Travellers constitute a minority group, which is most commonly perceived from the outside as a morally suspect group, seemingly exclusive by nature and rejecting the cultural norms of the majority population, adhering to a deviant way of life

<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 1.3.2/1.3.3

<sup>28</sup> For further details see for example the treatise on historical and sociolinguistic aspects of Shelta by Binchy (2006).

characterised by unproductive and immoral behaviour. The question of how these discourses of 'Othering' just outlined, which, as Hayes suggests (cf. 2006: 118, 2006a: 72), have constantly re-invented themselves through a sustained reductionism and continue to be strongly manifested in the Irish imaginary, were, and still are, materialised in Irish popular culture is the core of the following chapter.

### 1.3 Regimes of representation: Travellers and popular culture

*“We have sat quietly in our caravans for over a century while our fellow Irish have told lies about us through gossip, newspapers, books and films.”*  
(Graham Jones, *Traveller Wedding*)

The newspapers, books and films referred to in the above quote are to be taken into consideration in relation to the question of how the portrayal of Irish Travellers contributes to and reproduces a public discourse which, most commonly, resorts to a generic Traveller image established over time. By giving selected examples, starting from literary works and plays from Irish folklorists from the early years of the twentieth century through to more recent publications like Graham Jones' *Traveller Wedding*, I intend to provide a brief insight into the ways in which Travellers, or rather the figure of the Traveller, has been included in Irish literature. Following this, the often hostile coverage of Travellers in newspapers, a medium which represents the most important source for gaining information about the Traveller community (cf. Bhreatnach 1998: 285), is examined – based on accounts of researchers who have approached this specific topic. Last but not least, and as the core of this paper is an analysis of a documentary after all, other documentaries, films and TV series about or with Travellers are exemplified.

As already mentioned above, several scholars have directed their attention specifically to the portrayal and representation of Travellers in popular culture. The volume *Portraying Irish Travellers. Histories and Representations* (2006), edited by Ciara and Aiofe Bhreatnach provides essays by scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds, which all “*have at their heart a portrayal of Travellers by those on the outside, the majority settled population.*” (ibid. ix) Julie Brazil's contribution, for example, focuses on visual arts, while Paul Delaney examines the work of the Irish writer James Stephens. Aiofe Bhreatnach analyses the records of the Irish Folklore Commission as well as local newspapers. He has also published *Travellers and the print media:*

*words and Irish identity* (1998), to which I will come back below in greater detail. Additional approaches of newspaper coverage are provided by Mary Burke's "*Citizens of a kind*". *An examination of newspaper articles on Travellers from the founding of the Irish State to the present day*<sup>29</sup>, Rachel Morris' body of work, including *Gypsies, Travellers and the Media: Press regulation and racism in the UK* (2000)<sup>30</sup> and *Nomads and Newspapers* (2006) and Anthony Drummond's *Cultural Denigration: Media Representation of Irish Travellers as Criminal* (2006). José Laners, on the other hand, draws his attention to Irish literature and the development of a 'tinker' figure as a fictional character in his study *The 'Tinkers' in Irish Literature: Unsettled Subjects and the Construction of Difference* (2008) pointing towards the "gap that exists between the 'wild poetic tinker' as a construct in Irish literature, and the Traveller as a real person with a function in Irish society." (ibid. 1) Laners provides a vast overview of the literature tradition, beginning from the earliest appearance of 'tinker' characters in the first half of the nineteenth century, where stereotypes have already been well established in Irish society. He then discusses the Irish Literary Revival, followed by an examination of children's literature and contemporary fiction aimed at older teenagers, where 'tinkers' are often depicted as being without homes, occupations and families and "whether used as positive or negative examples, Traveller characters are merely conduits through which a sedentary author speaks to a sedentary teenage audience." (ibid. 4) The author further discusses the genre of detective fiction and the narratives provided by individual Travellers to represent themselves. The 'Othering' discourse, i.e. the way in which Travellers are often represented as both exotic and threatening, but never as just themselves (cf. URL 2), is also the subject of his article "*We are a different people*": *Life Writing, Representation, and the Travellers* (2005). The portrayal and depiction of Travellers in films and TV series is considered to a lesser extent in scholarly work. Among the few authors approaching this issue is Peter Kabachnik who examines the 'culture-of-crime stereotype' often associated with Travellers in *The culture of crime. Examining representations of Irish Travelers in 'Traveller' and 'The Riches'* (2009).

### 1.3.1 Literature

Delaney suggests that "*many of the changes in Irish society – as well as many of the fears and much of the excitement which has attended these changes – have been explored through the figure*

<sup>29</sup> To be found online: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/imperial/ireland/citizens.htm>

<sup>30</sup> Also available online: <http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Z%20Current%20MDI%20Resources/Gypsies,%20Travellers%20and%20the%20media%20-%20press%20regulation%20and%20racism%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>

*of the Traveller.*” (2006: 47) The emergence of the new nationalism in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century was accompanied by a competition for leadership between the Protestant Anglo-Irish ascendancy and an emerging Catholic middle class. The former were apprehensive of an Ireland that would come to be characterised by a stultifying Catholicism, repressive sexuality and increased materialism. The political struggle encroached on the cultural sphere and was artistically expressed in the Celtic Literary Revival. It was the wanderers, the beggars and the 'tinkers' in the literature of the Celtic Revivalists that were seen as the embodiments of a pre-colonial past, as romantic symbols of an older and more traditional Ireland – outside modern history. (cf. Hayes 2006: 93ff., Helleiner 2000: 40ff.) John Millington Synge<sup>31</sup>, one of the famous Revivalists wrote: “*People like these ... are a possession for any country. They console us, one moment at least, for the manifold and beautiful life we have all missed who have been born in modern Europe*”. (cited in Helleiner 2000: 41) For Synge and his contemporaries such as Lady Gregory<sup>32</sup>, Jack B. Yeats<sup>33</sup> or Douglas Hyde the wanderers and 'tinkers' symbolically stood for mysticism and spirituality and were considered the survivals of an ancient past<sup>34</sup>. (cf. *ibid*, Hayes 2006: 92) This notion about Travellers as “*ghosts of an earlier form of existence*” (Delaney 2003: 88) has lived on with the century that has passed by and can be found until this present day, as will become apparent in the analysis. However, the heroic idealism<sup>35</sup> of the Celtic Literary Revival was displaced by the differently defined cultural nationalism after the formation of the Free State in 1922 when the Catholic bourgeoisie came to the fore and engaged in the search for a new self-identity, as outlined above. The figure of the 'tinker', hitherto “*the abstraction on which Anglo-Irish nationalists projected all their desires and anxieties about the independent nation that was yet to be created*” became “*the embodiment of everything that was objectionable about the Irish past and worrisome about its future.*” (Lanters 2008: 4)

From then on and up the 1960s, when the Irish economy started to transform in adjustment to the global market, Travellers were perceived as the 'itinerant problem' and evoked images of chaos, violence and disorder. The political strategy for solving this 'problem' was manifested in the

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<sup>31</sup> Famous works of John M. Synge are *The Tinker's Wedding* (1904) and *The Shadow of the Glen* (1910)

<sup>32</sup> Lady Gregory's play *The Travelling Man*, wherein a rural woman refuses to give shelter and food to Christ, reflects the categorical denial of the emerging Catholic bourgeoisie. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 41)

<sup>33</sup> See Julie Brazil's analysis (2006) of the early work of Jack B. Yeats.

<sup>34</sup> Helleiner (cf. 2000: 42) argues, the the wanderer figures represented the position claimed by the Anglo-Irish artists, which, however, denied the colonial period and the position of the Anglo-Irish elite as representatives of this domination.

<sup>35</sup> Okely points out, that “[t]his exoticisation might appear harmless and aesthetically enriching when found in poetry, painting, opera and fiction, but the imagery lives on and may be used as device to reject most if not all living Travellers and Gypsies. Once perceived as exotic beings, the circumstances are ripe for dividing dream from reality, phantom from person.” (1994: 5)

establishment of the *Commission on Itinerancy* and the policy following its recommendations was concerned with finding Travellers a 'place' in modern Irish society. So was Sean Maher in 1972 when he published his memoirs *The Road to God Knows Where: A memoir of a Travelling Boyhood*. Maher, born in 1932 as the eldest of nine children and raised in a tent by the side of the road, is one of the voices that have arisen within the community – anxious about the economic changes that might result in the annihilation of an entire community. (cf. Delaney 2003: 79f., Oppersdorff 1997, Scanlan 2006) The 1963 Report of the Commission and Maher's text are diametrically opposed. While the former, ruling for the official policy, pursuing the social modernisation of a country in which industrialisation and urban development were increasing, was supportive of the 'settlement' of Travellers, Maher's abiding fear was, “*that soon this simplicity would be no more, that a people, a language and a culture would die in this horrible, modern world*” (cited in Delaney 2003: 79) – a fear provoked by the Commission, which saw no alternative to housing and, hence, criminalised the practice of nomadism. As Delaney argues, notions of nomadism as an aberration in modern Ireland need to be challenged. Nomadism is more complex and there is more to it than travel. Nomadism is an intrinsic part of Traveller identity, not necessarily dependent on the active practice, which makes divisions between housed Travellers and camping Travellers obsolete. Roma scholar, Jean-Pierre Liégeois encapsulates: “*whereas a sedentary person remains sedentary, even when travelling, the Traveller is a nomad, even when he (or she) does not travel. Immobilised, he (or she) remains a Traveller.*” (cited in *ibid.* 86) Maher's memoirs provide an 'inside' perspective in dealing with the political and economic changes in Ireland from the 1960s onwards – concerned with the same issues as the Report of the Commission, however “*underwritten with opposing aspirations*”. (*ibid.* 80) An aspiration not only opposed to the report but to the mid-twentieth century literature, where the 'tinker' is associated with a repressed awareness of modernity, a regression into primitivism respectively, and moral and physical dirt. (cf. Lanthers 2008: 4f.)

Ancient ways of living that collide with a modern world and which are therefore on the edge of annihilation also constitute a popular subject matter in more recent novels. *Tribe* (1999) by John F. McDonald, and *Paveewhack* (2001) by Peter Brady, both non-Travellers, are among the same. In both novels, Traveller characters function as first-person narratives using a non-standard English incorporating Cant words and phrases “*in a context that suggests that both the Travellers and their language are on the road to extinction*” (Lanthers 2008: 210), not only because of modernisation but because of a seemingly deliberate decision to abandon the 'old ways'. The main characters in the books find themselves somewhere in between two different worlds: Owen McBride, narrator in

*Tribe* describes the community as “*not really my people any more*”, yet, as he reminds a friend “*I am a fucking Tinker, and so are you*”, because “*you can take the man out of the Tinker but you can't take the Tinker out of the man*”. (cited in Lanthers 2008: 210f.)

A very recent attempt to challenge general perceptions and write 'something authentic' was made by Graham Jones with his *Traveller Wedding* of 2009. As he says himself in an interview<sup>36</sup> in which he discusses his novel, the media never seemed authentic to him and what he saw on television or read about the Traveller community was so far removed from the stories a Traveller once told him that he had to try and write a more authentic story. He did research among the Traveller community for about three months and uses the tabloid headlines as a sort of launching pad, as he thinks that this is where the general consciousness about Travellers stems from: “*In Ireland we seem to have no qualms engaging in what is basically racism against the Travelling community.*” (URL 3) With this statement by Graham Jones, I would like to turn to those tabloid headlines referred to in order to see what the newspaper coverage concerning Travellers looks like.

### 1.3.2 Newspapers

Though a small part of the overall population of the United Kingdom, the difficulties faced by Gypsies and Travellers have attracted considerable, and largely negative, attention in recent years. Indeed, to judge by the levels of invective that can regularly be read in the nation press, Gypsies would appear to be the last ethnic minority in respect of which *openly racist views can still be acceptably expressed*. I was truly amazed by some of the headlines, articles and editorials that were shown to me. Such reporting would appear to be symptomatic of a widespread and seemingly growing distrust of Gypsies *resulting in their discrimination* in a broad range of areas. (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2009: 221, emphasis added)

This statement was made by Alvaro Gil-Robles in 2004, Commissioner for Human Rights of Council of Europe from 1999 to 2006, and although he specifically speaks about the United Kingdom, the same holds true for Ireland. It expresses the concerns of both scholars and Traveller support groups who see Travellers as subjected to a constant negative portrayal in the media in general and most often in the newspapers – pointing towards the power such representation has in contributing to the ideological racist discourse, the reinforcement of negative opinions by the wider

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<sup>36</sup> <http://audiofarm.org/audiofiles/7731>

public and the consolidation of the position Travellers have in Irish society. In his comparative analysis of articles in the *Irish Times* from the mid-60s and the mid-90s, Aoife Bhreatnach (cf. 1998) spots a semantic shift and a perceptual change: While in the mid-60s, keeping in mind the nationalist principles that were paramount at this time, the negative interpretation of difference and the 'itinerant problem' were dominant. By the mid-90s, however, the 'itinerant problem' had become the 'Travelling community', Traveller representatives were quoted more frequently and difference was labelled as legitimate. Yet, in stressing their distinctness, the Travellers have become the focus of negative stereotyping and the author sees a “*disturbing degree of prejudice*”. (ibid. 288) Although in the 1990s violent acts, for example, were no longer treated as a consequence of poverty and Travellers were no longer seen as a 'problem to be solved', stereotypes – such as violence – still continued to reinforce the accentuation of a seemingly unbridgeable ethnic gap between Travellers and the majority population. (cf. ibid. 289) While newspapers often do change the modality of their judgements in favour of a more measured approach, a certain ideology may still be embedded implicitly. (cf. Ferguson 1998: 154) Drummond (cf. 2006: 75ff.) stresses, that the media continues to criminalise Irish Travellers and their culture by almost exclusively associating them with violence and criminal acts, regardless of whether the suspects are guilty or not. The non-governmental organisation *Pavee Point* gives a few examples of newspaper accounts in one of their publications (cf. URL 4): The *Sunday Independent* (28<sup>th</sup> January, 1996) headlined: *Time To Get Tough On Tinker Terror 'Culture'*<sup>37</sup>. Compared to the content of the article, written by Mary Ellen Synon, who is known for her controversial writings, the headline appears almost harmless:

*It is a life of appetite ungoverned by intellect. [...] It is a life worse than the life of beasts, for beasts at least are guided by wholesome instinct. Traveller life is without the ennobling intellect of man or the steadying instinct of animals. This tinker 'culture' is without achievement, discipline, reason or intellectual ambition. It is a morass.*

This mirrors precisely the thought of Ní Shúinéar<sup>38</sup>, Alvaro Gil-Robles and what Graham Jones said in the interview about his book: One would not dream of saying such things in relation to any other minority group – at least not in the national press. Sensationalist headlines, exacerbation and decontextualisation support and substantiate the anti-Traveller discourse. Frequently, local politicians are being quoted<sup>39</sup> and official perceptions, as for example the debate on the claim for

<sup>37</sup> See [http://www.indymedia.ie/newswire.php?story\\_id=63540&search\\_text=mary%20ellen%20synon](http://www.indymedia.ie/newswire.php?story_id=63540&search_text=mary%20ellen%20synon)

<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 1

<sup>39</sup> *Pavee Point* offers a few examples in the publication (cf. URL 4): “*They are dirty and unclean. Travelling People have no respect for themselves and their children*” (County Councillor quoted in *Irish Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1991); “*Killarney is literally infested by these people*” (County Councillor quoted in *Cork Examiner*, 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1989);

ethnicity in 2004, are presented in a rather simplistic way. Michael McDowell, then Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform commented in the *Irish Independent* as follows:

*A revision of public policy is overdue. The rethink should start with a frank admission of basic errors which resulted in founding policy on such absurd propositions as that Travellers constitute an ethnic minority or that a 'nomadic lifestyle' can exist in the present age.*  
(cited in Drummond 2006: 79)

Given the fact, that Irish Travellers and Gypsy/Travellers are the most marginalised ethnic group in Britain and Ireland, it is rather unlikely that a lot of the members of the majority population have ever socialised with individuals from these communities. (cf. *ibid.* 76) Bhreatnach (cf. 1998: 285) goes as far as to say that if it were not for media coverage, the Traveller community might be an undocumented minority, hence the cultural discourse is largely determined by outside forces due to their isolation, both voluntary and enforced. So, if we look at a survey of 2004, which found that “[T]ravellers and asylum seekers are the minorities viewed most negatively by the majority population” (Brown 2004: 2 cited in Drummond 2006: 76), it might be argued that these negative perceptions are most likely influenced by the media portrayal. That a nomadic lifestyle cannot (or rather should not) exist in the present age, as McDowell added for consideration, corresponds with 23% of the respondents, who do not think that nomadism should be preserved. 21% believe that Travellers should not have the same rights as the settled community. In this context, Drummond as well as the *Irish Traveller Movement*<sup>40</sup> refer to Article 17<sup>41</sup> of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which, summarised, highlights the important function of the mass media and the necessity for a diversity of national and international sources. “*It remains to be seen*”, so Drummond, “*how the incessant representation by the media of Irish and Gypsy Travellers as criminal, fulfils the aims of Article 17, especially in relation to children belonging to these communities.*” (2006: 77)

When it comes to newspaper coverage of Irish Travellers in the national press, acts of violence, 'feuds'<sup>42</sup> and situations of conflict are predominant. The press focuses on the Travellers' supposed responsibilities rather than discussing their rights and their needs – which would be urgently necessary (cf. Delaney 2003: 83) considering that many members of the Traveller community are

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“*These people have been a constant headache for towns and cities throughout the country*” (County Councillor quoted in *Cork Examiner*; 13<sup>th</sup> June, 1990)

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.itmtrav.ie/press/myview/53>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

<sup>42</sup> See Drummond (2006: 80ff.) for an overview of the media perceptions of 'feuds'.

still living in intolerable conditions, often without access to basic facilities like water and electricity, causing ongoing health problems and resulting in a shorter life expectancy than members of the majority population in Ireland. (cf. URL 5) The media must not be blamed, of course, for every burden and all the problems Travellers are still facing and they certainly cannot undo centuries of prejudice and ignorance. However, with power comes responsibility and the means not to enforce and strengthen this fear a large part of the population, including official representatives, seems to have. Travellers are excluded from public processes in a wide range of areas and the same holds true for the creation of those stories finding their ways into the national press. Portrayals presented to the wider public are often unbalanced and incomplete, as they are written by non-Travellers who, most of the time, do not know more about them than they need for a sensationalist headline. (cf. Morris 2000) As Drummond concludes in his article: *“Irish Travellers, as with other minorities deserve equality and respect, not cultural denigration by the media.”* (2006: 83) Such responsibility must also be applied to filmmakers and every other person who *“produces and uses a recognizable image of another”*, as Ruby (cf. 2000) postulates. This, however, is the subject matter of Chapter 4.3. For now, I would like to present a few examples of films and TV series about Irish Travellers.

### 1.3.3 Films and TV Series

*“We are Irish Travellers. Some call us Gypsies. Others call us thieves.  
Most though don't even know we exist.”*

The above quote is the opening voice-over of the American TV series *The Riches*, originally to be named *Low Life*, which premiered in 2007. This is exactly what attracted the series' creator, Dmitry Lipkin: that the average American has no idea of who Travellers are, that is to say social and cultural outsiders, who remain a mystery to every other person<sup>43</sup>. Moreover reflected in the quote is, that Irish Travellers are either misrecognised ('Gypsies'), visible because of crimes ('thieves') or completely unknown. (cf. Kabachnik 2009: 57) The series is about the Irish-American Travellers Wayne and Dahlia Malloy, played by Eddie Izzard and Minnie Driver, who are con-artists and thieves, on the run from their Traveller 'clan' with their three children, trying to 'steal the American

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<sup>43</sup> Kabachnik (cf. 2009: 51) points out, that although the number of Irish Travellers living in the United States is relatively low, the presence in American media culture is unusually high. Series and films featuring Travellers characters are among others *Man About Dog*, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Without a Trace*.

dream' by appropriating the identities of a well-off couple, referred to by them as 'buffers'<sup>44</sup>. This is in a way reminiscent of *Tribe* and *Paveewhack*, where Traveller culture is dying because of the decision to abandon 'the old ways', as mentioned earlier. (cf. Lanthers 2008: 212f.) Wayne and Dahlia Malloy are funny, likeable and attractive characters and as stated in one review, “*it's hard not to root for them*” (cited in Kabachnik 2009: 56) 'Buffers', on the other hand, often appear as greedy, unscrupulous, lecherous and corrupt. However, to summarise Kabachnik's findings of his analysis (cf. 2009) of *The Riches*, criminality is not only associated but equated with Traveller culture and the series does nothing to dispel that stereotype. Visibility, in this case the very fact that Traveller culture features in a major network TV format, can be something positive on the face of it. However, it may also prove harmful if the underlying rationale of the programme is to fulfil the viewers' expectations, perpetuating dominant representations and thereby entrenching existing stereotypes. What is interesting is the ambivalence inherent in such representations. According to Kabachnik, many Irish Travellers celebrated the character Mickey O'Neill in *Snatch* (2000), played by Brad Pitt, as a hero, because “*he was strong, attractive, an excellent fighter, possessed a strong concern for the welfare of his family, and, perhaps most importantly, he is victorious in the end, defeating the English, avenging his mother's death, and making off with a lot of money.*” (ibid. 56) That leaves aside the notion, that the film reduced Irish Travellers to dirty, dim and brutal bare-knuckle boxers. Applied to *The Riches*, Irish Travellers may be pleased with their representation, especially because the Malloys are constantly exploiting 'buffers', which could be interpreted as some form of revenge for all the discrimination Travellers have faced and still do. But, as Kabachnik argues, the performance of stereotypical roles functions as a reinforcement and internalisation of those stereotypes in the popular imagination. (cf. ibid) Although the series' creator fulfilled his intention in making Traveller culture visible, it is doubtful if Americans get the 'right' ideas about it. A reviewer for the *Boston Globe* described Travellers, by virtue of the series, as “*a nomadic society of Irish crooks who survive by conning law-abiding Americans*” (cited in Lanthers 2008: 212), albeit lead actor Eddie Izzard mentions the crucial point in an interview: “*We're just portraying one family who happen to be Travellers. And it's just because there's not a lot of media about Travellers, everyone's thinking well, this is all about everyone.*” (URL 6)

What Graham Jones tried to do with his *Traveller Wedding*, namely portray Travellers in a more 'authentic' way, was Perry Ogden's aim with his film *Pavee Lackeen. The Traveller Girl* (2005), a

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<sup>44</sup> A term used when referring to someone from the 'settled' community. In Ireland 'gauger' or 'gorger' is rather used. The official website of *The Riches* explained that 'buffer' is the term for “*the ordinary, law-abiding folk*”. Hence, it does not only mean non-Travellers but non-criminals. (cf. Kabachnik 2009: 59)

low-budget docudrama about a Traveller family living in a small caravan. In the accompanying booklet of the DVD, Ogden issues a statement regarding his intentions:

*Determined to avoid the usual clichés and stereotypes that often feature in films depicting Travellers, I decided to abandon traditional narrative in favour of a more realist approach; using little dialogue and long, hand-held shots, the film explores the harsh world of those children living on the margins of our society, but never sentimentalises their plight.*

The mainly non-professional cast represent characters based to a large extent on their own living situations. Winnie Maughan – 'star' of *Pavee Lackeen*, her sister Rose and her mother use their own voices and names in an almost narrative-less account of their lives on the side of the road in a desolate industrialised area of contemporary Dublin, without any access to basic facilities. (cf. Lanthers 2008: 214f.) Ogden was trying to use naturalistic and often improvised dialogues in order to create intimacy and deconstruct the distance between the event being filmed and the story being told. The family members, however, expressed concerns at various times, that the audience might think the film accurately portrayed their own lives. Winnie, who once stated that she did not know that the film would be shown in the cinema, wanted people to know that she was not really sniffing petrol in the film and her mother Rosie, that she is not actually getting drunk. Perry Ogden hoped to raise awareness and that he would contribute to improve their circumstances, yet, as Lanthers alludes, "*his film does not set out to make any kind of overtly anthropological or political point*" (2008: 215) and submits that it is still a non-Traveller who remains in charge of the narrative and their story. While well-meant, there has not changed a lot in the family's life – not one iota, as Fiachra Gibbons<sup>45</sup> concludes after she went to see them. "*Life's a terrible torture that's sent to try us*", said Rosie.

Catherine Joyce, manager of a local Traveller organisation in Blanchardstown, County Fingal, is worried about what seems to have replaced the earlier negative portrayal of Travellers in the media: namely, the 'pro Traveller programmes'. (cf. URL 7) There is *The Truth About Travellers*<sup>46</sup>, presented by journalist and reporter Henry McKean, who also aims to dispel the negative view the media has adhered to over the years. In the documentary he introduces a youth work organisation as well as other support groups and tries to show the Traveller community, "*a diverse and historic group that has played a key role in Irish life for centuries*", from a more differentiated and less

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<sup>45</sup> See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2006/feb/10/1>

<sup>46</sup> Available on youtube.

sensationalist point of view. Then, there is *Blood of the Travellers*<sup>47</sup> which Joyce describes as a factual documentary looking at various issues from a different perspective – on these grounds, the programme is very much appreciated by the community. However, Joyce finds herself asking where this new found fascination with the Traveller community stems from: “*Is it from a human rights perspective, is it from a public awareness perspective or are these programmes exploiting and misrepresenting what is already a community under constant public scrutiny and misrepresentation?*” (ibid.) But whatever the reason, her conclusion is reminiscent of Lanter's critique – the programmes are developed and edited by non-Travellers, Travellers themselves have little input and they are not targeted as the readers or viewers. To encapsulate: There are programmes that are doing some good and there are programmes that are doing more harm than good. What they have in common is the highlighting of difference, mediated by outside voices which most often speak on behalf of Travellers. (cf. ibid., Lanter 2008: 214ff.) Outsider voices are not a proxy for their own and although intentions may be good, there are difficulties in the deconstruction of a received way of thinking or an established discursive system. The support and engagement of the majority population, however, is needed when it comes to the struggle to ensure that a space for Travellers' voices and, ultimately, a space in Irish society is provided. (cf. Delaney 2006: 64, Helleiner 2000: 24) How this struggle is carried out, is the core of the following chapter.

#### 1.4 Voices of and for Travellers: a brief glimpse into advocacy work

*“An Ireland where Travellers are proud of their identity and with their ethnicity recognised,  
can achieve their fullest potential to play an active role in Irish society”*  
(Irish Traveller Movement)

The above quote is the vision and the very aim of the *Irish Traveller Movement*<sup>48</sup> (ITM), one of the largest advocacy groups in Ireland campaigning for Travellers' rights and towards a full recognition of the Traveller community as equal members in Irish society. The ITM, composed of Travellers and members of the majority population alike, was founded in 1990 and currently functions as an

<sup>47</sup> “*Blood of the Travellers* is a documentary that caught up with one of Ireland's most famous Travellers Francis Barrett who fought in the Olympics for Ireland and who carried the Irish Flag into the Olympic ring. The programme looked at the origins of Irish Travellers, at the relationship between Travellers and settled people and how it has deteriorated over the years, and some of the issues affecting Travellers like accommodation and discrimination with Francis himself getting refused access to a bar/night club after he returned from the Olympics. It also gives an insight to the contemporary culture of Travellers.” (Catherine Joyce, cf. URL 7)

<sup>48</sup> The informations about the ITM are all taken from their homepage if not cited otherwise. See <http://www.itmtrav.ie/>

umbrella organisation for over eighty support groups<sup>49</sup> from all over Ireland. Core principles of the national platform include the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group, the right to self-determination, the validation of nomadism and the solidarity with other marginalised groups in order to challenge racism as well as other forms of social inequality through collective action. While efforts are made to work with state agencies, the ITM provides a space for Travellers and Traveller organisations only, initiating various actions and working groups as well as providing miscellaneous publications<sup>50</sup> such as the annual reports or policy submissions. Each year, the *Annual General Meeting and Conference* is carried out, organised by the board of management which is newly elected each year. Racism and consequences of ethnicity denial on part of the Irish government, as already outlined above, were the core themes of this year's conference, held end of June, 2012. As an umbrella group the ITM is represented in other national and international networks, ensuring that their members' voices are heard beyond the bounds of the movement and that the aims and objectives are brought to key policy arenas. Selectively, these include the *European Network Against Racism* (ENAR), the *Equality Rights Alliance* (ERA), the *NGO Alliance Against Racism*, the *European Anti-Poverty Network* (EAPN) as well as the *Northern Ireland Traveller Network* and the *National Traveller Monitoring and Advisory Committee* (NTMAC). (cf. URL 8) Analogous to the ITM in the Republic of Ireland, the *Irish Traveller Movement in Britain* (ITMB) has been established in 2000, registered as a Charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee, with the aim of conflating Travellers, service providers and policy makers while working in solidarity with Romany Gypsies and other Traveller communities across Europe. With, obviously, very much the same principles as the ITM in Ireland, such as self-determination and proactive participation, the ITMB is working towards “*a world in which members of the Traveller Communities reach their full potential; where they are accepted, proud of who they are and have an equal voice.*” (URL 9)

A general growth of lobby and pressure groups, uniting Travellers and members of the majority population in the struggle against exclusionist policies, was observable in the 1990s (cf. Bhreatnach 2008: 288). As Helleiner (cf. 2000: 4f.) indicates, the rapid economic growth in the mid 1990s, usually referred to as the 'Celtic Tiger' period, was accompanied by a right-wing upsurge with racist and xenophobic activities high on the agenda. That brought about an even greater mobilisation on the part of advocacy groups in a broader anti-racist alliance. However, organised resistance reaches back to the 1960s, probably much longer, yet – as with every other aspect of Traveller life – hardly

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<sup>49</sup> For a list of ITM members see <http://www.itmtrav.ie/network/itmmember>

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.itmtrav.ie/publication>

any historical records can be found. Grattan Puxon, an English Journalist who is still campaigning for Travellers' rights, came to Ireland in the early 1960s, where he was immediately moved by the situation of the Traveller community. He started to organise protests, pre-eminently to hamper evictions of Travellers' sites<sup>51</sup>, wrote pamphlets and was soon supported by many Travellers and other activists, like students. As the movement gained more strength, the Government found itself forced to take actions – one of which led to the arrest of Puxon and, consequently, his leaving Ireland in 1964<sup>52</sup>. (cf. URL 10)

After the actions of Puxon and the attempt to set up civil rights movements, it took considerable time until the next form of independent resistance and, eventually, the formation of Traveller organisations. In 1980, Roselle McDonald won a court ruling after fighting against the evictions of roadside camps. It was accredited “*that Travellers could not be evicted from local authority property without being offered a suitable alternative.*” (ibid.) In practice, however, the success did not extend beyond the walls of the courtroom. Ways of circumventing the sentence were found and ignominious acts on the part of the authorities left Travellers no choice but to yield and, ultimately, move. (cf. ibid.)

A huge controversy in 1981 – the Tallaght By-pass construction, where hundreds of Traveller families were at the point of losing their homes<sup>53</sup> – led to the establishment of the *Travellers' Rights Committee* arranged by local activists and Travellers. Nan Joyce, author of *My life on the road* and friend and close informant of anthropologist Sharon Gmelch, was put up by the committee as candidate for the general election in 1982. With twice as many first preference votes against the other candidate, who tried to recruit his voters with the openly racist slogan “*Get the Knackers out of Tallaght*”, it was – once again – a victory only in theory. Nan was arrested after the election for the theft of jewellery. Reminiscent of another story, *[i]t turned out that the stolen jewellery had been planted in her caravan by the police themselves in an exact repetition of the frame up they had done on Grattan Puxon over twenty years previously.*” (ibid.) After two years of campaigning and organising public protests, the first Traveller-only organisation *Minceir Misli* arose out of the committee in 1983. Notwithstanding the fact that the members initiated links and contacts with

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<sup>51</sup> Grattan Puxon also became a spokesperson for Dale Farm – the largest halting site for Travellers in the United Kingdom, which was eventually evicted in 2012.

See for example <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/video/2012/apr/20/dale-farm-eviction-video>

<sup>52</sup> For more details see <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/rbr/travrbr2.html> and <http://www.wsm.ie/story/831>. According to the second source, Grattan Puxon left Ireland in 1963. Other sources of information about Puxon (which can be found online), however, comply with the first, hence cite 1964 as the year he was arrested and left the country.

<sup>53</sup> For further information see <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/rbr/travrbr2.html>

other unions, as the trade union movement, and continued to clamour the recognition of their rights and demands, *Minceir Misli* did not last longer than two years. The organisation fell apart due to their failure to mobilise sufficient funds for their work and, partially, because of the high number of illiterate members, which made it even harder for the group to function effectively, according to the sources. (cf *ibid.*, URL 11)

Prior to the establishment of the ITM and other non-governmental support groups, which are active until today, there had been yet another attempt in 1984 to bring together a group of people in order to highlight and, more importantly, improve the social wrongs Travellers were subjected to: the formation of the *Dublin Travellers' Education and Development Group* (DTEDG). *Anti-Racist Law and the Travellers* is one of the works published by the DTEDG. A short list of other publications can be found on *Pavee Point's* website.

*Pavee Point Travellers' Centre*<sup>54</sup> with its motto *Promoting Travellers' Human Rights* is probably one of the best-known non-governmental support groups for Travellers in the Republic of Ireland. As is the case with most of the organisations, both Travellers and members of the majority population actively participate in the group which is also reflected in the key premises of their work: For the improvement of the social situation of Travellers not only the active involvement of Travellers themselves is necessary but also the responsibility of non-Travellers to address problems and processes that deny the Traveller community a place in Irish society and which exclude them from participating in the same as equal members. Furthermore, these problems require a holistic and multi-dimensional approach, as single-factor explanations are not sufficient for the complex and multiple issues of concern. (cf. URL 12) Advocacy work for Travellers' rights on an international level, similar to the ITM, is carried out in collaboration with other minority groups and networks. *Pavee Point* does not only conduct studies and provide theoretical approaches concerning issues such as youth and education, economy and work or racism and discrimination in their various publications, they offer a variety of programmes<sup>55</sup> as, for example, the *Violence against Women Programme*, which aims at raising awareness of sexual and domestic violence and increasing knowledge of services and supports available besides offering trainings and other materials. Throughout its work, *Pavee Point* has always had a special emphasis on issues concerning Traveller women, as they experience triple discrimination: as women, as Travellers and as Traveller women. Furthermore, when it comes to violence there are three potential types: violence from an intimate

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<sup>54</sup> See <http://paveepoint.ie/>

<sup>55</sup> For an outline of the programmes offered see <http://paveepoint.ie/about-2/structures/>

partner, violence from the so-called settled community and violence from the state, as in case of evictions. Women play key roles in the Traveller movements and have made important contributions to the fight against social exclusion, discrimination and the denial of basic rights. (cf. URL 13)

Providing a space for women only was accomplished in 1988 with the formation of *The National Traveller Women's Forum*<sup>56</sup> (NTWF) – a national network of Traveller and non-Traveller women as well as other women's organisations. Using a human rights-based approach it advocates the empowerment of Traveller women through the possibility of sharing experience and information. The NTWF is a space for the development of solidarity among women in order to explore gender issues together and challenge (gender) inequality, racism, sexism and all other forms of discrimination with the aim of achieving recognition in policy development. To really achieve success, however, might take quite some strength and even more patience, but, as Rosaleen McDonagh<sup>57</sup> once said: “*We are taking control of our lives in a way that we never did before. And it will be a long time before that will have an impact on a political level. But, on a personal level that feels good – that sense of acknowledging your own self worth.*” (ibid.)

Since the very (recorded) beginnings of resistance in the 1960s, when English journalist Grattan Puxon stood up for Travellers' rights, a lot of work has been done by Travellers and, of course, by members of the majority population who also participate in the groups and plead for the rights of their fellow citizens. In the Republic of Ireland alone there are organised support groups in almost every county; the same holds true for Northern Ireland. It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of the present paper to further elaborate on those advocacy groups. However, as MacLaughlin (cf. 1995: 81f.) confirms and which hopefully becomes clear from the outlined, Travellers are no longer willing to act as passive victims and they have contributed a great deal to the re-valuation of Traveller culture. Moreover, there are growing links between advocacy groups in Ireland and their equivalents in other European countries precisely because there are clear parallels between anti-Traveller racism and anti-Roma/Gypsy racism elsewhere in Europe. To reach their objectives and

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.ntwf.net/>

<sup>57</sup> Rosaleen McDonagh, a Traveller activist and playwright, holds an M.Phil. in Ethnic and Racial Studies from Trinity College. She received the Metro Eirann Multimedia award for *The Baby Doll Project* – a one-woman show performed based on her own life. Staged during the Traveller Focus Week of 2005 was her second play, *John and Josey*, which explores the search for acceptance in and outside the community. While such work is particularly important, as it speaks from within the Traveller experience, it runs the risk of being a 'cultural intervention within limitations', meaning a project that is overtly pedagogical and political and therefore may be “*marginalized on similar grounds to those advanced as a rationale for travellers' position on the margins of Irish society.*” (Merriman cited in Hayes 2006: 216)

visions, it is regarded as imperative to raise more awareness among the mainstream population and to challenge the institutionalised Traveller image. (cf. *ibid.*, Helleiner 2000: 9)

## 1.5 By way of conclusion

A Traveller identity and, as a consequence thereof, a Traveller image prevalent in the various systems of representation, was created from positions of dominance and within a discourse of 'Otherness', in which meaning was imposed rather than negotiated through dialogue. (cf. Ferguson 1998: 68) Such a dialogue is sought by an increasing body of action and support groups throughout Ireland. Activists, both Travellers and non-Travellers, are trying to challenge the outcomes of a process that naturalised relations of power and subordination and are dealing with problems of inequality. While there is no dispute amongst most academics that Irish Travellers constitute an ethnic group, the Irish Government – in contrast to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – still does not recognise this status, thereby generating tensions between national and international human rights law.

Despite some past modifications to the Traveller image, when it comes to regimes of representation, it seems that there is still a gap between the 'wild poetic tinker' and the Traveller as a real person in Irish society – from the embodiments and romantic symbols of a pre-colonial past in the times of the Celtic Literary Revival via becoming a morally suspect group and a counter-cultural threat in a nationalist bourgeois country on its way to modernisation to present-day representations as either criminals or 'fascinating people in an extraordinary secret world', as the producers of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* describe the Traveller community. Self-representations are rare and others seldom represent Travellers as 'just themselves', although some well-intended attempts have been made recently. A powerful regime of truth, as Hayes (cf. 2006: 7) argues, cannot be easily deconstructed, not even from those who would do so.

The importance of such images, created from and for the 'outside', lies in the fact that they are often the only source of information the majority population gets about Travellers. Media representation might be the only 'reality' there is, or as Nichols once said: "*The reality of news takes precedence over the news of reality.*" (1991: 128) Collective representations of the 'Other', imparted in the earlier part of the twentieth century by oral tradition and folklore, are now sustained through the media and the arts. According to Mayall, this is crucial when attempting to understand the

relationship between a mainstream community and groups considered as marginal: “*Stereotypical images of groups affect how they are seen, how they are treated and the expectations that are held of them in terms of behaviour and abilities.*” (2004: 15)

## 2 Representation and contestation brought together: methods of inquiry

*“Anthropological research, with its emphasis on seeing the world as others see it, is correctly a response to the realities and concerns of the researched rather than the imposition of one's own; it is interactive and idiosyncratic.”*

(Sinéad Ní Shúinéar)

The goal of the theoretical framework was to unveil the manner in which Travellers are represented within a discourse of 'Otherness' in Ireland, how this construction of the Traveller image has *“seeped into collective conscience”* (cf. Hayes 2006: 5) and how discrimination, prejudice and marginalisation are challenged by support and advocacy groups. That is, in a manner of speaking, the bigger picture which now shall be applied to a very specific and, not least, highly topical case. The aim of the following empirical part of this paper is to examine how the social discourses are being materialised in the documentary series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, how Travellers and Romani people are represented in the show, if and how the institutionalised Traveller image is perpetuated and how, in consequence, the way of representation is contested.

Before the results of the analysis are presented in detail in Chapter 3, I am going to outline how the data collection has been approached methodologically. As will become apparent, it was an experimental and individual way by this was achieved, rather than rigidly following an elaborate method. That is precisely why I would not only like to question the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methods but also give an overview of certain concepts of the subfield of visual anthropology and the engagement of anthropologists with mass media and the textual reading of film texts. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive account on these sub-disciplines of anthropology, which would exceed my authority in any case, yet the engagement with some of the theoretical considerations of the same were important to embed my approach in a larger research context.

### 2.1 Visual anthropology: the documentary image

The documentary film<sup>58</sup> as the object of the present study seems to be a complex endeavour. A documentary is defined and, more importantly in this context, perceived as non-fictional, as

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<sup>58</sup> See Trinh (1991: 33-36) for a detailed list of the characteristics of a documentary.

something authentic. A film that portrays real people in the real world with real problems. The presenter often seems to be closer to a true knowledge of the subject than anybody else. (cf. Ferguson 1998: 182) Hence, most audiences assume that documentary images are accurate representations of reality. Even filmmakers might be under the same impression, as Hampe alleges: *“Unfortunately, many people think that because they are making a film about actual events, the truth will jump inside their cameras and will automatically reveal itself on the screen to their audience. This never happens.”* (1997: 9) What happens instead is that visual texts of whatever kind are actively involved in social discursive practices and produced under certain social conditions, representing power relations. To illustrate how these social discourses are being materialised visually is the purpose of film- and television analysis. (cf. Mikos 2008: 281ff)

While most commonly associated with the production of ethnographic films and photography in connection with the dissemination and conveyance of anthropological knowledge, some anthropologists ascribe a much broader scope to visual anthropology. According to these conceptions, the subfield also includes the study of material culture such as woodcuts, paintings, sculptures, copper engravings and so forth as well as action patterns such as gestures, facial expressions, behaviour and rituals. This is based on the assumption that culture expresses itself through visible symbols. (cf. Haller 2005, Jacknis 1994, Oppitz 1989) Thus, in the broadest sense, visual anthropology devotes itself to the production, presentation and analysis of visual forms of expression and has been, if seen from this perspective, part of anthropological research since the very beginnings. As MacDougall observed: *“Anthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it.”* (1997: 276) And what to do with it can be divided into two strands, according to Banks and Morphy (cf. 1997: 1f). On the one hand, visual anthropology is concerned with the study of visual forms of whatever kind, i.e. the consumption of visual texts. On the other hand, certain technologies such as film and photography are used within the subfield to generate anthropological knowledge, i.e. the production of visual texts. Although these two activities are inherently different, there is a crucial link between them: *“The study of collective visual representations itself generates new questions about how anthropology can communicate about them.”* (MacDougall 1997: 286) This is essential for the following analysis in connection with the considerations about the filmmakers' moral obligations precisely because identifying the dominant regime of representation is indispensable for a possible creation of a different discourse and a better understanding of Traveller culture. To recognise and expose the programme as an inaccurate image of 'the Gypsy' is also crucial for the contestation and the success of the ongoing protest. (cf. Hayes 2006: 7)

The anthropological interest in film can be ascribed to fundamental similarities between the production of anthropological knowledge and the nature of observational documentaries, not least because of the *“larger moral questions that arise when one person produces and uses a recognizable image of another”*, as Ruby postulates. (cf. 2000) While there are parallels between anthropological knowledge and observational documentaries, it is quite clear that there are also crucial differences between an anthropologist, a filmmaker and, as in that specific case, a programme maker; it is also quite clear that television fulfils a role different to that of a documentary film in visual anthropology. However, what an anthropologist and a programme maker share is the 'compulsion to explain', while the latter, in addition to that, has the 'compulsion to entertain' – which they in turn share with the filmmaker. (cf. Turton 1992: 283ff., Singer 1992: 265)

Historically, positivist perspectives have been in the foreground in visual anthropology proceeding on the assumption that film or photography recordings are able to represent an objective reality. As Ruby (cf. 1982: 125) postulates, this notion stems from the idea that pictures are taken by cameras and not people. Concomitant with the crisis of representation in anthropology, positivist thoughts regarding the visual ethnographic data have been widely abandoned in favour of constructivist approaches in much the same manner as with any other ethnographic text, whereby the emphasis has shifted to the social construction of cultural reality. Ethnographic films and their very understanding as a means of communicating anthropological knowledge are constrained by the culture of those behind the camera just as much as by those in front of them. (cf. Haller 2005: 153, Ruby 1996: 1345) On a more general level, it can be argued that every image created through a camera lens is influenced by certain subjective choices, as through framing, combination, selection, accentuation and so on<sup>59</sup>. (cf. Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 16f.) This, consequently, is also part of a film analysis, as it is regarded as imperative to unveil the principles of film design and organisation.

The textual analysis of film<sup>60</sup> and other media communication systems experienced a shift in the 1980s focusing rather on the construction of meaning on the part of the audiences than the producers<sup>61</sup>. (cf. Banks 1995, Ruby 1996: 1346) We live in a world that is informed by opinion-

<sup>59</sup> Sturken and Cartwright go so far as to argue that even surveillance videos involve a certain subjective nature, as *“someone has programmed the camera to record a particular part of a space and framed that space in a particular way.”* (cf. 2001: 16)

<sup>60</sup> For a general overview on the history of the engagement and use of visual material in anthropology see for example Banks (1996), Banks and Morphy (1997), MacDougall (1997), Denzin (2008)

<sup>61</sup> Audience and reception studies came to the fore with David Morley's and Janice Radway's studies in the 1980s. To recognise that audiences make meaning meant a shift from the textual to the social, a shift to (also) focus on media consumption and interpretation. (cf. Peterson 2003: 122ff.)

forming institutions, yet their systems of representation are neither objective nor neutral. Instead, they are shaped and biased by culture, ideology, a socioeconomic class, by nation, gender and race, imparting their particular meanings. Under these premises, the documentary is one of these systems of representation, conveying a certain kind of knowledge. (cf. Denzin 2008: 417, Ruby 2000) Meanings, however, are not only created by the producers and do not lie in the work itself; meanings are established through the interpretation and experience of the viewer, which is further dependent on the context of viewing. Hence, there are complex social relationships involved in the creation of image meanings composed of the producers, the viewers, the image or text itself and the social context, which implies that there are various potential meanings inherent in an image. (cf. Hall 1997, Sturken and Cartwright 2001, Banks 1996)

For the purpose of the following analysis, this means that the aim must be to uncover the representational strategies of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* and the manner in which stereotypes and misconceptions are perpetuated, which is in effect a question of power, as the ones being represented are not the ones influencing the mass-mediated pictures. The importance of that lies in the connection between images and responses, as outlined in the theoretical considerations of this paper. Furthermore, taking into account voices of Travellers against this kind of portrayal and the direct consequences for their everyday life means to approach the ways of how viewers make meaning and the very potential that lies behind visual texts, if assumed as “*objective witnesses of reality*”. (cf. Ruby 2000)

In accordance with Kuchenbuch's notion that the documentary film is a multifarious genre and, therefore, that there are various ways of talking about and debating on it, I would like to define my approach to discussing *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* as a conflation of the political and the veristic way. The former relates to the critical analysis of the content and the way information is conveyed, keeping in mind that the documentary genre is in general regularly found in the crossfire of political disputes and so it happens to be in this specific case. The latter is concerned with authenticity and truth claims of the images, which further leads to moral questions and ethical obligations that a documentary, by virtue of its ontological status, ideally has to fulfil. (cf. 2005: 277) As a documentary engages with other people and constructs a relationship between those others and the audience, it is a genre that is significantly entangled with questions and issues of identity. (cf. Ferguson 1998: 191)

## 2.2 Mass media: the negotiation of power

In the opening sequence of the first episode of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, Billy Welch, spokesman for Romani people says the following:

*Ninety-five per cent of people in this world have had no contact with them and don't know anything about them. The only information they have on Gypsies is what certain tabloids write about them and certain TV programmes put out about them. That's the only information, which .. ninety-nine per cent of it is a load of nonsense.*

Leaving aside the fact that this statement is quite ironic if intended to promote the documentary series, it is rather in line with what well-known media theorist Marshall McLuhan once said: “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.”<sup>62</sup> Combining both statements, that is to say that the image of Travellers, formerly and presently mediated through literature, newspapers and films, is now perpetuated through a medium which reaches far more people, in no small part due to its factitious and sensationalist appearance. Therefore, the matter in question is, on the one hand, the power that lies behind the medium television for the conveyance of a knowledge about the Traveller identity that has been institutionalised over the years. On the other hand, linking to Marshall McLuhan to some extent, there is a need to question the democratic potential of mass media<sup>63</sup> and new technologies for groups and individuals to communicate and represent their own ideas – pointing towards the formation of a protest against the so-called observational documentary.

Most of us will agree with the assertion that we live in a media-saturated world. Mass media systems like television, which by definition have been designed to reach a large number of people, influence our everyday life and are increasingly part of social situations and relationships and pivotal to the way information is conveyed and power negotiated. Critiques of the mass media, mostly top-down approaches as, for example, that adopted by the Frankfurt School in the late

<sup>62</sup> I am quite aware that quoting McLuhan out of context leaves behind important notions of his theories as well as the strictures upon him. This is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this paper, yet the significance of reciting this statement will become clearer in the following elucidations.

<sup>63</sup> “The idea of a mass medium refers to the term ‘masses’, which emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe shifts in the way people live in Western industrialized countries. The masses is a term that was adopted by political economists including Karl Marx to describe social formations during the rise of industrial capitalism. The term can have negative connotations in media theory. In this sense, it implies an undifferentiated group of people with little individuality and a vast audience for the media made up of individuals who are passively accepting and uncritical of media practices and messages. The term ‘mass media’ came into common use in the post-World War II era, a period marked by the dissemination of television throughout the United States, England and much of Europe.” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 157)

twentieth century, have focused on the creation of a *mass public* or *mass society* which is dominated and controlled by the class of producers who own the means of communication, as radio, television and newspapers. In the classical Marxist sense, that is to say that ideologies – generated through means of mass communication systems – are transmitted to passive viewers. Without doubt, the media is a powerful entity with the capacity to influence thinking and circulate meaning, often blurring the difference between the real world and its representation. Television as one of the primary forms of mass media production and “*regarded by some as the ideal medium of the masses*” certainly channels power through a one-way broadcasting model, which can be described as follows:

*In this model, centralized networks and producers transmit media texts to vast numbers of listeners or viewers over a broad geographical region. These audiences are not given the chance to produce or alter the programs they receive in the first instance. [...] [T]hough viewers can change the channel or tape programs and re-evaluate or even edit them later, they have limited control over the initial content of these programs. (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 59)*

Furthermore, a medium is neither neutral nor isolated. The former bears upon McLuhan's notion that meanings cannot be separated from the specific technologies through which they are transmitted. The latter is in accordance with the view that a medium has to be seen in relation to other media forms to which they refer. (cf. *ibid.* 157) In this respect, broadcasting a documentary which claims to reveal the 'reality' of Traveller life by a popular channel has in effect the power to reach millions of viewers who are also informed through different media forms about the very same topic, keeping in mind that these portrayals are most often outsiders' views and seldom challenged. As Turton indicates, “*a story only works out, whether as entertainment [the compulsion of the programme-maker] or explanation [the compulsion of the anthropologist], because we are able to interpret the particular events and characters arranged within it by extrapolating from our pre-existing experience.*” (1992: 289) The further removed such stories are from our everyday knowledge, the more likely it is that misinterpretation and misunderstanding will prevail. (cf. *ibid.*)

Nevertheless, to approach media only as a means of domination is to leave aside the very possibility of active rather than passive consumers and the counter-hegemonic potential that the media can have. Moreover, there is a variety of media industries these days, just as there is a variety of international subcultures, special interest groups and communities, which makes talking about one

singular mass culture obsolete. The counter-view to mass-media critique “*sees communication technologies as wonderful new tools for use by the mass citizenry that will promote an open flow of information and exchange of ideas, thereby strengthening democracy. It emphasizes the potential for various individual media forms to be used by individuals and groups to advance positions of resistance or countercultural perspectives.*” (ibid. 168) In the specific context of Travellers and their representation through *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, the Internet and the World Wide Web play a crucial role for the contestation of the show. Travellers, Romani people as well as support groups and non-Travellers are protesting against the Channel 4 broadcast and have combined forces to challenge misrepresentation, which will be further elaborated on in Chapter 4. At this point, it is important for me to emphasise the idea of a constant negotiation of power and the use of certain technologies as the Internet for a multidirectional communication. Recapitulating, I would like to conclude with another statement by Sturken and Cartwright, who aptly stated:

*The media are indeed in the control of powerful identities, and they do influence our thinking. However, audiences in a wide range of cultural and national setting resist, appropriate, and transform media texts not only at the level of consumption, but as producers of new texts.* (2001: 186)

### 2.3 The interpretation of film texts: data preparation and analysis

Reminiscent of MacDougall's notion that anthropology had its problems with the question of what to do with the visual, Sutton and Wogan are pointing towards the uncertainty of many anthropologists regarding the “*studies of mass media that are not rooted in traditional fieldwork*” (2009: 4), however, they are convinced that the discipline has something to add to the interpretation of film texts and may provide fresh angles and flexible approaches. In their work on popular Hollywood movies, the anthropologists are emphasising the value of textual reading, considering the same as an important first step for further ethnographic research on the production, circulation, and reception of media texts. (cf. ibid. 1ff) In accordance with Steven Caton<sup>64</sup>, Sutton and Wogan are distinguishing between the 'reception' and 'reading' of movies, whereby the latter is not an empirical issue but “*it is largely a construction by a film analyst of the way in which a film might be apprehended from a particular spectator position.*” (ibid. 14) The construction of plausible, yet

<sup>64</sup> Steven Caton is one of the anthropologists concerned with the representation of 'other' cultures in popular films, directing his attention – in his extensive work on *Lawrence of Arabia* – to questions of orientalism and stereotypes of the Arab 'Other' in the film.

not definitive, readings of movies with the addition of employing anthropological theories and questions is both the approach chosen by Sutton and Wogan (cf. *ibid.*) and the aim of the present paper<sup>65</sup>.

There are quite a number of elaborate methods and models for the analysis of fictional films, which can at least partly be adapted to the analysis of a documentary. (cf. Denzin 2008, Hackett 1996, Kuchenbuch 2005, Mikos 2008) There are also various theoretical approaches concerned with the documentary genre and ethnographic films, although these are more often characterised by the wish to develop certain criteria to be taken into account for analyses than by a specific method, which is understandable if one accepts the notion that it is a multifarious genre. (Grant and Sloniowski 1998, Hohenberger 1998, Kiener 1999, Kuchenbuch 2005, Renov 1993). However, there is not one single specific method or model that I would consider suitable for the objective of this paper – the analysis of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* in combination with the observation of the so-called *Big Fat Gypsy Protest*, bearing in mind the specific research question of how the series perpetuates a certain Traveller image and which implications this might have for the everyday lives of Travellers. Thus, my methods of inquiry have to be understood as experimental in nature: as a conflation of, firstly, the use of selected criteria for the analysis of visual texts and, secondly, classical qualitative content analysis as used in the social sciences. Both were applied to the documentary series, whereas only the latter was used for the analysis of the ongoing protest against the series – as it presents itself in various social networks and newspaper coverage. In addition to that, the corresponding book to *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* was partly used to critically examine the concepts of the producers, hence the portrayal of Travellers. Taking everything into account, my sampling is composed of 1) the first series, consisting of six episodes of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*; 2) the corresponding book *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*; 3) the online discourse regarding the series; 4) scholarly approaches concerned with the representation of Travellers in the media.

After the engagement with theoretical approaches, I started from the general reflection that a film or television analysis is characterised by a systematic, methodologically controlled and self-reflexive engagement with the visual text – be it a film, a television programme or a group of this type. A distinction has to be made between analysis, description and interpretation. The latter two can be seen as the main components of the former and are indispensable for the same. *Description* is a linguistic approach requiring to put into words what can be seen on the screen. The general aim of

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<sup>65</sup> Sutton and Wogan see only two requirements for this kind of analysis: “the text must be popular with some audiences, and the analyst must believe that it's possible to say something culturally interesting about it.” (2009: 142)

an *analysis* is to systematically identify the components and, in a second step, to relate them to the whole text as well as the context. Finally, the *interpretation* embeds the conclusions of the analysis in a theoretical and historical context. (cf. Mikos 2008: 78)

My analytical procedure began by closely and repeatedly watching the documentary, following the principles of a critical visual analysis as suggested by Denzin (cf. 2008: 427). By combining a *realistic and subversive reading*, I set up leading questions for the analysis as well as a film protocol<sup>66</sup> in order to conduct a structured micro-analysis of every sequence I considered important for answering my research questions. According to Denzin (cf. *ibid.* 423ff.) images can be read on two distinguishable levels: *Realistic reading/interpretation* treats visual representations as images of reality, asking what the specific representation says about a particular phenomenon. *Subversive reading/interpretation* is lead by the notion that meaning lies behind the visible surface and that visual representations are shaped by presuppositions and contortions. Both readings have to be combined and revised.

Indispensable for the structured content analysis – closely following Mayring (cf. 2007, 2008) – was the transcription of the narrated text, always taking into account the potentially important connection of the visual and the speech, which is possibly more important in the documentary than in any other film genre. The objective of a qualitative content analysis<sup>67</sup> or textual analysis as used in the social sciences is to systematically approach communication data for the purpose of reducing complexity. Regarding the documentary analysis this also means to critically examine the characteristics of the film structure, the principles of construction and taking into account the overall design. It is imperative to question the adequacy of approaching a specific topic and reveal what is preferably shown and what is not. (cf. Kuchbuch 2005: 282ff.)

Alongside reading the book – which is more or less the written equivalent to the series – and thereby taking a closer look at the language used, I have analysed a specified amount of contesting assertions made by Travellers, Romani people and support groups. The analytical categories devised for the content analysis of both the series and the protest overlap, yet are not identical. They shall be brought together in the next two chapters, however, making a clear distinction between 'inside' accounts and my own.

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<sup>66</sup> There are various suggestions in the particular models of film analysis (cf. Kuchbuch 2005; Mikos 2008) how to design a film protocol. I adjusted those to my research questions, which ultimately was subdivided in six segments: 1) sequence, 2) content, 3) music/other, 4) images narrative/camera focus 5) verbal narrative, 6) notes.

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed description of the method see Mayring (2007)

## 2.4 Statement of grounds: strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methods

The media, in this case a documentary series broadcast on television as well as the Internet and the World Wide Web as a means of joining forces against the former, is discussed as both a tool of communication and an instrument of research. First of all, that is to say that “*it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are. There is no escape from the politics of representation [...]*”. (Hall et al. 1996: 473) The media convey a certain kind of knowledge, they shape and define values and are more present in our everyday life than ever. Secondly, if we understand visual representations as cultural and symbolic forms in which characteristics of social life are inherent, it is only through a critical analysis that those can be unveiled. (cf. Denzin 2008: 428) Hence, the strength of analysing means of communication, such as visual representations, lies in its potential to critically examine what is often accepted at face value and what is strongly linked to unequal power relations. To quote Marshall McLuhan once again: “*We don't know who discovered the water, but we know it wasn't the fish*” (Hall 1997a: 3), meaning, if we are constantly surrounded by something, like media images, we may take that as something natural or inevitable, uncritically accepting it as reality. It is only through the exposure of the constructed nature of the Traveller image – which Stuart Hall refers to as the *interrogation of the image* (cf. *ibid.*) – that a new and more inclusive discourse might be brought into being. That is, in effect, what Travellers are trying to do with their contestation; that is also where Cultural Studies comes in by providing important models questioning the role of the media and making visible what is underrepresented; and, that is where anthropology has to offer its “*disciplinary attention to the ways people are constituted as 'same' and 'other'*” (Peterson 2003: 10), in a combined effort to counterbalance a democratic deficit in the representation of 'Others'.

I will allow myself to conclude this chapter in an informal and personal rather than technical manner, trying to sum up why I have chosen this kind of research despite its potential weaknesses. To begin with, the topic in question is a highly topical issue. Channel 4 is currently broadcasting the second series of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, the protest against the programme is increasing, new advertisements<sup>68</sup> have outraged Travellers and support groups and have evoked new reproaches. Thus, my research may be seen as incomplete as I had to choose certain episodes for analysis and could not take all responses on the part of those who object to the series into account. During my

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<sup>68</sup> For the latest series, Channel Four advertised with the slogan “*Bigger. Fatter. Gypsier.*” The London Travellers' Unit and members of the London assembly initiated a street protest and demanded from Channel Four to remove the posters and apologise. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) received over 300 complaints, all of which were, for the time being, dismissed. Members and legal representatives of the *Irish Traveller Movement in Britain* (ITMB) are currently pleading for a reassessment of the decision and a renewed formal investigation. (cf. URL 14)

stay in Ireland, I talked to Irish citizens and repeatedly discussed the show on an informal level. Unfortunately, limited by time and resources, I did not get the chance to talk to Travellers or protesters in person, therefore the content analysis of voices against the documentary series is restricted to what can be found online. Furthermore, the film analysis focuses on the representation of the content, not so much on the content itself. In other words, topics addressed in *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* such as education, gender roles, marginalisation, nomadism and so forth, are not considered as such, yet still taken into account as part of the analysis of the manner in which background-(mis)information is conveyed. Most certainly, there would have been other ways to approach methodologically. The conflation of models for a film analysis and the structured content analysis according to Mayring, however, seemed appropriate for processing my research questions. If the way how images function in terms of narrative, genre or spectacle is properly understood, as Dyer (cf. 2002: 2) indicates, we can get to an understanding of why they turn out the way they do. In keeping with Worth (cf. 1981: 193f.), visual documents are of use only if we are aware of how and according to what principles we have chosen the data on which our analysis is based.

### 3 'Welcome to the Wonderful World of Big Fat Gypsy Weddings': an analysis

*“Every girl wants the wedding of her dreams. Every bride wants the perfect dress. But there is one group of people in Britain who want perfection more than most. This is the extravagant world of 21<sup>st</sup> century Gypsy and Traveller weddings, where ancient traditions and modern fashions collide...”*

The documentary series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* has attracted a lot of attention of ambivalent nature in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. According to the producers, the series “*paints a revealing portrait of the secretive and surprising world of gypsies and travellers in Britain today*”<sup>69</sup>. According to Irish and English Travellers as well as Romani people, however, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* is perceived as “*a program that glorifies stereotypes and misconceptions about Europe’s most discriminated minority group*”. (URL 15) Hence, on the one hand, Channel 4 – broadcasting the so-called observational documentary – prides itself on the huge success the series has achieved, appealing to over nine million viewers. On the other hand, unveiling the controversy, the show has outraged Travellers and Romani people as they see themselves to be subjected to misconceptions, misinterpretations, shallow depictions and, as a consequence thereof, discrimination and offence.

Produced by Firecracker Films, the stand-alone episode *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* was first broadcast by Channel 4 in 2010 as a part of the *Cutting Edge* documentary series, screening documentaries on social and political issues from various producers since the 1990s<sup>70</sup>. A follow-up series of five episodes, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, began to air in 2011 – becoming one of the highest rated programmes based on the number of viewers Channel 4 has ever had. Two 'special' series – *Big Fat Royal Gypsy Weddings* and *My Big Fat Gypsy Christmas* – were additionally aired in 2011 and were followed by the *Big Fat Gypsy Easter Celebrations* special in April 2012. A second series consisting of six episodes started in February 2012 and is supposed to be followed by a third at the end of the year, as Channel 4 has announced. In view of the fact that there are also Romani people and Irish Travellers living in the United States, there is, unsurprisingly, yet another version of the original on screen since April 2012. The channel TLC, airing the programme, introduces it as follows: “*You’ve been watching 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding' and thinking that gypsies live in England, Ireland and other parts of Europe. But brace yourselves – there are American gypsies,*

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<sup>69</sup> Description on the DVD cover.

<sup>70</sup> The British public-service television broadcaster Channel 4 is highly regarded for its serious documentary and current affairs programming. (cf. Ferguson 1998: 182)

*and we've got access into their lives like no one else can show you.”* (URL 16) Thus, the show about the dresses and the drama continues in the United States and expects the same success as in England and Ireland with *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*.

On top of that, there are written equivalents to the series. The book, sharing the same name *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, was published in 2011 'because' “*there is so much more to these fascinating people and their culture and this book draws readers even further into an extraordinary secret world*”, as can be read on the gaudy, glittery book-cover. And not only did the Travellers and Romani people participating in the show become famous – so did Thelma Madine, the “*dressmaker of choice to the gypsy community*”. In the book she is described as someone “*who knows Irish traveller women better than anyone outside the community*”. (p.20) Since she kept being asked, according to herself, to tell more about her and *her* gypsy stories, she has written a book: *Tales of the Gypsy Dressmaker*. Channel 4 is currently broadcasting a new documentary series, called *Thelma's Gypsy Girls*, in which she trains young Traveller and Romani women to create wedding dresses. Thelma Madine, presented to the audience as the expert on 'gypsy culture', will be taken up again in the analysis at various points.

As becomes apparent, there is a continually growing market for spinoff products of the originally intended one-off *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, all promising further success. My analysis, however, is only based on the first series including the television pilot and the five follow-up episodes – with a length of approximately 45 minutes each – as well as the book *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. According to Denzin (cf. 2008: 427), a critical visual analysis begins with looking at the object of study in its entirety. That is where I would like to start from in the following examination, in order to provide an insight into the structure and overall design of the first series and the book.

### **3.1 The revealing portrait of Gypsies: approaching the overall design**

*The series uses extraordinary, extravagant rite of passage celebrations including weddings, communions and christenings to offer a window into the world of the gypsy and traveller communities. Each stand alone episode offers different insights into subjects including attitudes toward gender roles and education, the customs of courtship and their often difficult relationship with 'gaugers' (non-travellers). Through the experiences of an unforgettable cast of characters, the series explores the remarkable rituals, traditions and*

*beliefs held by this minority group to tell the story of gypsy and traveller life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. Warm, intelligent, engrossing and funny Big Fat Gypsy Weddings tells intimate stories on an epic scale, laying bare an exotic unseen Britain that exists right on our doorstep.*

This quote is an extract from the description as it reads on the DVD cover, mirroring how the show is presented to the (potential) audience. These outlined intentions on the part of the producers will be used in the following in a comparative manner to examine how they were implemented and, in further consequence, if the documentary delivers what it promises.

Apart from the pilot *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, each episode begins with the same opening sequence, in which the narrator gives an account of what the audience has to expect from the series, while bringing in short sequences from different episodes, appropriated for the particular theme. Fast-paced violin music in the background accentuates images of an old-style horse-drawn caravan, adolescents riding through a river and washing their horses in the same, older women drinking tea outside their caravans and children gathering around a campfire, while the narrator explains in a rather melodramatic and evocative manner: *“For hundreds of years, the Traveller way of life was one of ancient traditions and simple tastes.”* This is followed by images of young women belly-dancing in sexy, pink outfits and others with enormous and frilly dresses, while the narrator continues:

*Then their world collided with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (...) With unprecedented access to the UK's most secretive communities (...) this series will take you to the very heart of Gypsy life, through the biggest celebrations in the Traveller calendar (...) from the most extravagant children's parties (...) to the biggest weddings on Earth. (...) And from birth all the way to the grave. Over five episodes, this series will explore unique aspects of Gypsy and Traveller life (...) in a world where a man is a man (...) a woman knows her place (...) and courtship blossoms in an unusual way.*

The opening sequence of the first episode concludes with the notion already encountered in various other portrayals of Irish Travellers<sup>71</sup>: *“But this is a community under threat (...) fighting for its very survival.”* The melodramatics reach their climax before the episode begins: *“How long can the party last?”*, the narrator asks, seeing Traveller culture on its road to extinction as ancient traditions – also referred to as the exotic on Britain's doorstep – are clashing with the modern world.

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<sup>71</sup> See Chapter 1.3

Basically, each episode follows different couples on their way to their wedding, while edging in other 'milestones', such as the Holy Communion, 'rituals' like *grabbing*<sup>72</sup>, 'traditions', as for example the Appleby Horse Fair and bare-knuckle fighting, as well as other 'beliefs', as drawing on perceptions on education, gender roles or divorce. The titles are denotative in giving some indication of what the specific episode is about. Episode 1, titled *Born To Be Wed*, starts with introducing Thelma Madine, “*the Travelling community's dressmaker of choice*”, who henceforth acts as the expert on gypsy culture. Apart from presenting the 'ritual' of *grabbing* in a West London car park and going along with the Traveller couple Josie and Swanley who are about to get married, the first episode looks at a Holy Communion, where little Margaretha, as the only Traveller participating in the school communion, stands out from the crowd with her extravagant dress. Thelma lets the audience know that a Holy Communion “*is like a dress rehearsal for their wedding*” and although she thinks that this dress must be really uncomfortable, she has “*never once heard a Travelling child complain of pain, discomfort or anything. As long as it looks good, they're happy*”.



Dressmaker Thelma Madine

Photo: Neale Haynes for the Observer

Focus of the next episode, *No Place Like Home*, is, on the one hand, the wedding between Romani Pat and non-Traveller Sam – or 'the often difficult relationships with gaugers' – and, on the other hand, the eviction of two campsites, namely Dale Farm<sup>73</sup> and Hovefield. These two stories

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<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 3.3.2

<sup>73</sup> See also Chapter 1.4

combined, this is the episode which especially emphasises the notion that Traveller culture is threatened by the modern world: *“Tonight we witness a community struggling to cling on to their traditional way of life, as the modern world threatens to destroy their customs, livelihoods and even their homes (...) How much longer can they preserve their unique culture?”* the narrator asks and further explains that *“with the outside world intruding, Travellers are afraid that their old-fashioned traditions will disappear”*. So, on the one hand, the episode illustrates that the maintenance of living together on a caravan site is endangered by evictions and, on the other, that a Traveller is breaking with their 'tradition' to *“keep their way of life free of outside influence”*. Their wedding made it into the newspapers, presenting it as a Romeo and Juliet like love story, because this *“romance goes against everything the travelling world is working for – to keep their traditions and history alive”*, as the *Daily Mail* elucidates. (cf. URL 17)

Episode 3, with the inappropriate title *Desperate Housewives*, *“reveals what it's really like to be a Traveller woman – before, during and after her wedding day.”* In sum, the life of a Traveller woman is a life of drudgery, according to the show. But, as Thelma puts it, *“the women know they're gonna be dominated anyway”*, hence *“Traveller girls accept domestic violence more than the country girls”*. I will leave this statement without further comment at this point. However, while this episode broaches a lot of important subjects, such as education, illiteracy, domestic violence, divorce as well as social and behavioural norms in terms of gender roles, it misses the opportunities to deal with these issues in greater depth and see behind the curtain. Instead, Thelma is the one conveying her expertise to the audience once again.

This however changes in Episode 4, titled *Boys Will Be Boys* – a topic to which Thelma has, apparently, nothing to contribute. In the foreground of this episode is Paddy Doherty, Irish Traveller and former bare-knuckle fighter and one of the characters who came to fame through *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. He is also one of the Travellers – although he participated himself – who criticised the show and the producers for being exploitive<sup>74</sup>. *Boys Will Be Boys* is all about the 'fighting culture amongst Travellers' and one 'independent' woman who does not fit the tradition, as she earns her own money, however *“sacrificing her independence for the sake of a man”* in the end. The narrator lays bare the content of Episode 4, in which they 'go beyond the bling' *“as we enter the world of the Traveller man (...) where they work hard, play harder and cling on to their old-fashioned values. (...) And we witness the full force of their often painful traditions.”* The images that accompany the

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<sup>74</sup> The *Daily Mail* quotes Doherty as follows: *“It's all nonsense, it's just for a joke. The crew sort of tells you what to say and you play along. Danny Dyer made me out to be a very different person than I was. It was just for the cameras, it's not true.”* (URL 18)

narrative of the opening sequence are a young Traveller man who explains (although rather ironically) that his bride belongs to him, bare-knuckle fights and men getting drunk in a pub.

After exploring the 'tough life' of a Traveller man, the brides are back in Episode 5 and with them Thelma Madine, who encounters the secretiveness of the Traveller community, struggling with a bride who has lied to her about the wedding date. The second major topic in this episode is the Appleby Horse Fair where the drama continues, as Travellers encounter a massive force of police and see the event at risk, making visible the (intended) content of Episode 5, namely *Bride and Prejudice*: “Tonight we discover racism towards Gypsies is alive and kicking (...) but in true gypsy style, they're fighting back”, explains the narrator.

As already mentioned above, the book *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* can be described as the written equivalent of the first series, introducing some additional Travellers and continuing to tell the stories of characters who participated in the show. As quite aptly stated in the introduction, “[g]ypsies and travellers have become settled society's bogeyman, our bogeyman. It's easy to see them as dirty, criminal, violent, tax-avoiding and antisocial because that's what we are repeatedly told on TV and in newspapers. Because we don't know who they really are.” (p.2) But after some Travellers and Romani people 'opened up their lives' to them for the TV series, the book, seemingly, offers its readers “a real insight into a little-understood world, one that's in genuine danger of disappearing.” (p.1)

### **3.2 The performance of a task: making a documentary thrilling**

*“Every spectator is a coward or a traitor.”*  
(Frantz Fanon)

*Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* presents itself as an observational documentary. This genre is commonly associated with the introduction of a lighter-weight and more convenient filming equipment – a hardware which allows the filmmaker to 'be around' the processes, actions and events they want to document instead of telling, through the use of commentary, what the people being filmed think or interpreting the meanings of their behaviour. In general, the development of an observational documentary style – a way of 'speaking with' instead of 'speaking for' – acknowledges that opinions of experts and visions of film-makers need to be reduced in favour of 'inside' voices and the

personal views of the subjects being filmed. (cf. Ferguson 1998: 191ff., Ruby 1991: 54) However, as Ruby (cf. *ibid.*) remarks, the empowerment of the subjects is more illusionary than actual, as the editorial control still remains in the hands of the filmmaker. In the case of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* – and as is the case with most television documentaries – the observational mode is combined with the so-called 'Voice of God' commentary, which returns the authority to the producers who, at the same time, purport to convey the 'truth' and offer a window to the reality of Traveller life. While it is stated in the introduction of the book, that the participants of the TV series “*just want to demonstrate that gypsies and travellers are largely decent, clean, hard-working, honourable people who live by our laws and their own strict moral codes*” (p.2), *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* puts the emphasis on something different, namely the “*big fat frocks, the flashy carriages and the wild wedding receptions*” (p.3), as it is, quite ironically, stated just two lines below. In this context, it may be useful to refer to the distinction between a film-maker and a programme-maker, as suggested by David Turton (cf. 1992: 288): the fundamental feature of the culture of broadcasting is that a television programme is geared to an unknown and uncommitted (to the subject of the programme) audience numbered in millions. The attention of the 'floating' viewers, which are 'hooked' while channel hopping, has to be won and retained by the programme maker in order for the programme to succeed<sup>75</sup>. The particularity of the broadcasting audience is similarly stressed by Singer (cf. 1992: 265) who notes that a television image is, first of all, constructed to be seen only once, and, secondly, by a non-specialist public. Traveller activist Rosaleen McDonagh phrases this notion in a more rigorous manner: “*The realities of life for Travellers are too boring for tabloid TV. (...) Like all tabloid telly, it needs to be flashy, tacky and quick.*” (cf. URL 19) Some of the facets that managed to attract over nine million viewers shall be outlined now.

### 3.2.1 Dramaturgy

The brief account of the show's overall design already indicates some of the representational and compositional strategies the producers use. A few examples will provide some insight regarding composition, the combination of sequences and, concomitant, the passages from one to another, as well as the connection of the visual and speech.

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<sup>75</sup> Turton cites a CBS executive in this regard: “*I'm not interested in culture. I'm not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That's whether people watch the programme. That's my definition of good, that's my definition of bad.*”

At the very beginning of the pilot, the narrator states: *“This film follows four Gypsy and Traveller weddings and finds a community still at odds with a world that judges on face value.”* At the same time, the camera points at girls who are dancing in tantalising dresses<sup>76</sup> and the audience gets to see a close-up of the bare bellies and legs, while Thelma further elaborates: *“People could mistake them for being prostitutes because their dresses are so short, but they have got the highest morals of anybody, any culture that I know.”* After the opening sequence, Thelma is introduced and before the narrator gives an account of how many 'Gypsies' – ignoring that this term is not mutually interchangeable with the term 'Travellers' – are living in Britain, the dressmaker starts to talk about her experience:

*Working with Travellers, I can only say, erm, I probably had the same idea as everybody else at the beginning. I can honestly say I was frightened of them, because of the way they speak to you. They don't really give you much personal space, so you do tend to back off a little bit and I was frightened of them*<sup>77</sup>.

In the first four minutes of this stand-alone episode, the audience gets to see half-naked girls dancing who could be mistaken for prostitutes according to Thelma, massive wedding dresses presented as the most important thing for every Traveller woman and witnesses the characterisation by a non-Traveller stating that everybody is frightened of Travellers because of their behaviour.

While 'extraordinary, extravagant rite of passage celebrations' are the core of the show, each episode is supposed to offer different insights into a variety of subjects, as quoted above. In Episode 2, the eviction of Dale Farm and Hovefield is among those subjects. Evictions from halting sites have been a pressing matter for Travellers, especially since the 1960s, when settlement programmes were developed in order to solve the 'itinerant problem'. Eviction continues to be one of the divisive issues on the political agenda in Ireland regarding the Traveller community. As an eviction procedure is included in one episode of the series, the audience also gets a spark of inside experience and how those affected deal with the situation. Margaret, a Dale Farm resident talks about the circumstances:

*About seven and a half year we've been here, fighting our court cases for five year, lost everything, and now they said they just want us out. They're gonna bring in the big*

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<sup>76</sup> This is what the book describes as 'Cinderella's soft-porn dance moves'. (p.27)

<sup>77</sup> Thelma contradicts herself in the same episode, when she states: *“I didn't think there was any prejudice towards Travellers and Gypsies until I started doing what I'm doing.”*

*machinery, the big bailiffs, and smash everything. All these bricks, everything that you can see here, they want the bailiffs to destroy that and leave us homeless, after seven year. We put up a hard fight and they won't listen to us. They don't want to know cos we're Travellers and they don't want us here. They want us off.*

The focus, however, immediately skips to Margaret's daughter, who is about to have her First Communion. After the little girl is filmed while her cousins are explaining to her what an eviction actually means, namely that they are going to have to live on the side of the road, the fast-paced violin music opens up a new sequence, in which Thelma is busily engaged in making one of her extravagant dresses. Fluent passages are rare in the series and although such sensitive subjects are raised repeatedly, they are constantly cut off right in the middle in favour of the enormous dresses and the 'expertise' Thelma has to offer.

Especially conspicuous is the combination of the chosen topic and the specific stories being told in Episode 5. *Bride and Prejudice*, the last episode of the first series, focuses on discrimination and racism. While the narrator starts to explain what the episode is about – that “*racism towards Gypsies is alive and kicking*”, – the audience gets to see a sequence in which Thelma is furiously talking on the phone with one of the brides: “*You've lied to me right the way along the line, so how can I trust you?*” Priscilla, a young Traveller woman from Northern Ireland lied to Thelma about the wedding date, as turns out later, and although the dressmaker knows the reason for her secretiveness<sup>78</sup>, she feels betrayed and is worried about loosing out on that wedding. It is highly questionable if a conflict between a Traveller and a non-Traveller caused by distrustful behaviour on the part of the latter and already brought in in the opening sequence fulfils the purpose of dispelling negative images sustained by the press, as the series claims to do. On the one hand, it is shown at various points throughout the whole first series, that organising a wedding can be a difficult task for Travellers, as venues often get cancelled as soon as they mention the Traveller background – thereby revealing how discrimination is experienced on an everyday level. On the other hand, these presentations are reduced by simplistic and counter-productive statements, which the audience is asked to accept as an expert's explanations. Reminiscent of *The Riches*<sup>79</sup>, where Traveller culture is equated with criminal behaviour, Thelma explains to the audience that a certain

<sup>78</sup> Thelma explains as follows: “*All the years I've been working with Travellers (..) when I first worked with them I thought it was, why are they so secretive over everything? Why don't they tell you anything? They never give you a direct date. But since I've got to know them, you realise why they've got to be so vigilant. Because as soon as venues find out they're Travellers, they will cancel. They will give them all the excuses in the world, but they'll cancel on them.*”

<sup>79</sup> See Chapter 1.3.3

kind of behaviour is somehow inherent in Traveller culture. When talking about Priscilla's behaviour, she states: “[...] *And she's basically just kicked us in the teeth really and lied to us. Well, I'd call it a lie, where they probably wouldn't call it a lie, you know, that's (..) they're used to being like that*<sup>80</sup> [...]”. When talking about discrimination in the pilot, Thelma excels herself when explaining how Travellers deal with prejudice: “*They just take it on the chin. They just think it's a way of life. They deal with that every single day of their lives.*” While they certainly have to deal with it every day, they definitely do not 'just take it on the chin', as the very existence of Traveller support movement and actions of resistance reveal.

The second main story of Episode 5 is the Appleby Horse Fair, described by the narrator as “*a huge gathering, where Gypsies don't have to hide themselves away*”. The camera team is following Romani Gypsy John on his way to Appleby, who explains the importance of that fair:

*We don't get classed as citizens in our own country, so, we don't really feel that we belong anywhere. But we feel that we belong here. We meet here and gather here once a year. This place is sacred to us. As long as there's an Earth, it will exist, cos they'll never get rid of this one. We wouldn't allow it. We would literally lay our lives down for it. It's that important to us.*<sup>81</sup>

Keeping in mind that this episode focuses on prejudice *towards* Travellers, the piece of background information the audience gets, is that “*at last year's fair, the police made over 100 arrests, for offences ranging from public disorder to selling counterfeit goods*”, which is followed by a conversation between John and Ian, a non-Traveller and Pub landlord who put up wire meshes on the Pub's windows, causing one Traveller to ask: “*Are we chickens, or are we dogs, or ... ?*”. Ian explains that albeit he finds members of the Traveller community the most interesting people he has ever met, there is a small minority he would rather not see, but that has nothing to do with the community itself. John retorts: “*Probably the same with every culture of people.*”

Dramas and conflicts are very much in the foreground in one episode supposed to explore the sensitive topic of discrimination and racism towards Travellers. However, the presentation of distrustful and criminal behaviour are in the fashion of other representations in Irish popular culture, where a 'trouble-maker' image is often imposed on Travellers. The principle of a sensationalist style

<sup>80</sup> Ian Hancock, scholar and Romani activist, points out, that dishonesty is also a fundamental characteristic of the stereotypes surrounding Roma. (cf. 1999)

<sup>81</sup> It stands to reason, that this is the notion the narrator describes in the opening sequence as “*but in true Gypsy style, they're fighting back.*”

is adhered to over the course of the whole first series of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* at the expense of background information and approaching 'the very heart of gypsy life'. How the 'exotic on Britain's doorstep' is presented in order to be compatible with the aim of a programme maker to 'hook' an uncommitted audience shall be outlined by way of further examples. In this regard it is disputable if certain topics, often delicate and sensitive, are approached appropriately if considered in respect of the public discourse about Travellers<sup>82</sup>.

### 3.2.2 Sensationalism

*“Much like a car wreck from which you cannot look away”*

(Justina Uram Mubangu, The Human Rights Blog)

The series – how could it be otherwise – is devoted to the spectacular wedding dresses and the 'biggest weddings on earth'. If the assumptions made by the producers of the smash-hit series are taken into consideration, these extravagant outfits and celebrations have to be the very heart of Gypsy and Traveller life, because *“from the day a Traveller girls is born, the preparations begin for the biggest day of her life – her wedding day”*. According to Thelma, *every* Traveller girl wants the biggest dress, the biggest wedding cake ever baked and the competition for that is 'astronomical'. Some of the dresses Thelma makes weigh more than the bride, causing blisters on the hips and even lifelong scars, which Traveller girls are proud of however, as Thelma explains, because *“the bigger the scar, the bigger the dress”*. These dresses and the 'bling' certainly are eye-catchers and the latest series promised the viewers to be even *“bigger, fatter and gypsier”*, with dresses more outrageous than ever<sup>83</sup>. What comes after being mesmerised by these outfits are questions about the costs of such extravagant wedding celebrations. At the end of the pilot, the narrator explains that none of the customers they spoke to would disclose how much they paid for their dress and that Thelma does not discuss her deals either. This request for secrecy regarding money on part of the Travellers participating is not really respected throughout the whole series. Daniel – the interviewer accompanying the crew – still tries to pump information from Thelma. She however sticks to the commitment, either out of respect or fear:

<sup>82</sup> With regard to analytical categories for documentaries, Kuchenbuch (cf. 2005: 286) suggests to take into account the relation between ends and means, including without limitation to look at the manner in which certain topics or problems are approached and whether this is, in further consequence, an appropriate perspective – in this context also looking at the corresponding public discourses. Furthermore, it has to be analysed if a correct rendition of facts is granted.

<sup>83</sup> See also <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2101255/Big-Fat-Gypsy-Weddings-returns-outrageous-dresses-closer-look-life-traveller.html>

*Now if I told you that, I would definitely have to kill you. I couldn't tell you that because I've got .. the Travellers would kill me. So I couldn't tell you that, really. And you will never find a Traveller that will talk about money, ever, to anybody. It's all hush-hush.*

In Episode 2, Daniel tries again and asks Thelma how much a dress costs. She retorts: *“How much do you earn, Daniel?”* – *“I can't tell you that”* – *“Well, there you go. Tit for tat, Daniel .. I couldn't tell you. That's, er .. customer confidentiality. I would be ostracised completely if I told you that. Nobody'd ever trust me again.”* Nonetheless, the money issue is raised again at various points. In Episode 4, for example, Daniel asks Paddy Doherty how much they are paying for the furniture he and his wife Roseanne are about to buy, while the camera points at price tags. The narrator already explained beforehand that *“Traveller men are notoriously secretive about money”*. Paddy is not willing to tell Daniel the costs, but neither was Daniel himself when asked how much he earns. An artificial difference between Travellers and non-Travellers is established. Speculations about how Travellers can afford such luxury, presented in the show as part of *every* Traveller's life, goes hand in hand with the public discourse and the Traveller image that suggests that Traveller culture is a culture of crime. While the series at no point reveals the costs for the weddings that are filmed, there is one tabloid newspaper which satisfies the audience's curiosity. The *Daily Mail*, frequently reporting on *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, clarifies what the show hides: *“Typical Total Cost: £142,230. That's six times the price of an average non-gypsy wedding. And all paid in cash, naturally”*, advising the readers already in the headline: *“just don't ask where the cash comes from”*. (URL 20)



Bride-to-be Bridget and her best woman in the 'extravagant' dresses.

Photo: Channel 4

Aside from the spectacular outfits and attracting viewers by showing six-year-olds getting a spray-tan before their Holy Communion in Episode 2, young Traveller women in tantalising dresses at a hen party in Episode 1 and Travellers getting thrown out of a paint-balling site due to their 'reckless behaviour' in Episode 3 – all among other examples presented with a sensationalist appearance – it is also the more serious topics which are brought to the audience in a similar manner. As mentioned earlier, Episode 2 is about a marriage between a non-Traveller and a Traveller as well as the eviction of halting sites. The narrator explains to the audience that tough laws interfere with the traditional life on the road and while every council is required to assess the needs of the Traveller community, Travellers *believe* that there are not enough sites provided. That this is a fact and not only something they *believe*, becomes even explicit in the narrator's comment: *“With locals objecting, up to 90% of planning requests by Travellers are turned down, so they often buy land, build without permission and live there illegally.”* While the focus is actually on the First Holy Communion of a girl, who is living on Dale Farm with her family, the eviction is a good opportunity for the producers to create tension and make the documentary thrilling. Accentuated by the already known melodramatic and evocative intonation of the narrator and a language appropriate to the rendition of an enthralling story, the viewers get to observe the eviction of Hovefield:

*Dale Farm is just one of hundreds of sites nationally waiting for the axe to fall (...) Three miles down the road at a smaller site called Hovefield, D-day has already arrived. (...) After years of battling for planning permission ended in failure, the council served the residents with a 28-day notice to leave. But the Travellers stayed. And now the bailiffs have moved in to destroy their homes.*

While the camera is pointed at the excavators demolishing the site, interviewer Daniel talks to twelve-year-old Jerry:

Daniel: *Have you ever seen anything like this before?*

Jerry: *Once or twice, but I only got a little glimpse. This is much worse. .. I've never seen diggers this size in my life. .. And it's horrific, cos if it .. you don't want a child to be seeing all this, like a baby or a two.. three-year-old. They'd be seeing all this thinking, "What's going on.. what's going on?"*

Daniel: *Are you old enough to see it?*

Jerry: *Yeah. Well .. I'd say so.*

Daniel: *How old are you?*

Jerry: *12. Coming on 13.*

Daniel: *Why do you think they're doing it, Jerry?*

Jerry: *It's just because they don't like Gypsies, do they? They don't like Travellers.*

At the end of this episode, Jerry is once again asked about the eviction. Visibly worried and sad, he states:

*I think the council is being evil. It's not nice to think of the council in that way, cos sometimes you think they're nice people, but they're not at all. So .. cos sometimes they help you and give you a home, but then they go and rip up your home. They go and take your home away and then try and give you a different one that you're not used to. You're used to being on, like, in caravans and mobiles, and then they just want to go give you a flat or a house, which you're not used to and you can't live with it.*

Besides this conversation and the statement by Jerry, there is yet another situation in this episode, in which little children talk about the up-coming eviction in a rather pitiful way. A little girl explains how the state authorities proceed:

*We have to get this letter, it's called a 28-day notice, and no one out by that 20 days, 28 days, sorry, yeah a load of bulldozers comes in and digs up all the tarmac and knocks down all the walls and then burns all the chalets, oh.*

Arousing compassion seems to be one of the representational strategies by which the 'observational documentary' intends to increase the number of spectators. While giving an account of such circumstances is valuable, to sensationalise these serious subjects is only conducive to attracting viewers.

What is almost even more sensational in the same episode is the wedding “*where two different communities are about to come face to face*” and which the *Daily Mail* described as a Romeo and Juliet love story. Why this is so special is explained to the audience by Thelma:

*We're all looking forward to going to this one because this is just gonna be completely different. Nothing we've ever been to before will be like this one. (...) I know, by speaking to the Travellers, you know, they say they've nothing against obviously non-Travellers, but what they say is that they don't think anyone that isn't brought up as a Traveller could live a Traveller life. Because it is hard. It's strict. And they'll never, ever be accepted as a Traveller, just because they marry into the family.*

The presentation of this specific topic gets disrupted, however, at various points on the part of the persons involved. Groom-to-be Patrick does not see so many differences between the two communities:

*I think it's unfair to say there's difference and that we're different than them or they're different than us. I think it's very unfair to try and point out differences. What's that going to do for anyone? It's not acceptable if you ask me. We ain't different.*

Sam agrees with Pat: “*I don't see it as I'm not a gypsy and I'm marrying a gypsy. I just see it like he's my Pat and I'm marrying him.*” Also Sam's mother takes up a position which militates against the assumptions of the presenters. The question asked by the interviewer is rather in line with what has been outlined in the theoretical considerations of the present paper – namely, that it is still possible to say things about Travellers one would not dream of saying in relation to any other minority group. Referring to Sam's mother, Daniel discloses the prejudice towards Travellers: “*A*

*lot of mums would be worried by their daughter marrying a gypsy, wouldn't they?*”<sup>84</sup> Sam's mother, however, has no qualms whatsoever – she is happy for her daughter.

On the whole, serious and sensitive topics such as money, evictions, prejudice and the relationship between Travellers and non-Travellers are converted into sensationalist and attention-getting stories, not only presented in the series but also picked up by tabloid newspapers which embellish the stories on grand scale and make them even more accessible. It is not for nothing that *The Telegraph* describes the documentary as 'eye-bulgingly, jaw-slackeningly mesmerising'. The dresses and the drama attracted over nine million viewers after all.



'Looking more of a Traveller than a Traveller' - Pat and non-Traveller Sam.

Photo: Victor de Jesus

<sup>84</sup> While in this situation, Daniel takes it for granted that there has to be some suspicion when a non-Traveller marries a Traveller, he proposes his question in a different manner, when the situation is the other way round. In the pilot, he talks to Paddy Doherty about marrying within the community. Paddy states: “*You can't pick and choose who they are or what they are. But I definitely can pick one thing – it's definitely gonna be a Traveller. It won't be a country girl, not in a million thousand trillion years. And I can .. I could swear my life on that.*” Contrary to the former situation, Daniel asks: “*What is so wrong with .. country girls?*” Aside from the fact that Paddy never said that there was something wrong with country girls, it indicates the degree of prejudice towards Travellers.

In the book it is even assumed that 'gorgers' and non-Gypsies learned about Traveller customs and taboos concerning subjects ranging from sex, marriage and education to violence, money and the role of women 'for the first time'. In the next sub-chapter, taking a closer look at what kind of background information the audience receives, how this information is conveyed and by whom as well as how it is incorporated in the visual will provide an understanding and sense of what the viewer knows about 'the very heart' of Traveller culture after watching the series and what kind of information is missing for a more adequate understanding of the same.

### 3.3 The root of the matter: conveying information

*“The power of the media is nowhere more evident than in their role as mediators of information about and images of those parts of society most distant from the lives of the majority.”*

(Gross et al. 1988: 27)

Due to its status as a minority group on the margins of society, very few members of the majority population socialise with Travellers. Although it is doubtful that *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* provides the first encounter for non-Travellers with Traveller culture<sup>85</sup>, as the book states, the presentation as an observational documentary on a popular channel might have the power not only to perpetuate but to reinforce a Traveller image which has largely been established by the outside. Hence, the knowledge that is conveyed through the series has to be seen in relation to the knowledge the audience is assumed to already have regarding Travellers<sup>86</sup>. While positivist thoughts have been overcome and notions of objectivity have been challenged not only within the social sciences but within the independent documentary community, where it is accepted practice to see representations rather as an articulation of a point of view than a window to reality, the wider public might still believe that such documentaries can be objective and that they present what *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* calls 'the very heart of gypsy life'. (cf. Ruby 1991: 53) That there can be, and that there actually are, of course, other representations and images that are closer to an authentic depiction should not be neglected, but, as will become apparent, the programme is far away from portraying

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<sup>85</sup> This is true at least for Ireland and the United Kingdom. Since TLC also aired the programme in the United States, it is likely that this is true for Americans and even more disturbing, *“as American audiences are largely unfamiliar with the plight of Europe’s Roma and have little knowledge of the group’s long and painful history, which is marred by persecution, violence, slavery and genocide”* (URL 15), and are, most likely, at the same time unfamiliar with Irish Travellers and their circumstances, making it even more difficult to distinguish between the two groups, as the show makes no effort to do so.

<sup>86</sup> As already outlined above, a medium is never isolated, hence visual experience does not take place in isolation but is enriched by other memories and images. (cf. Sturken and Cartwright 2001)

the everyday lives of Travellers. Yet the declaration that this is what they do is reinforced by the specific genre they chose. There are Travellers and Romani people participating after all, being interviewed and talking about their life – they get their own voice and are given the possibility, or so it seems, to speak on their own behalf. The book lets the reader know that “*some gypsy and traveller families felt the time had come to show settled society who they really are*”. (p.2) And who they really are is furthermore explained by a narrator and a self-appointed expert on Traveller culture. As Wright (cf. 1992: 274f.) indicates, the narrator functions as a neutral and unseen expert who contextualises and supplements the images – a role that should be viewed with suspicion:

*Acting as a translator or buffer between the viewer and the subject, the narrator withholds [sic] an essential ingredient of realist cinema by impeding the identification of the viewer's ego with the subject. This has the result of limiting our empathy and keeping the subject at a safe distance. (ibid.)*

And distance, so Asch (cf. 1992: 197), tends to turn people into objects. Suspicious, or rather inappropriate, is also the vocabulary used and the manner in which certain processes and situations are described, both in the series and the book.

### **3.3.1 Language**

*My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* – this title is undeniably catchy. It is – and I am exaggerating here to make a point – somewhat reminiscent of the popular discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which the terms 'Gypsy' and 'tinker' were often used interchangeably and no distinctions were made between those two groups and other vagrants. (cf. Helleiner 2000: 37) The programme focuses to a large extent on Irish Travellers and not Romani Gypsies, however without providing any explanations of the differences between those two distinct groups. The only information provided can be found in the book, yet it focuses on surface appearances and that in a rather blatant manner:

*English, Scottish and Irish travellers proudly claim an entirely separate heritage and culture from each other and from that of Romany gypsies. However, like Romany gypsies, most English and Scottish travellers could walk into a shop, café or pub and go unnoticed. Irish travellers are different. They stand out because of their unmistakable accent: terse, throaty,*

*rapid-fire and often unintelligible to settled society. [...] Irish travellers stand out in another way: many of the girls wear skimpy and outlandish clothes – short that couldn't be shorter, bikini tops that would scream 'red alert' to the parent of any settled teenage girl. (p.18f.)*

As a matter of fact, the terms 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller' are used interchangeably at various points:

*There are between 100.000 and 300.000 Gypsies living in Britain today. The average age of British brides is 28. But Travellers marry young, and get engaged even younger (...) The vast majority of Irish Travellers are Catholic [...]. (Pilot)*

*This series will take you to the very heart of Gypsy life, through the biggest celebrations in the Traveller calender [...]. (Opening sequences)*

*To keep Traveller culture alive, if an outsider does marry into the community, they're often expected to discard their own lifestyle and adopt Gypsy ways [...]. (Episode 2)*

*Non-Traveller Sam is about to leave her own culture behind and marry into the Gypsy community (...) In an attempt to fit in, she's already adopting Traveller customs by dressing her little sister as a mini-bride. (Episode 2)*

The opening sequence of the pilot even refers to *one* group: “*But there is one group of people in Britain who want perfection more than most.*” The description of the DVD cover only identifies *one* minority group:

*Through the experiences of an unforgettable cast of characters, the series explores the remarkable rituals, traditions and beliefs held by this minority group to tell the story of gypsy and traveller life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain.*

This equation of Romani Gypsies and Irish Travellers was severely criticised by both communities, as will be discussed later on. In an attempt to defend itself Channel 4 states:

*The series features a mix of Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies and the programme makes a clear distinction between these different groups. Whenever a person is introduced, we are careful to identify who they are and what community they come from. (URL 21)*

They do introduce persons as either Irish Travellers or Romani Gypsies, however, clear distinctions are not consistently followed through, as becomes apparent considering the above-quoted examples. Furthermore, every statement and every information given by either the narrator or Thelma is brought to the audience in a generalising manner. It is apparently not only assumed that Irish, English and Scottish Travellers in both the United Kingdom and Ireland are one homogeneous group, it is also presented as if there were no differences at all between two different ethnic minorities. As suggested in Episode 1, every Traveller (and Gypsy?) girl is 'born to be wed' and starts with the wedding preparations from the day she is born. Every one of these girls has an 'exotic dress sense' and all of them are 'dressed to impress'. If the producers actually have 'unprecedented access to the UK's most secretive communities', as it is claimed in each opening sequence, they would – and probably do – know that the extravagant spending and luxury presented in the show can only be afforded by a handful of people. However, the focus is on the weddings after all. How these and other aspects featuring in the show are described will be briefly examined in the following.

Episode 3 'reveals what it is really like to be a Traveller woman', along these lines continuing with the homogeneous depictions, this time, however, not focusing on the entire Traveller community, but on the 'desperate housewives', a title already implying that every Traveller woman's life must be a 'life of drudgery' and thereby keeping up the tradition of judging in established terms of reference and imposing an image created by the outside. In line with that notion is the conclusion of this episode, namely that 'there are *still* plenty of girls queuing up to become a Gypsy housewife', which is apparently incomprehensible for the presenters. The book, however, has to offer an explanation why teenage girls want to get married: because they “*see themselves as real-life Cinderellas and dream that some day their prince will come and rescue them from the household chores and their parents' rules.*” (p.14) That, on the other hand, is hardly surprising for the producers because 'doesn't every little girl dream of being a fairy-tale princess, after all?' (cf. p.14) I will leave that undecided, yet it is important to emphasise that such fairy-tale analogies are not restricted in the show to little girls. Traveller women who are about to get married are introduced as 'brides, who get to be a princess for one day' and who have 'storybook weddings' which also need 'fairy-tale cakes' in order to make their 'Gypsy-girl fantasies' come true. Thelma's explanation is not only blatant this time, it is degrading, judgemental and also accentuated by the fairy-tale style:

*They look like Cinderella and they are Cinderella for a day. The only thing is, they don't carry on being Cinderella, they don't marry the prince who's whisked them off. They go back to being, like, the domestic life, so she's just gotta make the most of it.*

As cited in the book, she describes Traveller women dressed as 'living dolls' and points out the difference between Travellers and non-Travellers regarding clothing:

*If you went to a wedding in Liverpool and a girl was dressed like that, everybody would go, 'That's disgusting, you know. It's paedophilic.' But at a traveller wedding, they're all dressed like that; it's just accepted. (p.21)*

Although it does not qualify this statement, Thelma also points out, that the viewers and the readers should focus 'on how good Travellers are at enjoying themselves'. If there is one thing that settled people can learn from Travellers, it is how to throw a party.

To encapsulate, when the 'Traveller world' is spoken of – which is apparently something static, homogeneous and the counterpart to 'the rest of the world' – the viewer cannot be sure if this refers to Romani Gypsies or Irish Travellers, as distinctions between those two distinct groups are seldom made throughout the series. This 'Traveller world' is an 'extraordinary secret world' and therefore 'little-understood', according to the book. The Traveller and Gypsy community is described as the 'most lively and vibrant community known to man' with 'colourful members' who are 'fascinating and amazing people'. However, the community with its customs and traditions is in danger of 'being wiped out' and on the road to extinction, so they have to ask themselves: *"How long can the party last?"* 'Bulldozers are inching closer' to halting sites, which will soon destroy the 'adventure' of living in a caravan. And although they are 'fighting back in true Gypsy style', their 'old-fashioned traditions will disappear.'

The inappropriate and disrespectful use of vocabulary and analogies, such as putting a way of life on the same level with a party that is about to end soon as well as equating young Traveller women with fairy-tale princesses and the generalisations of every aspect of the selective examples and stories they explore while claiming, on the other hand, that the show provides an insight into Traveller culture, gives a brief glimpse into how information is conveyed to the audience and yet again the gap between the 'wild poetic tinker', known from the early twentieth century, and Irish Travellers as real people with a function in Irish society is salient, if not widened.

### 3.3.2 Between rhetoric and reality

Other representations of Travellers in Irish popular culture ranged somewhere between the exotic and the threatening, but seldom portrayed Irish Travellers as just themselves. (cf. URL 2) Some writers and film-makers, like Graham Jones, Peter Brady or Perry Ogden, have tried to break with that tradition and set themselves the demanding task of portraying Travellers in a more authentic manner. In a way, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* promises to provide the same by both labelling the show as an observational documentary and claiming to reveal 'the very heart of Gypsy life'. Romani John, cited in the book, outlines the reason why he is participating in the programme:

*We want the public to see we're just normal people who happen to like moving about and who occasionally need a helping hand with our sick and with educating our kids, same as anyone else. (p.69)*

This notion, however, is contrastive to the use of 'extraordinary, extravagant rite of passage celebrations' through which the show tries to offer an insight into Traveller culture. To look at the exceptional or the 'exotic', on the other hand, cannot be fully separated from the ephemeral nature of a television image, which is, first of all, aimed at a non-specialist public and, secondly, made for entertainment. (cf. Singer 1992: 265) Furthermore, the essential contextualisation in order to provide a knowledge and an understanding of certain issues the audience might not be familiar with at all, is severely limited within the space of a forty-five minute programme. (cf. Turton 1992: 291) Nevertheless, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* does take up issues beyond the bling – issues that mirror the often harsh reality of Travellers and which are of high political relevance, such as education, health, welfare, nomadism, labour and prejudice. Yet, insufficient explanations as well as narrow and simplistic statements, including generalisations – made by the narrator and a self-proclaimed expert, who assume the right to speak on behalf of the people the show is about – have the potential to communicate misconceptions to the viewers, which they, in turn, can be expected to share. (cf. *ibid.*) A few examples shall provide an insight into what kind of information is provided and how it is conveyed to the audience.

Keeping in mind that the pilot *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* was intended to be a one-off show as part of Channel 4's *Cutting Edge* series, a summary of the background information given by the narrator on Traveller culture in this episode could look as follows:

Gypsies and Travellers want perfection more than most, when it comes to weddings. These [allegedly all Traveller weddings] are a mixture of ancient traditions and celebrity-inspired extravagance and have become an important part of keeping Traveller culture alive. The younger generation is expected to marry within the community. First-cousin marriage is one of the significant cultural differences between Travellers and non-Travellers. Because this secretive community [sic] – with a reputation of potential violence – has lived on the margins of society for centuries, they are accustomed to prejudice. There are between 100.000 and 300.000 Gypsies [sic] living in Britain today. There have been travelling communities in Britain for at least 500 years, the two largest groups being Irish Travellers and Romani Gypsies, the latter originating in India and having come to Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Some continue to travel for employment today, but new laws have made living a nomadic life increasingly difficult and so there are more Travellers living in flats and houses than in caravans. The vast majority of Irish Travellers are Catholic and are expected to obey a strict code of conduct.

Apart from the extravagant dresses and the weddings, this is, basically, what the viewer knows about Irish Travellers and, supposedly, Romani Gypsies after watching this episode. Despite the generalisations and the lack of distinction between those two groups, raising a subject such as first-cousin marriage without providing further explanation and contextualisation can cause a stir. A few days after TLC aired *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* in the United States, Fox News headlined: “*‘My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding’ stars believe in incest, not pre-marital sex*”. (cf. URL 22) Consanguineous marriage is a complex topic and, moreover, a topic often accompanied by misinformation. Without calling the assertion itself into question presenting first-cousin marriage as ‘one of the significant cultural differences’ to a non-specialist audience can be misleading. Endogamy is one aspect of Traveller culture, however, according to *Pavee Point*, there is very little reliable information on consanguineous marriages within the Traveller community. (cf. URL 23)

Such short cuts are characteristic for every topic the series raises. Among those is education – a highly relevant subject, not least for advocacy groups. In Episode 3, which is supposed to reveal what it is really like to be a Traveller woman, the audience gets the following information regarding education from a Traveller, the narrator and Thelma:

Lizzie (Traveller): *I think I was about 11 or 12 when I left school. I knows that is hard for youse to understand, but, really, there is no need for the teachers to keep coming, “You need*

*to go to school, you need to go to school”, because we ain't going to be doctors or lawyers or anything. Housewives – that's what we're going to be.*

Narrator: *Many Traveller girls are removed from school early, not only to help at home but to prevent them from being corrupted by outside influences. (...) Dressmaker Thelma has watched a generation of Gypsies and Travellers grow up, and seen hundreds of children leave school.*

Thelma: *It's usually just after they've started secondary school, so it's like 12, 13. It's usually then, and then they leave. It is illegal to leave school at that age, but move round that much that probably they can't keep records, like they don't, erm, children who are, you know, living in the same area. There are, a lot of them are from Ireland, so they actually say that they've either gone back to Ireland or gone to live with a relative in such and such place. So there's ways round it where we wouldn't get away with it, but they do, because they travel round.*

Narrator: *Whilst many Travellers leave school young, the girls to clean and the boys to work, Noreen's unusual, as she stayed in education.*

Taken together, these statements suggest, that Travellers and Gypsies leave school for three reasons: they do not want to stay in education, they have to work instead of going to school and the parents want to prevent their children from outside influences. In contrast to the law-abiding majority population, as Thelma points out, what they are doing is illegal and, furthermore, they are getting away with it. Assuming that the majority of the nine million viewers watching the programme has no direct contact with Travellers and no further information on Traveller culture except of newspaper coverage, that is what they are left with. While Travellers' education levels are indeed considerably lower<sup>87</sup> than that of the members of the majority population, the reasons behind this are far more complex and dependent on both internal and external factors. *Pavee Point* illustrates that, firstly, past Education policy was characterised by a segregation model, meaning that many schools had all-Traveller classes with one teacher for all children regardless of age<sup>88</sup>. Secondly, there is a lack of visibility of Traveller culture within the school system, which may cause feelings of isolation and a lack of confidence regarding one's own identity. Traveller children are aware of

<sup>87</sup> In the Census of 2000 it is revealed that primary school was the highest level of education for 54.8% of Travellers and 63.2% of Traveller children under the age of 15 had left school. (cf. URL 24)

<sup>88</sup> A Traveller parent says the following about the special classes: “*Why I didn't learn to read and write at school because the teachers put all the Traveller children into what they called a special class. There were children between the ages of six years old and fourteen, I don't know why they done that. We're put in one big room and told to play a board game or draw a picture. I feel very resentful and angry about how we were treated in school. We went to school for years and we left not being able to read and write.*” (URL 24)

discrimination and prejudice and that being a Traveller is enough to pose a problem<sup>89</sup>. Thirdly, many Travellers are being discriminated against when it comes to attempts of obtaining employment, which makes it difficult to see the positive outcomes of staying in mainstream education. (cf. URL 24) The conclusion provided by *Pavee Point* – which offers, like most advocacy groups, education projects for Traveller children and parents – stands in stark contrast to what *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* alleges:

*Underpinning all of the above is the situation that many Travellers find themselves in which includes poor accommodation and appalling living conditions, poor health and the experience of widespread prejudice and discrimination. All of these factors combine to create a particular set of circumstances that militate against many Travellers participating fully in education. (ibid.)*

While this could actually be seen as 'the very heart of Traveller life', the often stand-alone statements without context easily get lost behind the big wedding dresses. At the very end of Episode 4, for example, the narrator explains that poor healthcare provisions contribute to a lower life expectancy within the Traveller community and that over 50 % do not reach the age of 50, which is rather unrelated to what this sequence is about, namely the death of Paddy Doherty's son, who died in a car accident and the 'distinct' kind of celebration they have every year on his day of death, while the camera is focusing on the 'extravagant' boots a woman is wearing and Traveller men drinking beer at the side of the gravestone.

Instead of taking a closer look at important elements of Traveller culture, as for example nomadism, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* seems to be obsessed with another 'ritual' supposedly practised by Travellers, taking it up in three of the episodes of the first series as well as in the book. It is a 'ritual' called *grabbing*, and to anticipate one thing of the following chapter: Travellers and Romani people protesting against the broadcasting of the series say that they have never heard of such a thing. *Grabbing* is what the narrator refers to when talking about 'courtship blossoms in an unusual way' in the opening sequence. In the first episode, the narrator explains further: "*Girls aren't allowed to approach boys, they must wait to be chosen, sometimes through a ritual known as grabbing.*" The interviewer asks a girl if she would be able to explain what grabbing is, getting the following answer:

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<sup>89</sup> *Pavee Point* cites a 16-year old Traveller boy explaining why he left school: "*I left Secondary school because you know, up there you were treated, like kind of bad, not by the Teachers but by the young fellas in sixth year cos you're a Traveller, they'd slag you and if you slagged them back you'd get bet ... by 17 and 18 year olds ... that was a big reason for leaving school.*" (cf. URL 24)

*Well, like, they take a girl off and they say, 'Will you give us a kiss?' And the girls says no or yes. But, like, I would say no. They say no and then they'll do something where it hurts, you know. Push, like .. I don't know, twist your arms to hurt you. And then, like, they keep doing it until you give them a kiss [...].*

In contrast to many Travellers who are not familiar with this courtship ritual, dressmaker Thelma knows about *grabbing* and issues a statement:

*The grabbing can be really physical sometimes. I don't think it's a good start to any relationship to be like that, where there's a, you know, a bit of violence involved. (...) But I think in the travelling community, the women know they're gonna be dominated anyway, you know? They go in with their eyes open. They know that's how it's gonna be. And this man is gonna take control of them. (...) It's accepted. In fact, it's insisted upon that the men dominate the women, otherwise they wouldn't be, in the eyes of the men of the community, men.*

In fact, domestic violence is one of the issues challenged by various advocacy groups, as already outlined above, and certainly not something that 'is accepted'. However, the 'custom' of *grabbing* was immediately, and unsurprisingly, captured by the *Daily Mail* (cf. URL 25), conveying it to the public as one of the 'most shocking elements' of the first episode of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, and, in further consequence, a shocking element of Traveller culture. According to the tabloid press, with the headline *Revealed: The bizarre secrets of courtship in My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, every teenage Traveller girl is subjected to this courtship ritual. The book further explains, that they first learned about *grabbing* at the Appleby Horse Fair, “thanks to those teenage 1950 throwbacks” (p.95), who felt uncomfortable to explain the custom, because “[t]hey realise it will seem alien to settled society, but they have promised to be completely honest and frank about their lives. Now, to their credit, they honour that promise.” (p.96) Travellers and other people criticising the series would not agree that it was 'to their credit', as a sexual assault is presented to the audience as a tradition of Traveller culture. Consequently, the already negative Traveller image is expanded by yet another element.



Presenting the courtship ritual 'grabbing' as a Traveller tradition.

Photo: Channel 4

### 3.4 The very heart of the show: representing the 'Other'

*“We’ve been stereotyped for hundreds of years, and it’s just coming from people who don’t know us, haven’t got a clue about us – just come to the wrong conclusions about us.”*

(Billy Welch)

In response to the ongoing debate *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* has stirred, Channel 4 issued a public statement, in which the genre of the programme – an observational documentary “*made predominantly from the perspective of gypsies and travellers talking about their own experience*” – is particularly emphasised, furthermore pointing out that they have “*intentionally avoided many commonly held stereotypes and attempted to provide a balanced view of all featured communities across the series*”. (URL 21) Taking a look at other representations in Irish popular culture makes explicit that a balanced view has rarely been achieved. Challenging such commonly held stereotypes is also seen as an endeavour by the support group *Pavee Point*, which is working towards the improvement of the social situation of Travellers. In collaboration with the *Irish Traveller Movement* and the *National Traveller Woman's Forum* they have compiled a list of the myths surrounding Travellers. (cf. URL 26) One of those, for example, is that Travellers allegedly do not want to be part of Irish society. Travellers, of course, have always been part of Irish society. The official recognition as an ethnic minority group, however, is yet to be achieved. Politics of

exclusion in the past and discrimination, which is still very present on a daily basis, makes participation as equal members of society rather difficult. Offensive labels, such as being violent, anti-social and work-shy, reinforce prejudice and discrimination. (cf. *ibid.*) At the other end of the spectrum of stereotypes, Travellers have been perceived as the embodiments of a pre-colonial past and the leftovers of a more traditional Ireland, although these images rather belong to the beginning of the last century. Today, the positive connotation of traditionalism has given way to the view that Traveller culture and modernisation will not be compatible in the long run – to the detriment of the former. One way or another, it is always the 'Other' and the 'exotic' that is represented. The problem is to “*demonstrate the humanity we share with the people we study without privileging our own, or [...] how to 'obliterate otherness while preserving difference'.*” (Turton 1992: 291) This is one of the difficult tasks anthropologists share with a programme-maker presenting an image of somebody. Some of the above elucidations already indicate that the representational strategies used by *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* do not only range somewhere between rhetoric and reality, but are also in line with quite common, and mostly ill-informed, depictions.

### 3.4.1 A secretive community with an ancient twist

Irish Travellers are not only separated from the majority population in space – due to the long history of exclusion and the denial of a place in Irish society – they are apparently also perceived as distant in time. Reminiscent of Celtic Literary Revivalists, such as John Millington Synge or Sean Maher's *The Road To God Knows Where* of the 1970s, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* seems to present an ancient culture which is at odds with the rest of the modern world. It is especially the big milestone of a Travellers' life, the wedding, where 'ancient traditions and modern fashions collide'. The series, however, fails to explain what these ancient traditions are and apart from the extravagant wedding dresses and cakes – which are usual neither for Traveller nor Gypsy weddings – there is nothing exceptional about the weddings that are being presented in the show. According to the producers, it is precisely these rite-of-passage celebrations through which Travellers are trying to preserve their culture: “*While many traditions have died out*<sup>90</sup>, *one of the few ways Travellers keep their culture alive is by celebrating the big milestones in life – birth, weddings, and communions.*” And while they are trying every way they possibly can to preserve their culture, according to Thelma, “*they're*

<sup>90</sup> In the book the issue of old traditions is also taken up. It is explained where the terms 'tinker' and 'knacker' – both pejoratively used for Irish Travellers – come from, namely from the occupational traditions as tinsmiths and trading animals for rendering. The reader is left with a rather simple explanation: “*Of course, these traditions have died out. Times change. Those who adapt best to change thrive. This is an evolutionary imperative.*” (p.56)

*probably fighting a losing battle.*” Thus, the Traveller community is a 'community under threat' and that is why they want to protect their children from outside influence and therefore rarely mix with non-Travellers. The opening sequence of Episode 2, starts with a comment by Thelma: *“They don't like anybody knowing anything about them at all. They even have their own language.”* Aside from the fact, that this notion and a documentary with and about Irish Travellers are incompatible, it is certainly too narrowly considered, if the language – which constitutes an important marker for Traveller identity and is, thus, one element of the 'very heart of Traveller culture' – is exclusively mentioned in context of depicting Travellers as notoriously secret<sup>91</sup>. The narrator proceeds:

*Tonight we witness a community struggling to cling on to their traditional way of life (...) as the modern world threatens to destroy their customs, livelihoods and even their homes. (...) How much longer can they preserve their unique culture? With the outside world intruding, Travellers are afraid that their old fashioned traditions will disappear.*

By virtue of the topics and stories included in this episode, it is especially in *No Place Like Home* where the notion of a seemingly static and homogeneous culture which is about to be absorbed by the rest of the (modern) world<sup>92</sup>, can be found. Following the wedding of Pat and non-Traveller Sam is one of the most sensational events the producers get to observe – and so it is for Thelma:

*They're trying to preserve their society. They don't want anything to penetrate their society at all. They want to keep it just to them. The only way it's pure, basically. Pure Traveller. (...) They don't want their society diluted by non-Travellers. They want to keep it as pure as they possibly can. A non-Traveller coming into the Travelling community is going to dilute it. So it's another step further down the line for being wiped out, basically. I would imagine there will be people sitting at the wedding that think, “This isn't right. This boy should be marrying a Traveller” (...) But .. If she [Sam] walks in, she definitely looks more of a tr.. I don't know if that's possible, but she looks more of a Traveller than a Traveller.*

As already mentioned, this representation is disrupted at various points throughout the episode, as Sam and Pat do not adhere to this substantial differentiation between 'us' and 'them'. Sam and Pat are going to live in a caravan after their wedding and the Interviewer, Daniel, is eager to find out

<sup>91</sup> As mentioned earlier, opinions vary if Shelta should be defined as a 'secret' language, a language or a linguistic register, however, the acquirement of the language by children in infancy and the usage within the community indicates a broader range of functions (cf. Hayes 2006a: 69), and is more complex than explained in the corresponding *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* book, namely *“to keep outsiders clueless”*. (p.33)

<sup>92</sup> Paddy Doherty takes a different point of view, cited in the book: *“A Traveller is a Traveller. We can't be absorbed into another culture because we are our own culture.”* (p.57)

how Sam feels about 'adopting Gypsy traditions' and 'leaving her own culture behind', revealing thereby his own biases:

Daniel: *Is it an adventure, Sam?*

Sam: *It is a bit of an adventure, like, moving into a trailer is something different, but I don't know, like, I don't care where we live. I don't .. I'm OK if we lived in a bin as long as I can be with him.*

Daniel: *What do you say to people who are watching who go, "She's crazy, she's going to live in a trailer"?*

Sam: *Well, they're crazy, cos they've never tried it .. I don't really think it's like a big deal, really. It's just like going looking at houses. It's not..* [Daniel interrupting her]

Daniel: *But it's not like a house. It's a caravan.*

Sam: *I know, but it's just the same, innit? It's still going to be where we live..* [Daniel interrupting her again]

Daniel: *No, it's not. It's different. It's a caravan.*

Sam: *Yeah, I know, but it's still gonna be where we live. It's still going to be our home, so I don't see it any different.*

While Sam and Pat are more than once insisting on mutual similarities, the presenters are of course interested in the differences, as the programme is about 'the exotic on Britain's doorstep' after all. As Sturken and Cartwright (cf. 2001: 105) point out, the selling of difference is a central aspect of today's marketing. However, it is still the 'Other' that gets represented with the perpetual underlying notion that Traveller culture and their way of life is not only different but an oddity compared to the 'normal', which itself is assumed as something static and fixed. In Turton's sense, there is no obliteration of 'Otherness' in favour of emphasising the humanity 'both communities' share. Traveller culture is, throughout the whole series, juxtaposed to the rest of the world and the members are presented as 'stuck in a time warp', hence a supposedly anachronistic culture is measured against a more modern one. (cf. Hancock 1992) Somewhere along those lines is the intersection of, on the one hand, perceiving members of the Traveller community as 'fascinating and amazing people', as described in the book – i.e. the romantic attributions and the perception of people as leftovers of an earlier age. On the other hand, this exoticism is easily converted to the notion of a countercultural threat, as Hayes (cf. 2006, 2006a) illustrates. Anachronistic and anti-social behaviour has to be, as for example the respondents of the Tinker Questionnaire by the Irish Folklore Commission have demonstrated, encountered with suspicion, which gets in further

consequence reinforced through the depiction of the Traveller community as a secretive community – or even 'the most secretive community', as stated in Episode 1 of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*.



The accompanying image to the narrator's speech about 'ancient traditions and simple tastes'. Photo: Channel 4

The image of a countercultural threat feeds on the perception of the Traveller community as an exclusive and secretive 'society' with their members engaging in cultural practices that are considered anachronistic by the majority population, including nomadism and a range of beliefs and taboos regarding social organisation, death, marriage, the use of a private language and the unwillingness to integrate into the wider community. (cf. Hayes 2006a: 55) The latter is reflected for example in the above-quoted statement by Thelma, where she informs the audience, that Travellers do not want outsiders to penetrate their 'society'. At the wedding of Pat and non-Traveller Sam in Episode 2 – “*where it's Gypsies on the one side of the dance floor and non-Travellers on the other*” – Thelma is asked by Daniel, if she sees the two communities getting on better with each other as a possible picture for the future. The dressmaker states:

*Wouldn't that be lovely if they did? You know, it would be nice if, like what's happening in there, where the communities are joining together because of a couple. Whether it will or not, I don't know, because you do get a staunch Travellers who just don't want any intrusion at all.*

While prejudice towards Travellers is captured at various points throughout the series, as when venues get cancelled or the Traveller background is hidden when applying for employment, the secretiveness of the community gains the upper hand, when it comes to explore the often difficult relationships between Travellers and the majority population on the part of the presenters of the programme. What the outside often sees as an oddity or even a threat is understood differently by Romani Billy Welch and in line with what has been exposed as a myth by *Pavee Point* and other advocacy groups:

*Sometimes you get the odd idiot in the pub who'll say, "Why don't you lot go back to where you came from?" And I'll say, "And how long have you lived here?" They say, "I've lived here 25 years." I'll say, "We've been here for 165." We can prove it .. People tend to be frightened of what they don't understand. And a lot of the settled community, they don't understand us, so they tend to give us a hard time. We've, in the past, we've had a lot of abuse and we've had a lot of persecution. Our way of doing things is, if we're very, very private, they'll leave us alone and we can get on with our lives.*

Considering this statement, it becomes clear that there is a logic behind the secretive behaviour that does not require separateness or secretiveness to be regarded as essential cultural elements of the Traveller or Gypsy communities<sup>93</sup>. In this context, the question of origin is also relevant. Not alone is it an allegedly anachronistic behaviour that places Travellers 'outside of history' and perceiving them as stuck in a time warp clinging on to certain traditions and 'old-fashioned values' that have long been abandoned by the more progressive and modern settled community (cf. Hayes 2006a: 55); what further distinguishes them is the oral tradition – in opposition to the common notion that history is necessarily something written down – and the lack of historical official records, the keeping of which were neither an objective of the British administration nor the authorities of the Free State as from 1922. As suggested above, questions of origin are crucial, insofar as certain perceptions do not only shape the way people think about Travellers, but also influence the responses – observable from the 1960s onwards when Travellers were seen as drop-outs from the mainstream who have to be re-settled. (cf. McDonagh 2000: 21) While promising the viewers and readers to provide an insight into Traveller culture, *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* does not attempt to make a contribution to dispel the drop-out theory. While it is mentioned in the series that

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<sup>93</sup> Political activist and academic, Rosaleen McDonagh phrases the same notion: *"We've always been here; however, when you get so far pushed out into the margins, a lack of trust builds up and you tend to become self-reliant on your own."* (URL 19)

Romani Gypsies originated in India and came to Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there is no further comment on the origins of Irish Travellers. Yet, an attempt is made in the book to give some background information<sup>94</sup>:

*The second largest group, the Irish travellers, or Pavee, are thought to have originally been dispossessed by Oliver Cromwell's sacking of Ireland in the seventeenth century, or by the Great Famine, some two hundred years later. It's possible that neither may be the case, as other academics point to records of a distinct Irish nomadic group with its own language and customs dating back to the thirteenth century. Their origins are impossible to pin down because travellers don't tend to write their own histories and they've rarely trusted anyone to record their oral history. (p.33)*

To locate an exact time in history when Travellers came into existence is difficult and the theory that Irish Travellers are the descendants of the victims of the Great Famine suits people in favour of rehabilitation and re-assimilation. There are several reasons, however, that argue against this theory as well as similar theories which suggest that Travellers are drop-outs or misfits of the majority population (cf. McDonagh 2000: 22) and therefore, the background information is not only superficial but conveys misconceptions. Further, and yet again, the emphasis is put on the fiercely secretive attitude of Travellers, which in consequence led to the lack of historical records.

In sum, the audience encounters a group of 'fascinating' people with high morals which should not become diluted by outside influence, as it is exactly this outside – the modern and progressive 'world' – that is threatening to destroy their ancient customs. Keeping themselves separated from the mainstream society is accomplished through secretive behaviour, and the 'exotic on Britain's doorstep' is preserved through the big and extravagant milestone celebrations. Travellers are not only distant in space – at the outer margins rather than the doorstep – but also perceived as distant in time, somewhere in a time warp, and, as will be outlined on the next few pages, 'in a world where a man is a man and a woman knows her place'.

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<sup>94</sup> It is even explained that the term 'Gypsy' was born out of a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, this fact did not prevent them from naming the series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*.

### 3.4.2 It's a man's world

*“The rough, tough traveller world is ablaze with tales of feuds and fights and men vowing vengeance.”*

Episode 4, *Boys Will Be Boys*, and Chapter 2 of the corresponding book with the heading *It's a Man's World* are dedicated to the 'world of the Traveller men' – “*where they work hard, play harder and cling on to their old-fashioned values*”. While the 'Traveller girl' is in the spotlight on *her* wedding day, it is the man 'who really rules the roost the other 364 days of the year', as it is explained in the opening sequence.



Irish Traveller and former bare-knuckle boxer Paddy Doherty.

Photo: Channel 4

Accompanied by James Brown's famous song, Interviewer Daniel echoes the lyrics when he suggestively asks a Traveller woman: “*Is it a man's world, do you think?*” She does:

*Yeah, a very man's world, yeah. If they, if you let them run they will. They will .. Pub every night, especially on a weekend. Dressed up, off down the town, to leave the wife like divvies at home. If you'll let them get away with it, yes, they'll do it.*

This notion is shared by most of the girls and women, boys and men who participate in the show. In Episode 1, following the wedding preparations of Josie and Swanley, the couple gives an account of the gender roles in the Traveller community:

*Josie: The woman shouldn't work, I think it's the man's job to, you know, go out working and bring the money in. I don't think it's the woman's job. It's a man's world. A man's a man and a woman's a woman.*

*Swanley: If the woman ever went out to earn the money and the men ever had to stay home to look after the children, it'd be a funny do, I'm telling you. There's definitely be something wrong there. I can't see that ever happening in our community, I can never see that going on. There'd be definitely have to be something wrong. That couldn't happen.*

A man is a man in the Traveller community, according to Josie, and the producers underscore this notion with matching images – fighting and drinking. Former bare-knuckle fighter Paddy Doherty has a prominent role in Episode 4. He explains to the producers – and, of course, the audience – that fighting is what they are 'bred for'. And it is precisely in this context, that the money issue is brought back in. Laying stress on the fact that bare-knuckle fights are illegal but still common on Traveller sites across Britain, the narrator explains that fighting culture amongst Travellers often includes gambling, with some fights drawing bets involving thousands of pounds. The series had already evoked speculations about how Travellers can afford such high cost weddings. Above and beyond this luxury of the extravagant and expensive wedding dresses, the audience is informed that status – very important for the Traveller man – comes on four wheels. Labour and employment, although not irrelevant regarding the origins of Travellers and the changing relationship between them and the majority population as a result of the economic modernisation in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, is only touched upon briefly and not explored any further. Hence, one can only speculate about how Paddy Doherty can afford a new car twice a year. This is aggravated by the fact that – as already encountered at various points throughout the programme – Travellers and, especially Traveller men, are notoriously secretive about money. However, Episode 4 is about the 'painful traditions' and the film crew was given permission to attend an honour fight on a Traveller site. This opportunity to attract viewers through sensation once again became even more thrilling when one of the fighters, exasperated by his defeat, uttered a threat: *“Point the camera out of my face, otherwise I'll send round a couple of boys to beat you up”*. The film crew had overstayed their welcome, which, however, did not keep them from sharing the same and the menace with the audience. While a man

enjoys every freedom in contrast to a Traveller woman, it is a 'tough life' the Traveller male is living, which can be further evidenced in physical characteristics: Not alone do they behave and look like '1950s throwbacks', they usually look and sound older than males of the majority population<sup>95</sup>. Traveller boy Davey is introduced in the book as follows:

*Davey, also sixteen, has the look of an extra from 'Happy Days' or 'Grease'. He's got mousy, gelled-back hair; dark eyes and symmetrical features. Today, he's wearing a baby-blue vest, Levi's and Converse trainers. He too is handsome. Unlike most traveller boys his age, his face is soft and young – maybe a little chubby. It's like meeting a young Gary Barlow, except he's got the voice of a fifty-year-old rough sleeper. Most traveller boys tend to sound much older than they are, like they've got chalk in their craw. Maybe it's the dialect, the hacking vernacular. Or maybe it's the gruff score to an already tough life. (p.41)*

The physical is also very prominent in the verbal characterisation of Paddy Doherty; according to the book, the 'hard-knock' Traveller life is deeply entrenched in his face, which is equated with the Rosetta stone. He has “*a creased, weathered forehead, a nose punched too often and the strong jaw of a man who keeps in shape.*” Moreover, it is his “*twinkling eyes that exude mischief, charm and devilment*”.

What it comes down to is, on the one hand, that the Traveller male is celebrated in contrast to his passive female counterpart. The 'world where they work hard' is defined by his responsibility to provide the means for the family, very often through self-employment, not only gambling and fighting. And it is, on the other hand, 'a world where they play harder, clinging on to the painful traditions', meaning that the Traveller men's world is characterised by an often violent behaviour and a culture of fighting, which is *readily admitted* by Paddy Doherty, implying that this is a fact the presenters were well aware of beforehand. Furthermore, they also claim to explore for the sake of the audience, what it is really like to be a Traveller woman. By way of concluding this chapter and turning to the next, I would also like to refer to James Brown's lyrics – slightly modified: It's a man's world, but it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a housewife in a tantalising dress.

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<sup>95</sup> According to the presenters, the same holds true for Traveller girls, who do tend to look older than the 'country girls'. They are, however, not sure if this is due to their 'religious devotion to sunbed' (because 'traveller girls are happy with nothing less than a chestnut-brown glow', as stated in the book) or the preparation for adult life from a young age. (p. 9)

### 3.4.3 In the name of beauty

*“As long as it looks good, they're happy.”*

(Thelma Madine)

That a show called *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* focuses on wedding ceremonies and dresses is unsurprising. Implying, however, that Traveller girls do nothing else but worry about their looks is questionable. There is nothing exceptional about such a strong wish for a wedding day and all the little details surrounding it to be perfect. What distinguishes Traveller women from others, apart from the age at which they get married<sup>96</sup>, is what Thelma tells us at the beginning of the pilot: Traveller women are implanted with the desire to get married as soon as possible and at a very early age, already knowing what their life is going to be like. Therefore, they spend their childhood years with drawing the wedding dress of their dreams. While the camera is pointed at a group of men fighting, when the narrator tells the audience in each opening sequence, that the Traveller world is a world 'where a man is a man', the images accompanying the narrator's speech about the world 'where a woman knows her place' are those of a woman cleaning a caravan. A Traveller woman gives an account of child-rearing, concluding that *“that's the way we are brought up .. homemakers, they call us. We're bred into it. We're brought up to be homemakers”*. Although this notion is reiterated in each episode, it is, as the title exposes it, Episode 3 – *Desperate Housewives* – which is particularly concerned with the role of a Traveller woman. After Lizzie, a young Traveller who is about to get married, has explained in the opening sequence that they *“ain't going to be doctors or lawyers, but housewives”*, Thelma yet again proclaims her expertise:

*I think the Traveller girls are definitely second-class citizens. They're very vocal, the girls, they'll say things, and, you know, they do have quite a lot to say. But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, they're kept in their place, really.*

As far as the first sentence of this statement is concerned, other Travellers and their supporters are claiming the same. However, the notion of second-class citizens is not restricted to Traveller women, but extends to Travellers in general. At first appearance, the question that arises is why they would not have quite a lot to say. At second glance, however, the basic notion which is conveyed to

<sup>96</sup> Roseanne, Paddy Doherty's wife, gives an account of why she thinks Traveller girls marry at a comparatively young age: *“I think .. Well, I think how they think, it's like, they're reared up very strict, brought up very strict. The girls are not really allowed to go anywhere. Well, mostly, that time, when I was young, you weren't allowed to go to the shop unless you had three or four of your smaller sisters and brothers with you. And I think some of them probably think, 'If I get married I'll have more freedom. I'll be able to go to places, see things.’”* Both Roseanne and Paddy think, however, that 16 is way too young to get married.

the audience becomes apparent: Most of the girls and women, according to the presenters of the programme, 'happily accept day-to-day drudgery over education or a career'. This is the categorical perception of Traveller women and how they are represented throughout the programme – exceptions notwithstanding. The narrator introduces the viewers to Noreen, who is a cake shop assistant and 'not prepared to accept a life of drudgery':

*It is tradition in some Traveller girls' life. As soon as they're getting married .. you know what I mean? Stay home all day, wait for him to come home, cook him food, clean up, go to bed, get up next morning, he goes working, he comes back, make him food, it's the same thing, but I don't want that, I've never, ever wanted that. I would rather have a job, so when I do get married, when I do have a married life, I'll always have something to rely on, like a job, instead of sitting down doing nothing all day, waiting for him to come home, relying on him for money. I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't want to just be living by my husband, do you know what I mean? I'd want him wrapped round my finger. [chuckles]*

When it comes to her wedding however, she is 'every inch a Traveller'. And being 'every inch a Traveller', does not only imply to dream about a big sticky-out dress, but to, generally, 'dress to impress', as it is the whole aim in a Traveller girl's life to get married, according to Thelma:

*How else are they gonna attract a man, really? If they all look good .. Every one of them young girls in there looks good. So they've gotta stand out from the crowd. And their whole aim in life is to get married. You know, if they're not married by the time they're 21, 22, they're basically on the shelf. So they've got to make sure they look good at every function they go to, so they can get a husband.*

As mentioned earlier, to look good is basically equivalent to dressing like a prostitute, as the dressmaker keeps repeating. *"It is like peacocks on parade. The best one is going to get chosen"*, as it is added in the book. That is, however, of no consequence when it comes to the high morals and old-fashioned values the Traveller community is clinging on to, because the readers are further informed, that *"they might dress like hookers, but Irish traveller girls – and many of their English gypsy and traveller sisters – live like nuns"<sup>97</sup>*.

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<sup>97</sup> This notion is affirmed by the Traveller girls participating in the show, as for example, in the pilot: *"The settled community think that Travelling girls, with their little skimpy outfits, are kind of .. gammy, which means that they're a slut or something. But that's not the case, because Travelling girls are more decent, because they're not the kind to just go out clubbing and, you know, get drunk and end up with anyone."*



Traveller women: 'dressed to impress'

Photo: Channel 4

The film crew does its best to capture the tantalising style of the Traveller girls and is not reluctant to show the viewers eight-year-olds dancing to Shakira songs in mini skirts, high heels and with a fake tan. While little Molly, who is about to have her First Holy Communion is getting a spray tan, the other girls are talking about 'more pressing matters'<sup>98</sup> – shoes. Sensational is not only the fact that an eight-year-old is getting a spray tan, but that the dress she is wearing for the Communion probably weighs more than herself and – as with the Traveller brides' wedding dresses – is leaving scars. Emphasised by the statements of the narrator, the viewers may be left with the perception, that in the Traveller community, there is 'damage done in the name of beauty' – from a very early age. In Thelma's view, both women and girls do not complain, because *“as long as it looks good, they're happy”*. To grasp the amount of attention that Traveller girls devote to looking good clearly is one of the main focuses of the show. This becomes particularly obvious in the episode, in which the film crew pays a visit to the Appleby Horse Fair. Billy Welch explains, that Appleby is one of the oldest horse fairs in the world and unique on the planet, but the young people would all come here to find husbands and wives. Apparently, this notion leads the producers to highlight, yet again, the skimpy outfits at the expense of a more valuable insight into an important tradition of Traveller culture.

<sup>98</sup> The usage of the phrase 'more pressing matters' can also be encountered in Episode 1: While the narrator explains – in the context of Josie's wedding – that *“many Gypsies and Traveller in Britain today choose to live in a house than a caravan”* and *“though Josie will be leaving the family home soon, she is preoccupied with more pressing matters”*. The camera indicates what these are: Josie is putting make-up on while simultaneously talking about her wedding dress.

#### 4 'A Big Fat Gypsy Protest': challenging (mis-) representation

*“Representation can make the foreign familiar but it can also make the foreign even more foreign.”*

(Cronin 2002: 7)

In an open letter to Channel 4, a Romani adolescent brought to the producers attention that *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* seems to “*feature an alien culture that even most Irish Travellers didn't recognise*”. (URL 27) If we take a closer look at other voices of dissent, uttered by both Irish Travellers and Romani Gypsies, they are in concord with this statement and especially with the second part of Cronin's notion quoted above, although in this specific case, considering the public discourse in Ireland, it may be more the 'Other' in the same country that gets even more 'Othered'.

Irish Travellers have long been represented in a negative light, especially in newspapers. Now, with *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, among other 'pro-Traveller' programmes, the public fascination with the series as well as its spin-offs does not seem to come to an end. Journalist Ed Cumming, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, argues that this exposure 'can only be a big fat good thing', as the show has made a great contribution to raising awareness, if nothing else. Viewers are free to think about and carry out further research into a long-downtrodden minority, he asserts. According to Cumming, it is also quite obvious why the television programme focuses on unfamiliar strands of behaviour and emphasises those cultural features which differ most strongly from our expectations: “*Most societies, most of the time, are quite similar and quite dull – they all eat, work, play, rest.*” (URL 28) While this line of argument and the intention behind is antithetical to that of Traveller activist and playwright Rosaleen McDonagh, the outcomes are similar: Everyday life does not make a good story. Big fat wedding dresses cater to the tabloid television's compulsion to entertain, as the number of viewers indicates. Everyday life stories are either too boring or, as McDonagh also speculates, “*too real to make and too hard to watch*”. (URL 19)

Whether the programme has raised awareness and led people to engage with the topic of Irish Travellers or Romani Gypsies, as Cumming suggests, has to remain unanswered. But the programme certainly caused a public *cri de coeur* from Irish Travellers and Romani people alike directed at the producers and “*opened up a much needed nationwide debate on how the Gypsy and Traveller community is shown in the media*”. (URL 29)

## 4.1 Voices of dissent

In his article about *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, Ed Cumming reaches the conclusion that the *Irish Traveller Movement* protests too much, pointing towards the online discussion groups and the mixed responses the programme has evoked. (cf. URL 28) Romani people, Travellers, activists, scholars, filmmakers and others are voicing their feelings on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook<sup>99</sup> as well as various blogs, the Channel 4 website and by means of official complaints to OFCOM<sup>100</sup>, the government's media regulator. (cf. URL 29) Voices of dissent revolve around and are partly defined by a notion reminiscent of what Commissioner for Human Rights of Council of Europe, Alvaro Gil-Robles, had stated in 2004 regarding the media coverage of Gypsies. “*Would this be allowed if it was any other minority or ethnic group or the general public?*”, asks Catherine Joyce, referring to the exposure of young children in the programme, provocatively posing and dancing in front of the camera. (cf. URL 7) Would the use of the comparative in conjunction with an ethnic designation be considered appropriate if it was the name of any other minority group? Could a show be promoted with *Bigger. Fatter. Blacker?* Or *Bigger. Fatter. More Asian?* Probably not, but why does it seem acceptable for the broadcaster to advertise the show with the slogan *Bigger. Fatter. Gypsier?* (cf. URL 14) These questions have been raised by advocacy groups like the *London Travellers' Unit* and by thousands of Travellers and Romani who see themselves subjected to yet another misrepresentation. First and foremost, adversaries are criticising, the fact, that the programme does not make a clear distinction between the different communities it features. Especially on the part of the Romani people the objection has been raised, that – while the title suggests otherwise – *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* does not deliver what it promises<sup>101</sup>. Above-quoted Romani adolescent Pip, writes the following in his open letter to Channel 4:

*It surprised me to discover that 99% of Britain's Gypsy and Traveller population are Irish.  
Correct me if I'm wrong, as I am sure you have done lots and lots of research on this topic,*

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<sup>99</sup> The Facebook group *Big-fat Gypsy Protest*, with its primary goal to raise awareness, calls upon Travellers and non-Travellers who object to the way Channel 4 has portrayed the Traveller community, viz. in a way that could not be further from the truth, as it says in the description. See <http://www.facebook.com/bigfatgypsy.protest>

<sup>100</sup> The OFCOM is the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communication industries with the legal power to circulate Channel 4 if it breaks the OFCOM's broadcasting code. These principles are outlined on the following website: <http://www.independentproducerhandbook.co.uk/10/6a-factual-and-current-affairs-programming/ofcom-broadcasting-code.html>

<sup>101</sup> While Romani people are criticising, that the label 'Gypsy' in the title is misleading, as most of the participants are actually Irish Travellers, they also doubt – like the above-quoted Romani adolescent – that the Traveller community is represented accurately: “*But perhaps the greatest problem is with the programme's name. Call me old fashioned but I believe that the label should reflect what's in the tin. The programme should have been called My Big Fat Irish Traveller Weddings, because it's largely Irish Traveller culture that's in it. Though I doubt even Irish Travellers would recognise the portrait that's been painted of them.*” (URL 30)

*but just 10% of the Gypsy and Traveller population are actually Irish Travellers. The majority, like myself, are in fact Romany, yet your 'documentary' seems to ignore our existence. While I have nothing but respect for the Irish Traveller community, you seem to be unaware that we are two distinct ethnic groups and thus there are many differences between our cultures.* (URL 27)

Others are expressing the same concern, thereby referring to the implications this misconception may have: *"The Television Show 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding' promises a look into the 'Gypsy' lifestyle. What they are really doing is showing a small group of Irish Travellers and then passing them off as 'Gypsies'"* (URL 31), says Mario Williams, pointing to the fact that Romani have been suffering racism and prejudice for hundreds of years, not least because of the way they were stereotyped. He is apprehensive of the potential reputation the show may bring along, arguing that it took time and a lot of hard work to change people's perception about them, which may in further consequence be destroyed yet again with such a (mis-)representation. In this context, objectors are alluding to the presentation of *grabbing* as a part of Gypsy or Traveller culture. Romani woman Emma Doe, who also submitted her complaints to OFCOM, had never heard of such a courtship tradition before *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*:

*This programme has misrepresented Gypsies and the bizarre 'grabbing' ritual is something I have never heard of. I have spoken to several other families this morning (just in case I was missing a massive piece of my heritage) and this is not practised by Gypsies in Sussex and Surrey. I know that much. [...] This programme goes out to millions of people with a scene of a disturbing ritual – grabbing a girl and trying to force her to kiss you. [...] and this programme has presented this as a fact. Where is the research supporting this grabbing custom? [...] Now thanks to this programme another ridiculous belief is added to the list of misconceptions and prejudices against Gypsies.* (URL 29)

Evidently exasperated by the representational strategies, Pip describes the programme as 'a work of fiction' and expresses his surprise and displeasure with regard to the *grabbing* 'ritual' in a reminiscent manner:

*After watching the last series of your 'documentary' it finally hit me why I was so unlucky in love. I would have been married by now, if only I had known that the key to a women's heart was to sexually assault her using a gypsy courting ritual called 'grabbing'. I asked my brother if he had grabbed his wife, but it turned out he had just asked her out on a date*

*instead. It appears that in reality, no one actually knows what grabbing is, in fact Gypsy and Traveller men actually have a lot of respect for their women after all. (URL 27)*

The commissioning editor responsible for *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, Nick Hornby, responded, likewise with an open letter, to Pip's severe criticism. In particular, Hornby emphasises – in concord with other public statements made by Channel 4, in which the genre 'observational documentary' is highlighted (cf. URL 21) – that every aspect and story of the programme is told through the eyes of the contributors, who are talking about their own experiences in their own words, which allows him to feel confident that nobody has been misrepresented in any way<sup>102</sup>. The editor assures Pip that the production team repeatedly witnessed the custom of *grabbing* first-hand, and points out to him that the programme made it abundantly clear that it is a predominantly Irish Traveller custom (cf. URL 32). From what is observable in the ongoing debate, however, Irish Travellers do not confirm<sup>103</sup> that *grabbing* is a known courtship ritual in the community; quite the contrary. And although nobody within the Traveller community seems to know this custom, *grabbing* is still one of the 'cultural elements' featuring most often in the first series of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* and, moreover, picked up by the media on a large scale.

The presentation of *grabbing* as a tradition of Traveller culture may be a particularly sensitive spot in the ongoing debate, as the persons concerned see it as an invention of yet another stereotype – added to the ones already well established and, according to the show's adversaries, sustained in *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. Justina Uram Mubangu sums up the perpetuation of these stereotypes as follows:

*All of the racial archetypes surrounding the Roma are present – exotic girls dancing seductively to fast paced violin music in colorful “belly dancer-like” costumes, grown men fist fighting and playing dice in the street, and, in general, seemingly uneducated and low class people who inexplicably manage to have of loads of cash on hand for fast cars, extravagant weddings, and lavish first Communion celebrations. (URL 15)*

One of the major goals of the protests is to challenge the overall representation, which is characterised by the use of highly selective examples, stories and information, delivered to the

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<sup>102</sup> In this regard, I would like to refer – once again – to the statement made by Paddy Doherty, militating against the producer's point of view: “*It's all nonsense, it's just for a joke. The crew sort of tells you what to say and you play along. Danny Dyer made me out to be a very different person than I was. It was just for the cameras, it's not true.*” (URL 18)

<sup>103</sup> See for example <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/feb/25/truth-about-gypsy-traveller-life-women>

audience in an exaggerated and sensationalist manner and, in further consequence, presented as applicable to the Traveller or Gypsy community in general, thereby drawing on essentialist depictions and stereotypes such as the secretiveness of the community. Fearing that decontextualisation and the general lack of background information may lead to further misinterpretation of a an ethnic group already suffering from prejudice and discrimination, opponents of the show are trying to rectify some of the misconceptions and to enlighten the wider public. Traveller activist Rosaleen McDonagh describes *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* as “*very much a distortion of the reality of our everyday lives*” (URL 19) and while she clearly points out, that gender roles are narrowly defined within the Traveller community and that the young Traveller women participating in the programme have had little opportunity by way of educational prospects – in contrast to herself, as she has benefitted from third level education – she is denouncing the producers, that Travellers, and especially Traveller women, are once again portrayed as victims, subordinates and unintelligent. (cf. URL 32) In line with McDonagh, Justina Mubangu assesses and outlines in *The Human Rights Blog*, that every young Gypsy or Traveller girl is portrayed as beautiful yet pitifully uneducated – “*as a virginal seductress though totally powerless and without control over her own life*” (URL 15), and as a complementary to the Traveller man, who is street smart, tough, has a lot of money and enjoys drinking and fighting:

*She is innocent and chaste before marriage yet dresses like a Vegas prostitute. From childhood, she has dreamt of her wedding day and it consumes her thoughts. Though she may be somewhat disenchanted by the drudgery of her everyday life, she is nonetheless acquiescent and rarely questions her role in society. (ibid.)*

Not only are young women portrayed as habitually dressed like prostitutes and repeatedly captured on film while seductively dancing in tantalising outfits; there are also images of children in mini-skirts and with fake-tans as outlined in the preceding chapters and commented on by Catherine Joyce. Pip perceives this exposure as particularly worrying and harmful:

*Your 'documentary' has an unhealthy obsession with little girls. While I understand that the outfits worn by some of your younger stars could be considered a little risqué, I see only little girls having fun and dressing up for a special occasion. Your 'documentary' appears to be suggesting that we are inappropriately sexualising our children, yet the only people who are sexualising our children are the viewers who watch them and think they are sexy. In reality, our little girls can mostly be found in velour tracksuits and handmade frilly dresses, so I*

would suggest you should stop filming little girls dancing if you are finding that this is turning on your viewers. (URL 27)

Two additional points that annoy Pip about *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* are the conveyance of misinformation and the lack of information provided on topics such as education. In his open letter, he criticises the producers for the generalising manner in which they are conveying knowledge to the viewers. Pip states, that they correctly identified the considerably lower educational status and that many Gypsy and Traveller children leave school early, however, they fail to provide an accurate explanation for this. He tries to enlighten the people in charge about the reasons why children are failing to attend school, bringing arguments similar to those offered by the members of *Pavee Point*: social exclusion is contributing greatly to the lower education levels and the state education system, according to Pip, is ignorant of anything other than the mainstream culture, therefore only providing a curriculum that is irrelevant to their way of life. Moreover, Travellers and Gypsies are often labelled as troublemakers and bullied for being different, hence there are other reasons for leaving school early apart from 'being born to terrible parents', which in turn is Pip's perception of how the programme tries to explain this. Furthermore, he wants to raise awareness about the fact, that there are Gypsies and Travellers who do stay in education like himself disclosing to Channel 4 that “*dropping out of education is not a prerequisite of living in a trailer*”. (cf. *ibid.*)

What becomes explicit in the course of observing the ongoing debate is the general sentiment on the part of the adversaries that *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* offers not only a very limited perspective on Traveller and Gypsy culture but provides a partly inaccurate portrayal – one that is far from the 'very heart of Gypsy life'. Leaving aside the fact that a wedding is almost always a big occasion, especially for the bride-to-be, as McDonagh points out (cf. URL 19), and that it is therefore nothing unusual for a family to dedicate a lot of attention and resources to its planning, the series also fails to explain “*the proportion of the population that can afford this luxury and how much Channel 4 pays towards this extravagant spending*”. (URL 7) It fails to look at the harsh realities of Travellers and Gypsies in the United Kingdom and Ireland, as Catherine Joyce further criticises. (cf. *ibid.*) More importantly, however, is the notion and experience that the perpetuation of common stereotypes and misconceptions is misleading and that it generates prejudice and discrimination. The potential consequences that this might have will be briefly explored in the following, before turning to the moral obligations of the programme makers, which have not been reneged on according to the objectors and others, if applied to general approaches regarding ethical questions and responsibilities on part of filmmakers.

## 4.2 For the sake of entertainment: reinforcing ignorance

*“When entertainment of any kind feeds the public's false stereotypical image of a particular ethnic, religious or racial group it only reinforces ignorance.”*

(Yale Strom, filmmaker)

The Rural Media Company, which publishes the *Travellers' Times*<sup>104</sup> magazine and the associated website, has produced a guide for Gypsies and Travellers listing the points they should refer to when filing a complaint to OFCOM about the programme. In order to ensure that these complaints stick, it is not enough to allege that *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* is an inaccurate portrayal; there has to be some harmful effect or offence as a direct consequence of the series. In the light of the fact, that the Gypsy and Traveller communities do not have access to mass media channels to challenge a misleading representation, it is particularly harmful and offensive to portray them in a way that will put them at the risk of racist attacks, discrimination and exclusion, the Company argues. *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* is not presented to the audience as what it is, namely an authored programme, expressing a particular person's point of view. Quite the opposite, says Jane Jackson, member of the Rural Media Company:

*[I]t suggests it is a documentary giving the audience access to a (secret) community to learn more about it. It has a voice-over (written by the program makers) to tell us what is happening in the program and this is the main source of misleading information about the Gypsy and Travellers communities. That voice often suggests that what we are seeing on the screen is typical of the Gypsy community in the UK, but this very far from the truth.*  
(URL 29)

Mario Williams, participating in the protest and campaigning for a boycott of the advertisers, states that he has read dozens of reports from Travellers and Romani in the United Kingdom who are claiming that their children, as a consequence of the deceptive depictions conveyed by the series, are now subject of even more abuse and bullying. (cf. URL 31) The representation of Traveller or Gypsy culture, ostensibly one and homogeneous in nature, as juxtaposed to the rest of the world, only reinforces a “*‘us versus them’ attitude [which] only advances negative attitudes towards Gypsies and puts viewers on notice that the people they are about to encounter must be very mysterious and cannot be trusted*”, says Justina Mubangu. (cf. URL 15)

<sup>104</sup> The *Travellers' Times* magazine is a news-source from within the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, also concerned with media portrayals: “*Travellers' Times Online's media watchdog picks the latest examples of what the media is saying about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture*”. See <http://www.travellerstimes.org.uk>

Pip claims in his open letter, that he was subjected to physical attacks during the last series of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, outlining to the producers that his twelve-year-old cousin was beat up on her way home from school by girls who were calling her a prostitute. Pip, however, is not surprised that people who have watched the documentary purely laugh at Gypsies and Travellers, “*because even I laugh at the monstrosities that Thelma Madine creates*”, he says and alleges a further example which indicates what kind of responses such a representation can evoke:

*Last year, Leeds University Union thought it would be okay to laugh at the Gypsy and Traveller communities by hosting a Big Fat Gypsy Weddings fancy dress party. While the union holds events throughout the year to celebrate other ethnic minorities, your 'documentary' encouraged them to incite ethnic hatred. You'll be pleased to know that due to complaints from yours truly and friends, the event was shelved.* (URL 27)

While commissioning editor Nick Hornby says that he feels sorry to hear that Pip and his cousin have experienced abuse, he is playing down the responsibility on the part of the production team:

*[...] it is clearly unacceptable but I hope you agree that we cannot be held responsible for the actions of the public. It is not and was never the intention of any of the films to encourage negative feelings towards Gypsies or Travellers [...]. Despite your fear that people are watching the documentaries simply to laugh at Gypsies and Travellers, I think the films are celebratory and I hope never derogatory. All the issues touched on in the series were thoroughly researched and while we understand that some of the issues are challenging, we are confident that the programme is fair and accurate.* (URL 32)

Not everybody within the Traveller and Gypsy community, however, agrees with the protesters. Some may be pleased with their representation in *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* and with a programme that seems to be fascinated with Traveller and Gypsy culture, standing, at least on the face of it, very much in contrast to the often overtly hostile newspaper coverage. Nevertheless, and as Kabachnik (cf. 2009) argues in reference to *The Riches* and *Snatch*, visibility can prove harmful when it perpetuates dominant representations, thereby entrenching stereotypes. Moreover, Gypsies and Travellers – as groups which are readily and easily stereotyped – are not normally integrated members of the group that is in effect stereotyping and labelling, which makes it difficult for them to challenge such representations and provide different images; images of their realities, the way they perceive them produced by themselves. (cf. Morris 2000: 213) While the producers, as Hornby argues, can of course not be held directly responsible for public actions, they can neither shift the

whole responsibility. *"Objectivity is a myth"*, says Larry Gross, *"but a myth with consequences."* (1988a: 189)

Within the Traveller and Gypsy communities, it is widely agreed that the show is the opposite of what it purports to be. According to the adversaries, the audience gets an overly simplistic view of Traveller and Gypsy culture as the show operates according to voyeuristic, stereotypical, and judgmental representational strategies. The overall presentation comes down to the notion, *"that Travellers and Roma [are] uneducated, flashy, and closed-minded people who live in mobile-home parks and throw enormous parties"*. (URL 34) Considering the public statements given by Channel 4, they do not seem to be aware of the dangers inherent in such a representation and the very real consequences that overly shallow depictions may have, proving particularly harmful when imposed on one of the world's most misunderstood and, at times, abused minorities. (cf. *ibid.*) But, as Mayall argues:

*Images, created for the most part by outsiders, provide a basis for how we interpret our experience, and pre-informed information and knowledge affect our perceptions and judgement by providing a normative, or standard, picture. Images themselves are rarely value-free, and the judgements they contain are often those that will generally be accepted. There can be little doubt that negative images reinforce negative responses and that there is some connection between racial stereotyping and discriminatory treatment.* (2004: 17)

In line with Mayall's and as well Yale Strom's statements quoted above, Dyer (cf. 2002) points towards the unequal power relations that come into play within systems of representation: How we are seen is determined by representation and, consequently, partly determines how we are treated. How others see members of a group, their place and their rights is affected by those in power. Given the huge success of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, it would be surprising if the producers relinquished their control over the contents of the show and changed the concept to a more balanced and less sensational depiction of the Traveller community. The content of broadcasting, in accordance with Singer, depends upon the predilections of those individuals who are in positions of power. He concludes: *"If they like flowers you will see more botany programmes."* (1992: 271) As briefly discussed in Chapter 2, the creation of meaning is complex and certainly not exclusively dependent on the producers of the images. Nevertheless, the power of the media is evident – especially *"in their role as mediators of information about and images of those parts of society most distant from*

*the lives of the majority*” (Gross et al. 1988: 27), and, especially, when there are claims to objectivity involved, such as in the very idea of an observational documentary.

### 4.3 The production of images: a question of responsibility

Catherine Joyce, manager of a local Traveller organisation, finds herself asking where this new found fascination with the Traveller community stems from. There almost seems to be an overrepresentation in both television and the print media, considering that Irish Travellers constitute only 0.5% of the Irish population. Even more pressing, however, are other questions and issues she is worried about:

*[W]hy are the Travellers taking part in some of these programmes and why is it that the media shy away from engaging with politically active Travellers? Do they not want to hear the real every day stories about the breaches of our human rights? [...] And do they not want to see the sites that some Traveller children are forced to live in squalor in third world conditions with no access to clean running water, no toilets and no electricity? (URL 7)*

According to Ruby (cf. 1991: 55) and Hampe (cf. 1997: 80), and which becomes apparent by a very basic critical examination of the media landscape, subjects become 'documentary pop-stars' and many people just enjoy their fifteen minutes of fame and are seemingly willing to trade that for their dignity, thus neither questioning how these images are constructed nor giving thought to their impact on the audience and the damaging effects this might have. Documentary filmmakers might not even be aware of the potential problems people in their films may face, but, as Ruby (cf. *ibid.*) postulates, “[t]he use of people for our advantage is an ethically questionable undertaking; in its extreme it is exploitation in the literal sense.” (Pryluck 1976: 24) Success, in this case that of the producers of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* – although the same holds true for research physicians, sociologists or anthropologists – depends on the subjects, who – most of the time – have little, or nothing to gain from their participation. (cf. *ibid.*) As Ruby points out (cf. 2000), there are moral questions and ethical obligations whenever one produces an image of another and whenever people or groups are not speaking for themselves. What is true for the anthropologist can also be applied to a filmmaker – especially to a documentarian: “One must consider the consequences for those among whom one works of simply being there, of learning about them, and what becomes of what is learned.” (Hymes 1972: 48 cited in Ruby 2000a) One of the moral obligations which Ruby is

referring to is to reveal the covert. What the producers of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* claim to do, is to give 'a unique insight into Traveller and Gypsy communities' through an observational documentary. It is still a middle-class English non-Traveller who acts as an adviser and the expert on Gypsy culture<sup>105</sup>. The voice-over is conveying information to the audience; information that is not based on research, as the adversaries claim, keeping in mind that a documentary is assumed to give a 'voice to the voiceless'. (cf. Ruby 1991: 51) Rosaleen McDonagh highlights this understanding of a documentary: *"My understanding of documentaries is that they should educate, inform, be interesting and tell a narrative where the vulnerable become strong and empowered during the course of the storyline – 'empowered' being the key word."* (URL 33) In this context, issues of participation, power and social mobility come into play, leading McDonagh to raise further questions; questions that have already been examined in the theoretical part of this paper and which revolve around the balance of representations: Who writes the books about Travellers? How often have members of the Traveller community been on television? Who makes these films, series or documentaries? Who edits and who is the target audience? (cf. *ibid.*)

The producers do not seem to be responsive to the criticism. Pip asks them to stop ruining his life, as he, and apparently thousands more, are not interested in these fifteen minutes of fame. Instead he is convinced that the persons in authority have the moral obligation 'to put humans above ratings':

*We suffer from discrimination on a daily basis and our human rights have historically been violated, yet you deem it acceptable to broadcast a misleading 'documentary' that has been made not to raise awareness of our plight but for entertainment. We are not a joke, we are human beings and your work of fiction is only strengthening stereotypes and ignorance.*  
(URL 27)

Nick Hornby, however, speaking for the production team, is confident that the programme is 'fair and accurate', not acknowledging that they might also have made a buck at the expense of Travellers and Gypsies. (cf. URL 31) "[W]here will this end", asks activist Catherine Joyce, *"and where is the moral responsibility to ensure that programmes have content and substance that is more reflective of the communities rather than concentrating on the entertainment and shock factor"*

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<sup>105</sup> Pip writes the following about Thelma Madine in his open letter: *"I've been to many Gypsy and Traveller weddings, but I'm yet to attend a wedding where the bride's dress weighs more than my whole family. Don't get me wrong, I've seen some huge dresses but there is something you need to know: Thelma Madine is lying to you, she's not our dressmaker of choice. In fact, I'm kind of embarrassed for her because no one actually knows who she is and everything she says about us is actually untrue. Basically, you've been conned, so I suggest you find a new spokesperson for the Gypsy and Traveller communities, such as an actual Gypsy or Traveller like my Baba (grandma), she makes some right nice clothes you know."* (URL 27)

*which seems to be the biases for a lot of these programmes?” (URL 7) In contrast to Travellers, the producers actually have the power “to equalize and not to skew further the radically unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources in our society” (Gross 1988a: 192), if they would only use this power in the way envisaged by Pip and other protesters. But, as Kafka once said: “In the fight between you and the world, bet on the world.”*

## Conclusion

It has been my intention to critically examine the way in which Irish Travellers are represented in the documentary series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* and the question of how the public discourse regarding the minority group becomes visible in a television programme that reaches an enormous amount of viewers. Based on the understanding of visual representations both as means of communication and cultural and symbolic forms in which social discourses are manifested, it was the aim of the analysis to question claims of truth and objectivity which are seemingly inherent in a documentary and, furthermore, substantiated by the presenters. To expose what is often accepted at face value is the very potential of a critical visual analysis. To unveil the constructed nature of images, the Traveller image in this specific case, is a first step towards a new and more inclusive discourse. In the light of the huge success of the show, possible implications of conveying (mis-)information about Travellers and Romani people was assessed in a second second step, thereby taking into account the voices of those concerned and, as became apparent through the observation of the ongoing protest against the broadcast by Channel 4, those affected.

Various scholars, anthropologists among others, have directed their attention to the portrayal of Irish Travellers in both literature and newspapers as well as other regimes of representation, such as paintings, plays and government reports. Although high in number, Traveller-related depictions in films, documentaries and series have been considered to a lesser extent until now. The body of work concerned with the representation of Irish Travellers gives a valuable insight into the process of 'Othering' and discloses the question of how specific portrayals contribute to and reproduce a discourse which is to a large part defined by the 'outside'. The present paper can therefore be seen as an additional, yet small, contribution to the consideration of this very question, which ultimately revolves around unequal power relations – trying to highlight the potentially adverse effects of a portrayal through a medium that is supposed to reach an audience numbered in millions; a portrayal which is, more importantly, not created by the ones who are being portrayed. While considering Sinéad Ní Shúinéar's that anthropological research “*is correctly a response to the realities and concerns of the researched rather than the imposition of one's own*” and with the “*emphasis on seeing the world as others see it*” (2006: 70), approaching questions of representation through a realistic and subversive reading of a popular film text concerned with a different culture acknowledges that contemporary anthropology – in the sense of Sutton and Wogan (cf. 2009) – is in flux and has to offer multiple and flexible methods for the engagement with mass media.

Already at an early stage of the research process, it was noticeable that elements of the discourse of difference – which started to emerge during the quest for a new national self-identity after British rule – are still present. In the early twentieth century, Irish Travellers became the 'projective outlet' for those stereotypes and essentialist depictions which were formerly ascribed by the British authorities to the Irish citizenry, including backwardness, sexual profligacy, violence and a repugnance for rules, as outlined in Chapter 1. The image of Travellers as the cultural 'Other' is entrenched in Irish popular tradition and perpetuated in the smash-hit series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*, in which all above-mentioned stereotypes can be encountered. A different and, more importantly, often negatively evaluated way of life provides the basis for the drawing of boundaries. Cultural elements and the essentialist construction of the same are the means by which it is measured what one is not. This discourse of normality – reflected in the relationship between the majority population and Irish Travellers – is manifested in (visual) representations and becomes visible in the course of critically examining the representational strategies of *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. While one century has passed by since 'tinkers' were depicted as the embodiments of a pre-colonial past, one still encounters the perception of Travellers as the leftovers of an earlier age. The programme represents both Travellers and Roma as exotic and fascinating people who are clinging on to their ancient traditions which the modern world has long abandoned. When Travellers are asked about their traditions, customs and ways of living, the biases on the part of the production team are disclosed, if not necessarily on purpose. Cultural elements such as trailer living are taken up to highlight difference and to contrast the deviant to what is considered as normal. It is precisely this exoticism and the continuation of treating Travellers as manifestations of 'folk life' that sets them further apart from the majority population. As Okely (cf. 1994: 5) has pointed out, such an exoticisation may appear harmless in poetry. It might even be enriching when found in literature, painting or fiction, but the imagery lives on and has the potential to blur the boundaries between phantom and person – between rhetoric and reality. Considering that truth claims are involved in a documentary, this specific way of portraying a minority group may prove even more harmful and widen the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Travellers and the majority population, as Traveller culture is not only presented as different, but as an oddity.

What *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* has in common with other programmes and portrayals is not only the accentuation of difference but that the same is mediated by outside voices. Through the use of commentary – which in general tends to establish distance and turn people into objects – and including a non-Traveller as the expert on Traveller culture, both constituting channels through which most of the information is conveyed to a non-specialist and uncommitted audience, the

documentary fails to keep its promise, i.e. provide an insight into Traveller culture and show the majority population who Travellers and Gypsies really are. While participants, according to themselves, saw an opportunity in the TV series to dispel common stereotypes and depictions mediated through various channels and entrenched in the public discourse, the producers chose to present the exotic rather than the everyday life in order to get the attention of the 'floating' viewers. Instead of 'giving a voice to the voiceless', the audience is entertained by fast-paced violin music and images of half-naked girls who are dancing in front of the camera, while the narrator – with an ever melodramatic intonation – tries to explore the seemingly extravagant world of Travellers. These accounts are characterised by simplistic statements and an overtly sensationalist manner, failing to take the advantage of the opportunity to explore serious and highly relevant topics, such as education, evictions, domestic violence or prejudice and discrimination, i.e. failing to give the promised insight into the 'very heart of Gypsy and Traveller culture'.

The discourse of 'Otherness' in Ireland, as it has been explored by various scholars, was characterised by a vague knowledge of Traveller culture. While the presenters of the show are promising to provide a balanced view to 'a world that judges on face value', short cuts in the conveyance of background information are conducive to the perpetuation of misconceptions, which in further consequence may influence a pre-informed knowledge and affect perceptions as well as expectations. Furthermore, preconceptions are resonating to these accounts, thereby not only communicating about the 'Other' but unveiling an image and a perception of the 'Other' that is based on one's own terms of reference – most obviously reflected in the use of a certain language and vocabulary, both in the series and in the corresponding book. Sensationalist, exacerbated and decontextualised accounts are the show's commonalities with the newspaper coverage of Irish Travellers. Both support and substantiate the anti-Traveller discourse and contribute to the consolidation of the position Travellers have in Irish and English society. Travellers themselves had little say regarding their identity over the course of the last century and have not been in the position to influence a discourse that is characterised by unequal power relations. Irish Travellers and 'Gypsies' are neither acknowledged as the experts on their culture in *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*.

Although the producers seem to be aware of the degree of prejudice that exists towards the Traveller community in Ireland and the United Kingdom, they do not make an effort to deconstruct common stereotypes and misconceptions; there are rather more added to the list. Apart from the spectacular wedding dresses and the young Traveller women who dress like prostitutes, violent, distrustful and secretive behaviour is presented to the viewers, most of the time insinuating that the stories being

told are applicable to every Traveller or Gypsy. The 'trouble-maker' image, also present in literary portrayals, other films and TV series and, especially, in newspapers, can be found once again. While difference is highlighted and sameness forgotten, diversity is not captured – in favour of generalising accounts which presume homogeneity, both within the Traveller community and the rest of the modern world to which it is opposed. This juxtaposition is not acknowledging the significance of the contemporary presence of Travellers and neither is it based on mutual respect. What was formerly the figure of the 'tinker', is still associated with a repressed awareness of modernity. As ever, there is a thin line between the perception of Travellers as fascinating people and a morally suspect group that has to be met with suspicion.

While Travellers and the various support groups are, probably more than ever, trying to dispel what has become the 'truth' about Travellers in the public discourse, the well established imagery is hard to deconstruct. Women are portrayed as housewives and the passive counterparts to the tough Traveller men, yet, Traveller women play key roles in the Traveller movements and are actively involved in the fight against social exclusion, as can be seen when taking a look at the advocacy work that has been and is still done. And while dialogue is actually sought by the various support groups, the audience is left with the impression that Travellers – as Thelma points out in each opening sequence – 'don't want anybody knowing anything about them at all'. The myth of the refusal to integrate in the wider community is perpetuated and not further commented on. Single-factor explanations are not sufficient for the complex processes that have been and are taking place in a nation state with an indigenous ethnic minority. The difficult task of providing a more authentic picture of the Traveller community has rather been achieved by recent fictional novels than by the observational documentary.

As outlined in the theoretical part of the present paper, stereotypes and the attachment of particular labels to a group play a crucial role for the responses and attitudes towards them. To demonstrate the same through the chosen example has been one of the aspirations of this approach. Travellers and Roma who are protesting against the Channel 4 broadcast call *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* a 'mockumentary', describing the series as a voyeuristic, insensitive and grossly xenophobic portrayal of the community. Opponents of the show feel mocked and misrepresented, alleging that the producers are violating human sensibilities and are conveying deceptive depictions to an audience that is in numbered in millions, therefore evoking negative responses and contributing to the sustainment of prejudice and discrimination. Meaning is, yet again, imposed rather than negotiated and dialogue neglected in favour of the production of images mediated by outside voices. For the

sake of entertainment. Such outside voices – in keeping with Lanter (cf. 2008: 216) and what has also been my intention to highlight – are still and too often setting the agenda for Travellers and are speaking on their behalf. Therefore the last word, a positive appraisal, should belong to Traveller Catherine Joyce: *“I think I’m one of these people that would be optimistic in terms of change in this country, and I think one of the more positive things about it is that Travellers are actually getting involved in steering that change and directing the change. Any change that comes about with the involvement of Travellers for me has to be a positive thing. I would hope that this society in 10 years’ time would be a society that we could call multi-cultural and anti-racist. I don’t think we are going to change everybody, but I think that we need to change the practice and make racism the exception rather than the rule.”* (URL 35)

## Appendix

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## **Filmography**

*Big Fat Gypsy Weddings*. United Kingdom 2010 – Present. Directed by Morag Tinto

Episodes:

*My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. 2011. Directed by Osca Humphreys

*Born to Be Wed*. 2011

*No Place Like Home*. 2011

*Boys Will Be Boys*. 2011

*Bride and Prejudice*. 2011

*Blood of the Travellers*. Ireland 2011. Created by Francis Barrett

*Into the West*. Ireland 1992. Directed by Mike Newell

*Pavee Lackeen. The Traveller Girl*. Ireland 2005. Directed by Perry Ogden

*Snatch*. United Kingdom 2000. Directed by Guy Ritchie

*The Riches*. United States 2007 – 2008. Created by Dmitry Lipkin

*The Truth about Travellers*. Ireland 2010. Directed by Owen McArdle

*Traveller*. Ireland 2001. Directed by Alen MacWeeney

## Abstract and Curriculum Vitae

The present paper has three strands. The first is concerned with the anti-Traveller discourse in Ireland and the question of how an indigenous ethnic minority – still at the margins of Irish society – became the cultural 'Other' in the course of a post-colonial nation's quest for a new self-identity. Distinctive cultural elements, i.e. a different way of life brought about images of Irish Travellers ranging from romantic symbols of a more traditional Ireland through to a morally suspect group and a countercultural threat. Based on scholarly approaches concerned with representations of Irish Travellers, the question of whether and how these portrayals contribute to and sustain the discourse of 'Otherness' is addressed. In a second step and through a critical visual analysis and the textual reading of the observational documentary series *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* it is examined how the public discourse regarding Travellers is materialised in a show which is broadcasted by a popular channel and therefore reaches an audience numbered in millions. In doing so, the focus is on the programme structure and the overall design, thereby especially considering the way of how information is conveyed to a wider public and how Irish Travellers are depicted. The third strand of this paper takes into account voices of dissent from both Irish Travellers and Romani people who see themselves to be subjected to misrepresentation and who are apprehensive of the potential reputation and consequences the series, in no small part due to its popularity, may cause.

\* \* \* \* \*

Auf der Suche nach einer neuen, post-kolonialen Identität und nationalstaatlichen Geschichtsschreibung, hat sich ab dem Zeitpunkt der Unabhängigkeit Irlands ein Diskurs entwickelt, welcher keinen Platz ließ für Diversität und die Einbindung einer indigenen Minderheit, die sich aufgrund ihrer Lebensweise von der Mehrheitsbevölkerung unterscheidet und bis heute am Rand der Gesellschaft angesiedelt ist. Während es im Zuge der Entkolonialisierung und der angestrebten Wiederbelebung des Irischen – vor allem in der Literatur – romantische Attribute waren, die den Travellers zugeschrieben wurden, sahen die Machthaber eine Gefahr in einer „unzeitgemäßen“ Lebensweise. Diese wurde als inkompatibel mit dem Vorhaben der wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Modernisierung des Landes betrachtet. Welche essentialistischen Zuschreibungen das kollektive Bewusstsein der Mehrheitsbevölkerung geprägt haben und wie diese durch Literatur und Medien aufrechterhalten und einer breiten Öffentlichkeit vermittelt wurden und werden, wird im ersten Teil dieser Arbeit beleuchtet. Eine kritische visuelle Analyse der Dokumentarfilmreihe *Big Fat Gypsy Weddings* soll Aufschluss darüber geben, ob und inwieweit der öffentliche Diskurs über die

kulturell „Anderen“ in Irland und England in der Serie materialisiert wird. Dabei wird einerseits hinterfragt, inwiefern die Produzenten ihrem Wahrheits- und Objektivitätsanspruch gerecht werden. Andererseits, und in Anbetracht des enormen Erfolges der Serie, soll unter Einbezug der Kritik der Gegner – die sich einer weiteren Fehlrepräsentation ausgesetzt sehen – ein Blick darauf geworfen werden, welche Implikationen und Konsequenzen die Vermittlung von falschen oder simplifizierenden Informationen sowie stereotypisierende Darstellungen haben können.

## Curriculum Vitae

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**Name:** Claudia Wührer

**Geburtsdaten:** geb. 14. November 1986/Braunau am Inn

**Ausbildung:**

**2001 - 2005** BORG Ried im Innkreis mit Schwerpunkt Bildnerisches Gestalten und Werkerziehung, Matura am 15. Juni 2005 (mit gutem Erfolg)

**2006** Beginn des Studiums Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie an der Universität Wien  
Spezialisierungen: Friedens- und Konfliktforschung (INGORAPS), interkulturelle Kompetenz und Menschenrechte, Wissenschaftstheorie (am Institut für Philosophie, Universität Wien und NUI Maynooth) sowie Revolution und Soziale Bewegungen (am Institut für Geschichte, Universität Wien und NUI Maynooth)

**2009** Erhalt eines Leistungsstipendiums der Universität Wien

**2010 – 2010** Erasmus Aufenthalt an der National University of Ireland, Maynooth

**Sprachkenntnisse:** Deutsch – Muttersprache  
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**Weitere Tätigkeiten:**

**2005 – 2006** Einjähriger Aufenthalt in Südamerika und (Klein-) Kinderbetreuung in einem Waisenhaus in Cuzco (Peru)

**2008 – 2010** Private Nachhilfe in Englisch und Mathematik für SchülerInnen der Unter- und Oberstufe