Abstract:

This paper argues that the symbolic power of an image rests upon the dismissal of the voices of those depicted. To do so, it explores several recent controversies over media portrayals of the Romani people: the National Geographic show American Gypsies (2012), the cover of the Swiss magazine Die Weltwoche (12 April, 2012), and the documentary film Shutka Book of Records (Aleksandar Manic, 2005). Claiming that the television show American Gypsies “misrepresents Romanies for financial gain at the expense of Romani culture, livelihood and social status,” Romani activists in the US organized a petition to end the broadcasting of the show. Similarly, believing that Shutka Book of Records desensitized viewers to Roma reality and naturalized their exclusion from mainstream society, the Roma in Skopje challenged the representativeness of the documentary and followed its screenings with peaceful protests. Racial incitement was depicted in the Swiss magazine Die Weltwoche, whose cover misappropriated image of a Roma boy with a toy gun—taken two years earlier by a photographer in Kosovo—and was followed by the caption The Roma Are Coming. The article argued that Roma are fueling “crime tourism” in the country. The controversial photograph and the article that accompanied it fueled activists’ responses and public debate in the mainstream media. Following Barbie Zelizer, this paper argues, “it is in the intricate circumstances by which each picture is produced, distributed, contextualized, recycled and viewed that its impact comes clear.” This paper uses the recent controversies over Roma visual representations to show the tensions between the universal and the particular—between the circumstances that facilitate the symbolic status of Roma visuals and
the need to look more closely at their denotative aspects. It also raises the question of how best to hear and incorporate the voices of the people represented in these images.