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Introduction

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*I was stolen by the gypsies. My parents stole
me right back. Then the gypsies stole me again.
This went on for some time. One minute I was
in the caravan suckling the dark teat of my new
mother, the next I sat at the long dining room table
eating my breakfast with a silver spoon.
It was the first day of spring. One of my
fathers was singing in the bathtub; the other one
was painting a live sparrow the colors of a tropical
bird.*

Charles Simic, *The World Doesn't End*, 1989

On September 8th, 2016, the children's film *Nellys Abenteuer* (*Nelly's
Adventure*) was released in Germany, receiving, in the months to come,
an appreciative welcome in professional film circles. The fact that it
revives the age-old scare story of 'gypsies'[1] who steal children seems to
have slipped under almost everybody's racism-awareness radar during
all the stages of the film production process – from its conception,

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1   The designation 'gypsy' is used here to refer to the cultural construct as elaborated
    by Klaus-Michael Bogdal and Hans Richard Brittnacher (*Leben*), hence the omitted
    initial capital letter in 'gypsy'. Subsequently, when it appears in the titles of art-
    works, such as *Gipsey's Stealing a Child*, I have adhered to the original spelling of
    the word. The term 'Roma', conversely, is used here on the occasions when I refer
    to real people.

through the fundraising campaign and up to its distribution.[2] This is all the more remarkable when we consider that the motif of 'gypsy' child-theft was extraordinarily popular in European literature during the nineteenth century; it counted as one of the stock plots in the silent film period, i.e. in the first three decades of the twentieth century, but its commercial success in the sound period was short-lived. There are few sound films in which the story of 'gypsies' who kidnap children is treated seriously in a realistic mode. In the light of these developments, *Nellys Abenteuer* presents a symptomatic case and warrants attention. Not only does the film revive a story pattern that has long been obsolete in sound cinema, but it also blends the story with hard-hitting realism, in so far as the genre of children's film allows.

In the film, blond, blue-eyed and sweet-looking Nelly (**Fig. 1**), a German teenager, is kidnapped by the shady criminal Hokus, a Romanian Roma, stylised as a typical 'gypsy' figure. Sporting a black felt hat over his long curly black hair, Hokus has a dark-skinned face overgrown with a black, bristly beard, flashing now and again his one golden tooth.[3] In fact, throughout the film, the 'gypsy'-looking thug kidnaps Nelly not once but twice: the first time, he lures her into his car when she is in the company of two Roma kids from his gang, and, using the cover of the night, takes her to a 'real' Roma settlement.[4] The second time, in the midst of a forest, Hokus places a handkerchief soaked in chloroform on

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2   Producer of the film is the German company INDI Films; two of the co-producers are public television channels – Südwestrundfunk (SWR) and Saarländischer Rundfunk (SR). Over 930,000 euros from public funds have been allocated for the film production; the official funders include MFG Filmförderung Baden-Württemberg, Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung, Deutscher Filmförderfonds, Filmförderungsanstalt, Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, BKM (for the script). According to the film's official website, *Nellys Abenteuer* has received four festival awards and has been nominated for eight other festival awards (*Nellys*).

3   Compare his screen image with the illustration of the 'gypsy' child-thief in the nineteenth-century German children's book entitled *Anna, das geraubte Kind* [*Anna, the Stolen Child*] (**Fig. 28** in Section 6.4.1.).

4   In a video statement, published on the SWR website and later removed, the director Dominik Wessely explains his choice of setting and cast: "Es war uns immer klar, dass es ein echtes Romadorf sein muss"; "Mir war elementar wichtig, dass diese beiden Kinder auch von Roma gespielt werden. Da ging es mir einfach auch um das Maß an Authentizität, das sehr wichtig war für die Gestaltung dieser Figuren." [It was always clear to us that it had to be a real Roma village. It was important for me that these two children should be also performed by Roma. I was concerned about the degree of authenticity, which was very important for the construction of these figures; my translation, R.M.] (Wessely 2017).

Fig. 1. Screenshots from the film *Nellys Abenteuer* (2016, Dir. Dominik Wessely): The thirteen-year-old Nelly Klabund (Flora Li Thiemann) and her kidnapper Hokus (Marcel Costea)

Nelly's mouth, and when the girl collapses unconscious in his hands, he throws her over his shoulder and carries her away.

The film provoked a heated public discussion in the autumn of 2017, and since then, a series of official statements have been released by organisations and scholars on both sides of the debate.[5] I shall not engage here in the exchange of arguments. A lot has been written already on the antigypsy content of the film that, in addition to the child-theft motif, exploits a whole series of 'gypsy' stereotypes. However, I wish to point to *Nellys Abenteuer* as the most recent example of a racialised representation of protagonists framed by the 'gypsy' child-theft narrative. The colour coding of bodies in black and white in the film follows a representational pattern that goes all the way back to seventeenth-century European arts and even much earlier.

The main object of my inquiry here, as the title suggests, is the age-old motif of 'gypsies' who steal children. In the following chapters, together with the reader, we shall consider the motif's literary origins, its metamorphoses across time and space in a number of different visual media – from history paintings, through prints and book illustrations to

5   For statements and other publications written in defence of the film, see Becker; INDI Film; and Götz. For statements criticising the film, see Brunßen; Heftrich; and Josting.

silent films – trying to throw light on the disparate layers of meaning and the multiple functions that the motif has acquired over the course of time. But in doing so, we shall keep a vigilant eye on one specific feature that is generally brushed aside, regarded as self-evident or too banal to be worth even mentioning, and that is the colour coding of human bodies, both in texts and images. Under colour coding, we should understand not only verbal or pictorial references to skin colour and/or other phenotypical features (such as hair colour and shape or eye colour) but also the additional emphasis on colour in relation to bodies, achieved through the use of light and shadow, through styling and costumes or by the choice of setting in which bodies are placed.

In *Nellys Abenteuer*, for instance, it is not only that the casting director has chosen the blond and blue-eyed Flora Li Thiemann to play the role of Nelly Klabund, the identification figure in the film, representing a typical German teenager. The film also shows us that Nelly has fair-skinned and fair-haired parents who live in a house with a blindingly white interior located in a sunny and impressively tidy neighbourhood, where white and its adjacent colours ostensibly predominate. In sharp contrast, Hokus and his people are associated with dark skin, with dark objects, with the time of night, and with the space of unlit, poverty-stricken settlements. The screen images of Nelly and Hokus, victim and perpetrator of child-theft, are thus stylised to create a clear line of separation between 'white' Europeans (in this case Germans) and 'non-white' 'gypsy' figures. The same considerations hold for the poem by Charles Simic, quoted in the epigraph. In just a few lines, it succeeds in evoking a dyadic world that is defined and divided along colour lines: the "dark teat" of the 'gypsy' mother is set against the "silver spoon" of the 'non-gypsy', a direct reference to the noble, blue-blooded descent of the lyrical "I"; the bathtub of one father, a space connoting whiteness and cleanliness, is opposed to the tropically colourful canvas of the other father. It is not even necessary to specify who is the 'gypsy' and who is the birth parent.

Against the backdrop of these two artworks – a full-length children's film, a short poem, and the images they conjure up – I can formulate the driving questions of my research as follows: why are 'gypsies' almost universally perceived as 'non-white'? In his significant work *Leben auf der Grenze*, the German literary scholar Hans Brittnacher pertinently observes that the 'blackness' of 'gypsy' skin is factually as false as it is aesthetically obligatory (cf. 230). Why is a minority group whose members range from blond to darker brunettes perceived only in the following ways: as bronzed, swarthy, "tawny as Havana cigars"

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to quote the nineteenth-century French poet and art critic Théophile Gautier (Brown 1); as "dark brown, or olive coloured" in the words of the eighteenth-century German scholar Grellmann (8); or as black and "of the devil's body colour" if we refer to the seventeenth-century German writer Grimmelshausen (143) – i.e. perceptions spanning the whole gamut of 'non-white' tones, and why are Roma never or hardly ever perceived as 'white'? This question hinges on a major and again seemingly redundant question that concerns the representation of national majorities in Europe, namely: why are present-day Europeans (i.e. representatives of the ethnic majorities in European nation-states) universally perceived and self-perceived, regardless of their social status, as 'white' when in the times of feudalism 'white' skin, this highly cherished attribute, was a monopoly of the royals and the aristocrats?

In the following chapters, I shall demonstrate the need for a critical approach to antigypsy texts and images that takes into consideration and articulates, no matter how banal and self-evident the descriptions may seem, the colour coding of bodies simply because colour coding lays the basis for racialised representations. Racialisation is one of the key concepts employed in the ensuing analysis, drawing on the definition elaborated by the British sociologist Robert Miles. He posits that 'racialisation' (and its synonymous term 'racial categorisation') is "a process of delineation of group boundaries and of allocation of persons within those boundaries by primary reference to (supposedly) inherent and/or biological (usually phenotypical) characteristics. It is therefore an ideological process" (74–75). Adopting Miles' understanding of racialisation is fruitful for my undertaking because, in his definition, the application of the term is not limited to historical contexts where the idea of biological 'race' is already present; for, as Miles demonstrates, from the fifteenth century onwards, skin colour was signified as a means of collective representation. There is one further point to be made here. According to Miles, it is important that racialisation should be understood as a dialectical process of signification: by defining Africans as 'black', Europeans have implicitly defined themselves as occupying the opposite end of a common continuum of skin colour, that is, as being 'white' (74–75).

Focusing on the opposition of Europeans versus Africans, Miles reconstructs the black-and-white matrix of European racism in his book, outlining its historical development, inner dynamics, and modern forms of expression. The thought pattern he describes in the following quote, though, is just as applicable to the black-and-white mind-set that underpins antigypsyism:

> (...) various human physical features (some imaginary) were signified as monstrous, one of which was skin colour. Western Christianity associated certain colours with a range of additional meanings, with the result that it embodied a colour symbolism mirroring that of the preceding classical world. A white/black contrast expressed a complex of additional meanings, similarly dichotomous, such as good/evil, pure/diabolical, spiritual/carnal, and Christ/Satan ... Thus colour expressed a hierarchical religious evaluation which attained a more widespread secular content within Western culture..., parallels with which can be drawn with the Islamic world... Where distinctions between human beings were designate by reference to skin colour, this colour symbolism had a powerful evaluative implication. Monstrousness, sin and blackness therefore constituted a rather different form of Trinity in European Christian culture in this period. (16–17)

> (...) the scientific discourse of 'race' did not replace earlier conceptions of the Other. Ideas as savagery, barbarism, and civilisation both predetermined the space that the idea of 'race' occupied but were then themselves reconstituted by it. (33)

In the artworks under discussion here, it is often the case that the aesthetic juxtaposition of 'white' Europeans versus 'gypsies' is complemented and enhanced by a parallel juxtaposition with 'black' Africans. Such contrastive oppositions should be viewed as aesthetic tools developed for the purpose of producing and instituting 'white' European identity; their practical purpose is to calibrate the eyesight, metaphorically speaking, informing the perception of white and non-white colour in relation to human skin. In this context, antigypsy aesthetics represents one of the many tools for conferring or disavowing 'whiteness', each tool having a different social and geographic scope.

Also, a few words need to be said about the phrases commonly used to designate the motif in question: the motif of children-stealing 'gypsies' or the motif of 'gypsy' child-theft[6] refers to a recurrent story pattern that rests on two pivotal events: a child is first stolen and then rescued or, years later, recognised and recovered. Thus, the motif of

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6   Other common formulations in English include "child/baby-snatching gypsies", "Gypsies as child stealers", or "the stereotype of the Gypsy baby thief" while in German, there are only two widespread formulations: "Kindesraubmotiv" or "Kinderraubmotiv".

child-theft comprises both events – the theft and the rescue/recognition,[7] even though it is named after the first event. Bearing in mind this two-event structure, I can already shed light, albeit in very broad terms, on three major developments in the history of the motif's visualisations that will become a focal point of my analysis. To begin with, during the seventeenth century, the story of the child that was stolen at birth by 'gypsies' enjoyed great popularity among Dutch history painters who were drawn almost without exception to the climactic moment of recognition. These artists, who catered for the tastes of the Dutch high nobility, showed interest exclusively in the second event of the story, the moment when the stolen child's true identity is revealed. To my knowledge, there are only two images of the period that depict the scene of child-abduction.[8] So, one is bound to ask, why? Why this marked preference for the scene of anagnorisis? This is an important question with far-reaching implications and we shall delve into it by engaging with Cervantes' tale "La gitanilla", written in 1613, to highlight the profound impact this text has exerted on the European imaginary. Also, it has to be added here that the chapters dedicated to Cervantes' *novela* and its influence on Dutch history painting form the main part of my exegesis: being fairly comprehensive, they lay out the framework that should provide the reader with interpretive coordinates for the bulk of material presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

If the vogue during the Dutch Golden Age counts as the first stage in the motif's development, the second major stage could be assigned to a period that stretches from the late eighteenth century, through the entire nineteenth century and up to the early twentieth century. With the rise of popular culture and the printed mass media, the motif of 'gypsy' child-theft regained its virulence, but it was accompanied by

7   See, for example, the paired prints *Gipsey's Stealing a Child* and *The Child Restored* (1801) (**Fig. 21 and 22**); or consider Mrs. Carl Rother's novel for British juveniles entitled *Lost and Found, or, Twelve Years with Bulgarian Gypsies* (1887); or examine Theodor Dietsch's puppet play called *Der Kinderraub zu Oederan oder: Die wunderbare Entdeckung zu Frankenberg* (*The Kidnapping in Oederan or: The Wonderful Discovery in Frankenberg*), a paper poster of which can be found in SKD online collection (Sachsen, ca. 1891/92, 34.2 × 23 cm, Inventory No. C7660). Already the titles of these works reflect the two-event structure of the motif.

8   They include one history painting by the Haarlem master Leendert van der Cooghen: *Constance (Preciosa) abducted by the gypsies (J. Cats, Het Spaans heidinnetje)*, 1652–1681 (**Fig. 4**); and one etching/engraving by Pieter Nolpe *Roma vrouw Majombe met Konstance*, 1643, based on a drawing of Simon de Vlieger's, which, as we shall see later, subjects the scene of abduction to a rather unusual treatment (**Fig. 9**).

a total reversal of emphasis. The sample of prints here evidences that during this period, it was the first event – the moment of child-theft – that grew in importance and came to the foreground. This is yet another point where one needs to ask why? The widely-circulated images – engravings, etchings, lithographs, broadsheets, children's book illustrations, magic lantern slides and later silent films – were, notably, targeted at and consumed by representatives of the lower-ranking social strata, not the aristocracy. There is also a third development I wish to draw scholarly attention to: during the silent film era, the story of 'gypsy' child-theft counted as one of the lucrative stock plots. Being an overly familiar motif that provided excellent material for melodrama, it was exploited with broad variations in dozens of films produced in the USA, England, France, Denmark, Italy, and Spain. With the introduction of sound, however, the motif disappeared almost entirely from the silver screen. Again, we need to ask why and I shall present a plausible explanation.

Outlining the trajectory of the child-theft motif (its textual and pictorial forms and their semantic transformations across space-time and media) allows us to trace antigypsyism/European racism back to its archetypal origin and primary literary sources, to gain understanding of its evolving black-and-white aesthetics in its materiality and signification, and to untangle the multiple layers of meaning that have coagulated over time, infusing the colours black and white with astonishing complexity – the two most crucial colours when it comes to the hierarchical categorisation of human bodies. The selection of images and texts represents, so to say, an excavation of the earlier material expressions of antigypsyism, a chronology of proto-racist artworks that have paved the way for modern racism, instituting its modes of seeing and acting as a shared norm and an everyday normality. In the context of my research topic, i.e. not in all contexts but in visualisations of the motif of 'gypsy' child-theft, the colour white has established itself as the colour of invisible privilege and this is one of the main theses presented here. White operates simultaneously as the colour of unmarked normality (the neutral background colour) as well as the colour of privilege (the colour of light, of social/biological superiority and of realist visibility). To understand what the implications and consequences of white as the tacitly privileged colour are, we need to account for it simultaneously in a number of different dimensions: in relation to the respective medium, in relation to light and its visual rendition,

in relation to realist visibility of human bodies and faces, and last but not least, in relation to the cultural models that code female sexuality.

Firstly, white is the colour of the medium. Not one medium but a series of media that are pivotal in the development of European culture and arts: the white sheet of paper in sketching, drawing, print-making and photography; the white page in books or other printed publications, in Word documents; the white canvas in painting; the white screen onto which magic lantern shows and films are projected. As the colour of the medium, white has the status of a non-colour (together with black, it is also generally excluded from colour charts) and is commonly perceived as a neutral (pure) background. This supposedly neutral background carries an inherent binarity that comes to the fore in the case of black-and-white pictorial techniques: when bodies and human skin (faces) are represented, they can either be identical with the white backdrop or have a colour that differs from it. There is always a choice to be made when visualising bodies, and many artists use the binarity of the medium to juxtapose and thus racialise their subjects. One direct consequence is that black as well as the rest of the spectrum colours, when contrasted to white, are almost automatically perceived as an addition to a neutral background, as a deviation from a pure white surface. Consider, for instance, the Dutch broadsheet *The Gypsies* (*De Zigeuners*) (1894–1959) (**Fig. 25**) in which the mother, whose face shares the background colour of the white paper, is set against the 'gypsy' child-abductors whose faces have an added brown tone.

Secondly, white is the colour used to depict light and so, if we go back through the history of Western art, we shall see that it is the colour traditionally employed to associate human bodies with light: with the divine light as the highest spiritual attainment; with the enlightened nobility as the dominant position in feudal classist societies, and with the superior 'white' 'ethno-racial' identity of European nationalist (colonialist) societies. In religious contexts, white/light is a sign for the sacred deity; in feudal classist contexts, white/light is the colour of the ruling elite and of its civilised Europeanness, whereas in secular modern contexts, white/light signifies not only enlightenment and rationality but also biological 'ethno-racial' purity. It is also interesting to consider how bodies are associated with the colour of light, and I shall do so by closely examining some works of the seventeenth-century Dutch masters. If I were to venture a generalisation here, I could say that whiteness is ascribed to bodies not only on the level of skin colour but also with recourse to clothes, accessories, and settings. Bodies, and especially the

female body, are often adorned or entirely wrapped in white. Dutch painters, for instance, demonstrate their dexterity by producing strikingly realistic depictions of fine and very expensive materials – white silk, satin, linen, and lace. Thus, light/white has also become a visual signifier for wealth, both spiritual and material, in direct opposition to the shadow/non-white colours that stand, by implication, for absence and poverty, spiritual and material. Moreover, the shadow/non-white spectrum of colours, that is colourfulness and blackness, are, again in the contexts under scrutiny here, relegated to an inferior position, exoticised, orientalised, Balkanised, etc., and commonly given the status of non-Europeanness.

Thirdly, white, being the colour of light, naturally ensures the highest visibility to human faces and bodies. A face that deviates from the white background through addition of colour is both less visible from a distance and marked in comparison to a face that shares the whiteness of the medium, and is thus both luminous and unmarked. Also, a face depicted in a diminished light is harder to distinguish, whereas the colour of human skin rendered in a shadow inevitably appears 'non-white'. I must note here that the aesthetic colour boundary erected between the nobility/national majority and 'gypsy' figures is permiable only in one direction. The self-appointed 'whites' can easily claim the aesthetic realm of the shadow for themselves: there is a long tradition of artists who identify with 'gypsies' or even declare themselves to be ones.[9] Yet for the Roma, it is hardly possible to claim 'whiteness' (read: visibility, normality, and affiliation to the 'white' body of the nation) for themselves. Symbolically, by the power of the 'gypsy' image projected onto them, they stay bannished in the realm of the shadow, reduced to ghostly silhouettes of human beings.

Fourthly, the image of the 'white' woman and her body wrapped from head to toe in white fabric does not present simply an aspirational beauty ideal but is, in effect, an aesthetic codification of female sexuality. As we shall see in the chapters to come, in seventeenth-century literary texts, whiteness refers in the first place to virginity; it is an asset, a cultural capital that Cervantes' literary heroines pledge to value more than their own lives. As the research material evidences, the fair-skinned female, preferably a blonde, in a full-length white dress is a recurrent visual trope across time-space and media, the 'white' woman being an epitome

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9   See Brown's insightful and well-researched book *Gypsies and Other Bohemians. The Myth of the Artist in Nineteenth-century France* (1985).

of the imagined collective. It is worth noting here that the ideology of classism and the ideology of racism – the intrinsic aim of both being to naturalise social hierarchies – are poised on a physiological state as questionable and vague as female virginity.[10] Both ideologies spawn social systems whose reproduction in time requires a vigilant control over female sexuality, practically proclaiming asexuality for its ideal. In the light of this, it is necessary to regard the artworks under scrutiny here not simply and not only as historical documents that carry the imprint of a bygone social reality but also as ideational products outside of time, as fruits of human imagination, as forms of mental software whose power manifests itself – today as well – in the ability to chart life paths and life plots, to propose worse or better-fitting roles for human beings within society. The impact of classism and racism on the dominant models of femininity deserves a study of its own, but it suffices to emphasise here the pernicious effect that these ideologies have both on the oppressors and the oppressed, and the specific burden they place on women.

I shall end my introduction to the motif of 'gypsy' child-theft and its journey through visual media with a few words about the theoretical framework of the study. The findings presented here are grounded in the theoretical considerations and research insights advanced by scholars working in the fields of Antigypsyism Studies (Bogdal 2011; Brittncher 2012, 2017; Patrut 2014; Reuter 2011, 2014), Critical 'Race' Studies and Critical Whiteness Studies (Miles 1989; Dyer 1997), Postcolonial Studies (Shohat 1994), Narratology (Lotman 1990; Doležel 1998; Campbell 2008), Art History (Gaskell 1982; Brown 1985; David de Witt 1999, 2007; Belting 2013; Bell 2008, 2015) as well as Film and Media Studies (Nichols 1991; Elsaesser 2015; Vogl-Bienek 2016). With the case study about the age-old motif of 'gypsy' child-theft, it has been my specific intention to open a space of dialogue between and among academic disciplines in order to enable a better understanding of the omniscient yet highly elusive nature of the 'gypsy' phantasm. As such, the adopted methodological approach runs a certain risk: it makes itself vulnerable to criticism coming from scholars, well-versed and conversant with the intricacies of their respective field of study. At the same time, by bringing together diverse perspectives, this case study puts forward novel insights and ideas that are only possible at the precarious intersection of established disciplines.

10 See, for example, the article "Hymen: Facts and Conceptions" by Hegazy and Al-Rukban (2012).