Peter Nestler's Depiction of the Everyday Life of Sinti and Roma

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The Latin word 'documentum' refers to a record that proves something. It is closely related to the verb 'docere,' i.e. 'to teach.' Since a lot can be learned by evidence, it is no surprise that 'evidence' means both a document, and something that is plain to see and therefore hard to deny. Both meanings are implied in the term 'documentary film.' Such a film records something and evidently displays what has been recorded.

However, what is recorded must be transformed into a discourse. What kind of discourse emerges depends on a complex interplay of specific factors. Among them are social conventions and cultural traditions, peculiarities of the chosen medium or the speech genre, symmetries or asymmetries of power and, of course, already established frames and scripts that influence the reception. As a result of this complex interplay, the same 'picture' can convey different meanings in different discourses. Since there is no film discourse without editing and editing involves re-contextualisation, every film needs interpretation and is subject to criticism. As is well known, even propaganda can make use of documents. It would therefore be naïve to assume that a documentary film is clear-cut and unequivocal. Rather, its meaning depends mutually on the film maker's attitude and the viewer's conjecture. In fact, the attitude is manifested by the selection of takes and the montage, confirmed by either explicit commentary or indicated by aesthetic means and their implications which 'teach' the viewer how to receive and interpret what is recorded.

In the case of Peter Nestler's depiction of the everyday life of Sinti and Roma, the viewer always senses an attitude overcoming misconceptions and doing justice to those who have been mistreated, ignored and expulsed from the discourse so far. Many misconceptions that matter here were encapsulated in the notion of 'gypsies,' when Peter Nestler started to document the reality of Roma and Sinti in the late 1960s. Nestler was born and raised in Freiburg. There he worked for a while in the company of his father who produced plastic. Later on, he became a seafarer but soon disembarked and started to study art in Munich where he was occasionally cast as an actor. At the age of twenty four, he decided to escape the mechanical and inauthentic procedures of show

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business and to direct his own documentaries. In 1966, due to the hard conditions he was facing in the German broadcasting system, Nestler immigrated and, together with his wife Zsóka, worked for the second channel of the Public Swedish TV.

In 1970, twelve years before the Nazi genocide of the Sinti and Roma was recognized by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, Peter Nestler produced his documentary *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy* (4:3, 47 minutes). One can say that Germany was in urgent need of such a documentary at that time. Very little was known about the people who were forced to live at the margins of society, disconnected from the majority and seldom acknowledged as persons endowed with the same civil rights as every other citizen. Unfortunately, Nestler's documentary was not screened in Germany at that time. It was only after the reception of *Die Judengasse* in 1988 that a broader public took notice of Nestler's earlier work. Whereas *Die Judengasse* is frequently shown at the Frankfurt Jewish Museum, *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy,* despite its relevance, has not yet received the recognition it deserves.

The main objective of a documentary is to convey knowledge and to reduce ignorance. But there are many ways to convey knowledge and to illustrate its significance. Though a documentary is based on evidence, it is neither a scientific report nor a news story. Research is of course mandatory, but the outcome of research has to be mediated in a specific way. Whereas a scientific report or a news story is restricted to declarative sentences and statements that deal with their subject in a more or less impersonal style, a film involves a complex interplay of sight and sound, information and imagination, spoken language and pictorial representation. Each conjecture of this interplay involves personal, subjective meaning. I like to argue that Peter Nestler realised the full potential of this interplay to depict more than just the everyday life of Sinti and Roma. That alone would have been an achievement. But in addition Nestler equipped the people he interrogated with the power of authorship and aroused empathic understanding in the viewer.

At the beginning of *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy* (1970) Nestler juxtaposes a short impression of the fence in Auschwitz-Birkenau with a series of painted portraits (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

While the death camp is an epitome of inhumanity, the paintings look peaceful and warm-hearted. Each portrait shows a Sinti, either a child or an adult, a female or a male, sometimes a mother or a father together with a child. These paintings were created by the German artist Otto Pankok (1893–1966) who lived together with Sinti during the early 1930s at Heinefeld, Düsseldorf. The Nazis were eager to prohibit Pankok's work in 1936. Whereas the artist survived, most of the Sinti he had painted were killed during the Holocaust. When Pankok finally published a book with their portraits in 1947, he wrote in the preface:

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Fig. 1 and 2 Screenshots from *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy* (1970).

> Noch bevor die Synagogen aufloderten, waren die Zigeunerfamilien hinter den Gittern des Stacheldrahtes zusammengepfercht, um später das jüdische Schicksal in den Todeslagern des Ostens zu teilen.[1]
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> Even before the Synagogues were set alight, the gypsy families were herded together behind barbed wire to share later the fate of the Jews in the death camps of the East. [Translation M. B.]

By quoting this remark, Nestler sets up a frame of reference that helps the viewer to grasp the relationship that is laid out in the first sequence of his documentary. However, the most important implication of the juxtaposition between the epitome of inhumanity and the portraits is revealed when the viewer learns that the word 'Rom' means 'a human being.'

With this notion in mind, the viewer can understand and evaluate what follows: seven survivors of the Holocaust tell their stories and Nestler shows where and how these survivors live. It is plain to see that there is a connection between the past and the present, between the traumatic experience of the Holocaust and the ongoing struggle for justice.

In this respect, the documentary is double-edged: it recalls history and challenges contemporary society. Without exception, the survivors complain about ignorance and mistreatment they have recently faced. More than twenty years after the decline of the Third Reich, Roma and Sinti were still facing mistreatment in the BRD. Therefore, the viewer cannot escape the conclusion that the social and political practice, the state's bureaucracy and jurisdiction is a systematic negation of the very meaning of the word 'Rom.'

Evidently, Nestler feels obliged to emphasise this meaning. As often as possible, he hands over the narrating voice to the Roma themselves. This is not

1 Pankok, Otto: Zigeuner, Düsseldorf 1947.

only an act of poetic justice. When Sinti and Roma speak and tell their own stories, they become – at least in the first instance – authors themselves. At the time when *Zigeuner sein/The Stigma Gypsy* was produced, this link between a narrating voice, authorship and humanity was not generally a familiar notion. In fairness, one has to admit, that this notion is not explained in the film itself. It is just an outcome of the principle of oral history that Nestler implemented. It was not until 1988 that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asked in one of the most cited essays in contemporary science: "Can the subaltern speak?" The answer Peter Nestler's film had given in advance is without doubt 'Yes.' But it is, by aesthetic measures, a performed, an embodied 'Yes,' and therefore much more than just a positive statement. It has the persuasive power of experience. And since it was exactly the lack of this experience that contributed so much to the ignorance about the Sinti and Roma and the injustice they had to suffer in Post-war Germany, the merit of Nestler's documentary is grounded in the sharing of authorship between the film maker and the minority.

One of the characteristic features of the human voice is its demand for an answer. It is hard to listen to a human voice, especially when the voice tells a moving story, and not to respond. However, the answer doesn't have to be a verbal one.[2] To be touched and moved, to show empathy or to feel pity is also a kind of resonance.[3] Often this kind of resonance is a necessary precondition for further understanding and solidarity. In this respect, the apparent disadvantage that the viewer cannot speak back turns out to be an advantage. Disconnected from the original interlocution, the viewer becomes aware of the resonance that is grounded in his or her own sensitivity. If the focus shifts from the action or the conversation on the screen to the viewer's own sensitivity, a relation between the spectator and the people depicted in the film emerges in such a way that it is hard to fall back into the bad habit of 'othering,' of denying empathy and understanding. Instead, a sense of community may be stimulated that – if transformed into a political attitude – might lead to solidarity.

The paradox that the suspension of any verbal reaction might enhance this feeling of community is often overlooked in ordinary life. But art is a means to make people aware of forgotten or neglected human potentials. Some filmmakers, among them Jean Renoir and Michelangelo Antonioni, developed a specific sense for this dimension of human understanding. In their films, the momentum of the moving image is suspended on several occasions so that the resonance of what has just been seen or heard has a chance to reach the conscience of the viewer. It is because resonance is a sentiment rather than a

2 Cf. Waldenfels, Bernhard: Antwortregister, Frankfurt a. M. 1994.

3 Cf. Rosa, Hartmut: Resonanz, Berlin 2017.

concept and cannot be decoded immediately, that it triggers further emotions and imaginations. However, resonance is not set up apart from reflection. Quite the opposite is true: reflection occurs when resonance is interpreted.

In 1994, Peter Nestler was interviewed by Christoph Hübner about his work. In this interview, Nestler points at a similar direction. He states that film is a medium to dissolve concepts, rather than a medium to illustrate or to stabilise concepts. And he goes on to say that a film should mediate a sense of gravity.[4] What really matters is not so much the constant flux of sight and sound but the sudden break of routine when something unexpected or unknown becomes visible, audible, tangible. This is the moment of truth, the breakthrough to reality. Film has the capacity to uncover reality. That holds true for both, fictional film and documentary film. To uncover reality is to look through familiar codes of representation and to get rid of misleading concepts, prejudices and outdated conventions that blur the picture.

If this capacity to penetrate ignorance is what we are interested in, we can study Peter Nestler's documentary in detail and find out how the interplay of oral history and visual display resonates and produces a strong sense of solidarity. So, for example, when one of the narrators tells his story, he sits among three of his children. They listen carefully and realise immediately the fracture of their father's voice when he has to face the traumata of his life (Fig. 3).

Such a precarious moment could be embarrassing. For a film maker there is a great temptation to exploit such a moment and to enhance its melodramatic impact. Nestler resists this temptation. His film does not leave out the moment because the viewer should be jolted and shall respond in more or less the same way as the children respond. The film establishes here what cognitive science calls a scene of shared or joined attention,[5] which is also a scene of increased and focussed attention. Neither the children nor the viewer can miss how troubled the narrator is. They also sense how he regains the strength to go on and to speak out, how offensive it is to learn after twelve years of waiting that the German state denied him any compensation. Consequently, his family is doomed to live in conditions that the viewer can only be ashamed of.

Instead of just stimulating a naïve or patronised form of empathy, the viewer is forced to witness the man's struggle for self-assertion and dignity. He or she can imagine what it really means to be seen as a 'Zigeuner,' to be put aside and denied what every human being deserves. This act of witnessing is likely to result in a different attitude towards contemporary society. And exactly this is the turning, the vanishing point of the scene I have singled out.

4 Hübner, Christoph: Dokumentarisch Arbeiten. Christoph Hübner im Gespräch mit Peter Nestler (1994), in: Peter Nestler. Poetischer Provokateur. Filme 1962–2009, DVD 5, Christoph Hübner Film / absolut Medien 2012.

5 Cf. Tomasello, Michael: The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition, Cambridge 1999.

Fig. 3 Screenshot from *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy* (1970).

Nestler's documentary displays why it is necessary but not sufficient to feel pity. Only if the contradiction that is at work in society is felt and reflected by the majority, can the injustice that a specific minority has to face be resolved. And, no doubt, the majority is the addressee of Nestler's documentary *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy.*

Radmila Mladenova (in this volume) explains with a twinkle in her eye how a film about Sinti and Roma should *not* be made. With Peter Nestler's film in mind, we can come up with an alternative: Authorise the people to tell their own story. Let their voices resonate in scenes of shared attention that uncover a hidden truth about reality and thereby alter the usual frame of reference. And last but not least, do not expect that this will be easy to achieve. In any case, it is worth trying.

With the help of his wife and the testimony of Hermann Langbein, who witnessed the cruelty of Auschwitz-Birkenau and recalls his memories in *Zigeuner Sein/The Stigma Gypsy,* Peter Nestler was able to document the poor living conditions and the injustice done to the victims of the Nazi regime after World War II. Evidently, he has succeeded in establishing an aesthetics of respect.