

Abstract

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The present study adopts a tailor-made five-tiered analytical approach to films on the ‘gypsy’ theme to shed light on the interplay between their production set-up, content matrix, visual design, paratextual framing and functions. Drawing on a sizeable corpus of works from the European and US American cultural realm, it demonstrates that regardless of the place or time of origin, ‘gypsy’-themed productions share the skeletal frame of ‘ethno-racial’ masquerades. As such, they are akin to blackface minstrel shows and often enjoy similar levels of obsessive popularity. If the film industry mobilises its powerful apparatus to assert the authenticity of the films and advertise them as untampered-with ‘slices of reality’, the X-ray vision advanced here makes it plain to see that these cinematographic works are nothing other than ventriloquised cultural forms. With hardly any exceptions, ‘gypsy’-themed films are scripted, directed and playacted by professionals from the dominant national culture, and in the cases when Roma lay actors are involved, this takes place after scrupulous casting based on dark skin colour and conformity to stereotype. Another recurrent feature of the films is the deployment of Roma extras who are used – together with their homes, music, language and artefacts – as authenticity props.

Inevitably, one is bound to ask why: why do filmmakers from all four corners of Europe reproduce with such automatic readiness the racialising aesthetics of authentication that has come to define the ‘gypsy’ theme? Why do audiences flock to cinema halls so eager to absorb the reality of screen ‘gypsies’? The answer to this question is complex and multifaceted and has a lot to do with the shared sense

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of reality sustained by national cultures. Simply put, staging the tableau of 'gypsy' life constitutes a pivotal scene in the spectacle of the national: aesthetically, it is functionalised as a contrastive foil against which the 'white' ethno-national Self can gain relief and psychological salience; content-wise, it provides a brief carnivalesque escape from the shackles of normality, a vicarious adventure into the 'non-white' world of the forbidden which ends, though, with the didactic finale of a cautionary tale. As part of the ideological imaginary of nationalism, the para-ethnographic 'gypsy' show is not confined to film only but is re-enacted in all other art forms from which film copiously borrows: from literature through the visual and performing arts to music and popular culture. Bearing in mind the transmedial and intertextual nature of the 'gypsy' spectacle, the current study seeks to define and describe the racialising patterns of the antigypsy gaze specific to the medium of film and thus stresses the role of lighting and colour schemes. And if the author takes the risk of charting the phenomenon of 'gypsy'-themed films on a dauntingly large map, the exposition balances the broader findings with micro-analyses at the level of individual films and film sequences with an attentive eye to cultural and authorial idiosyncrasies.