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The Phenomenon of 'Gypsy'-themed Films and Their Technology of Truth Production

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This chapter examines – from several important vantage points – the prevailing aesthetics that underpins the personation of the 'gypsy' mask on the big screen, or what I call the racialising aesthetics of authentication. This aesthetics manifests itself in a significant body of fiction films, produced in the European and US American cultural realm, which rest on the assumption that certain groups of people labelled as 'gypsies' are different in some intrinsic, radical and objectively graspable way and that the said films can open a window view to the Otherness of 'gypsy' way of life, taking the viewers, as it were, on a voyeuristic tour of their clandestine world. To account for the phenomenon of 'gypsy'-themed films in a pan-European and US American context and lay bare their intricate technology of truth production, I proceed in my exposition in a top-down manner, moving from the general through the specific to end up with the singular. First, I present my findings by providing a bird's-eye view of 'gypsy'-themed films as such, highlighting entire segments from the film corpus to point out core and peripheral examples of their racialising aesthetics of authentication. In a next step, I present the algorithm of film analysis which I have developed inductively during an intensive phase of film viewing; this analysis has also guided me in the process of categorising and appraising individual works. For the assessment of a 'gypsy'-themed film, there are five key levels of analysis to be taken into consideration. Each level of analysis is expounded here through a set of questions and a resumé of findings; afterwards, the same findings are compressed one step further, so that

the cinematic technology of truth production is distilled into five basic steps. Following this summary introduction to my research topic, in the next chapters, I proceed by providing a detailed and multi-perspective description of 'gypsy'-themed films and the racialising aesthetics of authentication they typify in view of current film theory, in comparison to blackface minstrel shows, and with regard to the films' content (character portrayal, storyline), form (visual design) and functions (aesthetic, disciplining, carnival, subversive, and socially integrative), applying my analytical lens to a selection of exemplary works and zooming in on paradigmatic sequences. It is important to stress here that each of the following chapters throws light on the subject matter from a new angle, expanding the discussion with a new set of analytical tools and theoretical coordinates. This systematic change of perspective requires in turn that the reader ready herself/himself with a new 'set of eyes' for each new chapter; each subsequent chapter requires a substantial readjustment of the mental lens. As to the film examples, the reader should bear in mind that my analytical focus is directed at one select aspect, so that the analyses cannot and should not be treated as evaluations of the works in their entirety.

4.1   The Racialising Aesthetics of Authentication Described as a List of Films

One way of describing the racialising aesthetics of authentication that prevails in the production of 'gypsy'-themed films is by listing a selection of prominent titles, which are presented here in chronological order. The chosen films are further divided into three sub-groups based on how they handle the 'gypsy' theme. Thus, the first group of fiction films, given below, are found at one end of the thematic spectrum: in these films, the focus is placed exclusively on the world of 'gypsies', imagined as a separate, autonomous universe with little or no contact with the given dominant national culture. In other words, these works cut out the world of the 'white' mask from the picture (thus turning a blind eye to the role that the majority society has in creating the larger socio-economic conditions within which the minority is forced to act). The central dramatic conflict is set up within the 'gypsy' universe, while 'white' characters are employed episodically for the sake of contrast and are given peripheral roles. If we are to describe these films in abstract terms, we can say that the mirror-inverted opposition between the

'white' mask and the 'gypsy' mask in them, which produces the effect of radical Othering, is communicated by implication. Or, if we resort to optical metaphors to point to the asymmetry of representational power, we can say that these films (re)produce the antigypsy mode of the European gaze:[59]

- *Drama in a Gypsy Camp near Moscow* [*Драма в таборе подмосковных цыган*]. Russia, 1908
- *The Gypsy Charmer* [*Mustalaishurmaaja*]. Finland, 1929
- *I am a Gypsy* [*Ich bin ein Zigeuner*]. Austria, 1932/33
- *The Last Camp. Gypsies* [*Последний табор*]. Russia, 1935
- *Hot Blood.* USA, 1956
- *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* [*Skupljači perja*]. Yugoslavia, 1967
- *Queen of the Gypsies* [*Табор уходит в небо*]. USSR, 1975
- *King of the Gypsies.* USA, 1978
- *Angelo, My Love.* USA, 1983
- *Blood Wedding* [*Bodas de sangre*]. Spain, 1983
- *El amor brujo.* Spain, 1986
- *Guardian Angel* [*Анђео чувар/Anđeo čuvar*]. Yugoslavia, 1987
- *Time of the Gypsies* [*Дом за вешање/Dom za vešanje*]. UK | Italy | Yugoslavia, 1988
- *Gipsy Magic* [*Циганска Магија*]. Macedonia, 1997
- *Black Cat, White Cat* [*Crna mačka, beli mačor*]. Yugoslavia | France | Germany | Austria | Greece, 1998
- *Gypsy* [*Gitano*]. Spain, 2000
- *Roming.* Czech Republic | Romania | Slovakia, 2007
- *A Ciambra.* Italy | Brazil | Germany | France | Sweden | USA, 2017

The second thematic grouping of fiction films comprises works in which the deviant world of the 'gypsies' is, once again, the main source of spectacle, but the central conflict is shifted to one between a 'white' and a 'gypsy' character. In these films, there is an explicit juxtaposition in visual and narrative terms between the 'white' mask and the 'gypsy'

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59 It has to be said that the antigypsy mode of seeing can be prompted not only with regard to representatives of the existing Roma minority but also towards individuals and/or groups of people who occupy, vertically, the lower ranks of the social hierarchy, as well as towards individuals and/or groups of people who occupy, horizontally, the periphery of the European cultural realm, that is, migrants from the East, asylum seekers, refugees and generally everyone who is considered a stranger, an outsider, an intruder.

mask, as well as the mythic worlds they stand for. The dramatic encounter between these two worlds is purposefully used to affirm the film's overarching 'truth' about 'gypsies', not to expose power inequalities, but to show titillating evidence of alterity, be it symbolic, corporeal, sexual, linguistic, cultural and/or 'ethno-racial'. This ideological subtext is also present in the few cases when the 'gypsy' protagonist posits an exception to the group and is coded with positive qualities. With some variations, 'gypsies' are seen as agents of destruction, of social discord and national disintegration, and, metaphorically or literally, as 'non-white'. The following titles reveal the two modi of the European gaze, its bipolar structure:

- *The Adventures of Dollie.* USA, 1908
- *A Romany Spy* [*Das Mädchen ohne Vaterland*]. Germany, 1912
- *Zigeuneren Raphael.* Denmark, 1914
- *Betta the Gypsy.* UK, 1918
- *Carmen* [*Gypsy Blood: A Love Tale of Old Spain*]. Germany, 1918
- *Gipsy Anne* [*Fante-Anne*]. Norway, 1920
- *The Loves of Carmen.* USA, 1927
- *The Bohemian Girl.* USA, 1936
- *Dark and Bright* [*Morena Clara*]. Spain, 1936 & 1954
- *Carmen de la Triana.* Spain | Germany, 1938
- *Flower of the Tisza* [*Tiszavirág/Zwischen Strom und Steppe*], Hungary | Germany, 1939
- *The Vagabond's Waltz* [*Kulkurin valssi*]. Finland, 1941
- *Madonna of the Seven Moons.* UK, 1944
- *Jassy.* UK, 1947
- *The Loves of Carmen.* USA, 1948
- *Drei Birken auf der Heide/Junges Blut.* West Germany, 1956
- *Lola, the Coalgirl* [*Lola, la piconera*]. Spain, 1951 and 1969
- *Oh Pain, Little Pain, Pain* [*¡Ay, pena, penita, pena!*]. Spain | Mexico, 1953
- *Lowlands* [*Tiefland*]. Germany, 1954
- *The Gypsy and the Gentleman.* UK, 1958
- *And Hope to Die* [*La course du lièvre à travers les champs*]. France, 1972
- *Pink Dreams* [*Ružové sny*]. Czechoslovakia, 1976
- *A Roof* [*Покрив*]. Bulgaria, 1978
- *Das Mädchen vom Hof.* West Germany, 1979
- *Carmen.* Spain, 1983

- *Devils, Devils* [*Diabły, diabły*]. Poland, 1991
- *Black Swallow* [*Черната лястовица*]. Bulgaria | France, 1997
- *¡Ja me maaten...!* Spain, 2000
- *The Pilgrimage of Students Peter and Jacob* [*Zpráva o putování studentů Petra a Jakuba*]. Czech Republic, 2000
- *Carmen.* Spain | UK | Italy, 2003
- *Gucha – Distant Trumpet* [*Guča!*]. Serbia | Bulgaria | Austria | Germany, 2006
- *Papusza.* Poland, 2013
- *Koštana* [*Коштана*]. (five TV adaptations) | Yugoslavia
- *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame.* (numerous film versions)

As to their topic, the two groupings of films presented so far gravitate towards the one end of the thematic spectrum that, as far as my film corpus is concerned and as outlined in Chapter Two, stretches from the fictional phantasm 'gypsy' to representations of Roma. A distinctive feature of these works is that they contain an element of 'ethno-racial' masquerade and assume a homogenising and a racialising stance; as such they form the core of what I call 'gypsy'-themed films, and represent the main object of my investigation. It is important to specify these works of fiction title by title and critically evaluate each of them for a number of reasons. Some of these films are celebrated for their supposedly truthful depiction of Roma lifestyle, even as veritable ethnographic documents. A number of the listed auteur films attained truly staggering levels of popularity at the time of their release; many of them have been distinguished with prestigious national and international awards, and are even today objects of praise and veneration in professional film circles, as well as in popular culture. Moreover, what is of crucial significance is that most of the 'gypsy'-themed films given here continue to feature in festivals dedicated to Roma arts and culture, forming part of the unwritten canon of works accepted as genuine and inspired. As such, they still have a strong influence on the self-image of Roma, as well as on the work of contemporary filmmakers.

A prominent example from the first list of films is the Mosfilm production *Queen of the Gypsies* (1975, Dir. Emil Loteanu).[60] In the *His-*

60 In his unpublished Master's thesis "Das Bild der Sinti und Roma in ausgesuchten Spielfilmen", Martin Holler works out in detail the antigypsy clichés used in the portrayal of the film's main figures, the horse-thief Zobar and the 'gypsy' *femme fatale* Rada. The German historian demonstrates the film's indebtedness to European literature, tracing lines of influence to Maxim Gorky's debut short story

torical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema, the film scholar Peter Rollberg reports that with his second 'gypsy'-themed film,[61] the leading Moldovan director Loteanu landed one of the greatest box-office hits in Soviet cinema and made stars of its leads Svetlana Tomá and Grigore Grigoriu (453). In *Великие советские фильмы. 100 фильмов, ставших легендами* [Great Soviet Films. 100 Films That Became Legends], Ludmila Sokolova states that *Queen of the Gypsies* received nearly thirty international awards, among which San Sebastian's Golden Seashell[62] (1976), as well as special prizes in Belgrade, Panama, Prague and Paris. In 1976, Svetlana Tomá, for whom the role of Rada became "the actress's business card", was declared the best actress of the year by the readers of *Soviet Screen* magazine, and later the Moldovan actress of the century (Sokolova 162–163). Fedor Razzakov provides further details of the phenomenal success of the 'gypsy' theme in Soviet cinema: in the first year of its release, *Queen of the Gypsies* brought in 64.9 million spectators; the film was Soviet cinema's response to the Mexican 'gypsy' melodrama *Yesenia* (1971, Dir. Alfredo Crevenna, Soviet release 1975), a production[63] that has attracted the highest audience for any Soviet

"Makar Chudra" (1892), Alexander Pushkin's Byronic poem *The Gypsies* (1824) and Prosper Mérimée's tale "Carmen" (1845). Holler discusses the ideological subtext of *Queen of the Gypsies* in the context of the Soviet policy of assimilation of the Roma minority; he also makes mention of another 'gypsy'-themed title *The Gypsy* (1967, Dir. E. Matveev), which puts forward the figure of "the new Soviet Rom" (56–66).

61 Emil Loteanu's first 'gypsy'-themed film is called *Fiddlers* (*Лаутары*, 1972). Rollberg describes it as "a broad canvas about gypsy life, displaying all of the director's strengths – panoramic landscape compositions, sensual music, and a slow narrative rhythm erupting in sudden acts of violence – but also characteristic weaknesses, most frustratingly a plot structure that falls apart due to Loteanu's overindulgence in beautiful imagery and sound" (416). According to the online database *Энциклопедия отечественного кино. СССР/СНГ* [Encyclopedia of Domestic Film. USSR/CIS], *Fiddlers* received the Grand Prix in Orvieto (1973), a special prize in Naples (1972), the Silver Seashell and two other awards in San Sebastian (1972), and the Silver Siren in Sorrento (1972).

62 In a filmed interview, Svetlana Tomá recounts the day of the awards ceremony in San Sebastian. She explains that neither the film's director Emil Loteanu, nor the other lead actor Grigore Grigoriu were permitted by the state authorities to leave the USSR, so she was on her own when receiving the Grand Prix. The film was sold to more than 120 countries, a success that was deemed incredible at the time. Tomá adds that she travelled the world with *Queen of the Gypsies*, visiting 47 countries on all the continents of the globe, where she held the premieres and represented Soviet cinema (DVD bonus material).

63 A disambiguation note is necessary here: there are two Mexican films from the 1970s called *Yesenia*. The first is a telenovela (1970, Dir. Fernando Wagner) based on a story by Yolanda Vargas Dulché, "one of the most widely read women writers in

or foreign film ever screened in the history of Soviet cinema, with a total of 91.4 million tickets sold. In the second half of the 1970s, Soviet filmmakers embraced the 'gypsy' topic:[64] the director Alexander Blank shot four episodes for a TV series called *Gypsy* in 1979. The series, based on the book by A. Kalinin, topped the record set by *Yesenia*, attracting almost 200 million viewers (1198; see also Rupprecht 86; Kudryavtsev).

This short account of the enormous popularity that has surrounded *Queen of the Gypsies* but also of the lasting impact that the 'gypsy' theme has had on Soviet cinema is not a whimsical digression, but aims at underscoring the success formula that almost invariably accompanies well-executed 'gypsy'-themed films, regardless of their country of provenance. It is notable, first of all, that these productions are, by and large, an extremely popular and commercially lucrative form of entertainment. There are more examples of cult titles to come, which suggests that the basis of the success of 'gypsy'-themed films is in their ability to attract unprecedented audiences on a national and/or international level, to confer and consolidate the star status of their filmmaker and lead cast, and, in some significant cases, to lay the foundations of the tradition of the 'gypsy' genre in the respective national cinema.

Mexico", and starring Fanny Cano (Luna 257). It is a story of "a gypsy woman who abducts a baby girl and is discovered when a suitor recognises the medallion of the girl as that of a rich landowner's daughter" (Beumers 181). The second *Yesenia* is an adaptation of Dulché's story to film (1971, Dir. Alfredo Crevenna) starring Jacqueline Andere. When citing *Yesenia* as the most successful film ever shown in Soviet cinemas, some film scholars mistakenly refer to Wagner's telenovela; however, it is Alfredo Crevenna's film that was shown in Soviet cinemas in 1975.

64 A panoramic view of 'gypsy'-themed films in the Russian language zone is to be found in Edouard Chiline's short but highly informative article "The Celluloid Drom: Romani Images in Russian Cinema". The author presents fifteen titles altogether, dividing them into two categories: one group of films that "almost entirely focus on Russian Gypsies" and a second smaller group of films with "strong Romani subplots or key characters" (35–36). The films then are introduced individually in a discussion that considers their historical context, so that in the end the article offers an enlightening overview to the topic from the silent film era until the late 1990s. Chiline is attentive to the issue of Roma self-representation and accentuates the work of the Roma director Dufunia Vishnevskii: *It's my fault* (Я виноват, 1993) and *The Sinful Apostles of Love* (Грешные апостолы любви, 1995), praising it as a "remarkable example" (40). Yet his overall film assessment stays at the level of plot synopsis and accepts the alterity argument as valid. With regard to *Queen of the Gypsies*, Chiline writes: "It is considered by many to be one of the finest films ever made about the Roma" (37), supporting, albeit implicitly, this appraisal by saying in the next line that both Loteanu's 'gypsy'-themed films "became sustained box office hits, both within the Soviet Union and internationally, mostly across the Eastern bloc where they were exported and stayed in circulation for years" (37).

Paradoxically, when scholars comment on the significance of these films, in aesthetic, cultural or other terms, they rarely stop to consider the import of the 'gypsy' theme.

Another film example of that order that comes from the second list is *The Vagabond's Waltz* (1941, Dir. Toivo Särkkä). In *Nordic National Cinemas*, the film scholar Tytti Soila describes this elaborate costume drama as "one of the most popular Finnish films ever and a grandiose spectacle" (55). According to Soila, *The Vagabond's Waltz* was the first Finnish film to be seen by over a million spectators, holding its premiere simultaneously at two cinemas in Helsinki. During the first three months of its release, the film was seen by every second inhabitant of the Finnish capital, an estimated 160,000 people. What is more, the film features the two most popular stars of that period; the lead characters are played by "the number one couple of Finnish cinema: Ansa Ikonen and Tauno Palo" (56). The *Historical Dictionary of Scandinavian Cinema* names Särkkä's work as "the second most popular Finnish film ever made" (Sundholm 209). The various entries in the said Dictionary speak not only of the lucrative popularity of the 'gypsy' theme in Finnish cinema but also of its masquerade nature:

> Two indigenous minorities have played special part in Finnish cinema: the Romani and Sami people. Both have been used according to the double function of the "other", of being both dangerous and attractive at the same time, hence playing on both the fear and sexual desire that the representations have evoked. This double bind of ethnic representation was already used in Tulio and Vaala's early films, *Mustat silmaet* (*Dark Eyes*, 1929) and *Mustalaishurmaaja* (*The Gypsy Charmer*, 1929). The most legendary portrayal of Romani people in Finnish cinema is the box-office hit *Kulkurin valssi* (*The Vagabond's Waltz*, 1941), with the tall and dark Tauno Palo disguised as a gypsy. (139)

The topic of 'gypsies' was introduced to Finnish cinema by the directorial duo of Teuvo Tulio and Valentin Vaala. Valentin Vaala, deemed one of the most significant filmmakers in the history of Finnish cinema, made his directorial debut in 1929 with the film *Dark Eyes*, where both he and Teuvo Tulio play the leading male 'gypsy' roles. This first feature-length attempt was never widely distributed and reportedly Vaala himself considered it a disappointing failure. Nevertheless, later in the same year, together with Tulio, he partially remade the film as

The Gypsy Charmer for the Fennica-Filmi company and his second attempt not only became a box-office hit but also earned the starring Tulio the nickname "Finland's Valentino". Consequently, shortly afterwards, the 'gypsy' theme became a subgenre of its own, "enabling the eroticization of the male body and the performance of a masquerade, excessive male" (Sundholm 389).

After this short digression, which has presented for our consideration some concrete examples, we can now return to the description of the film corpus, and more specifically to the third and final group of fiction films that handle the 'gypsy' theme. This group of fiction films is the largest in actual number; it encompasses works that make use of 'gypsy' figures in minor roles, invoking the anti-world of 'gypsies' in relatively short sequences, without making it their central point of appeal. These films are marginal to my research and are, therefore, the least represented in the corpus.

- *Jánošík.* Czechoslovakia, 1935
- *Sissi: The Fateful Years of an Empress* [*Sissi – Schicksalsjahre einer Kaiserin*]. Austria | 1957
- *Touch of Evil.* USA, 1958
- "The Gypsy." *At Each Kilometer* ["Циганката." *На всеки километър*], Ep. 8. Bulgaria, 1969
- *Chocolat.* UK | USA, 2000
- *Snatch.* UK | USA, 2000
- *Daddy Daycare.* USA, 2003
- *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.* UK | USA, 2006

By way of disclaimer, it has to be said that the cinematic works listed in this chapter form a rather unwieldy collection of filmic texts that share a very broad and almost tautological definition: 'gypsy'-themed films are films about imaginary 'gypsy' figures or, put another way, films in which the 'gypsy' mask is staged in truth-claiming modus. However, what makes this collection so unmanageable is the sheer variety of works. Clearly, the films stem from different national cultures as well as from different socio-historical periods. Viewed through the lens of conventional film genres, they happen to span the entire spectrum of genres from musicals, comedies, costume melodramas and dramas, through *noir* and horror films to fantasy and documentary-style fiction films. What is more, many of these films are auteur works, each of them

creating its own signature vision and symbolic 'gypsy' universe. Under-standably, the undertaking to provide an interpretative coordinate system for such a big and disparate number of titles presents a formidable challenge in itself. The challenge arises in particular from the tension between the need to assess the films as autonomous works of art, ones that have originated from a specific socio-historical context, and at the same time remaining faithful to the focal goal of the research, and that is to extrapolate a set of salient characteristics, to identify one or more aesthetic tendencies at work that account – in good measure – for the titles in the film corpus. Inevitably, the resulting coordinate system is bound to appear schematic and will not always do full justice to the complexity of the material. That is to say, the films grouped in the three thematic categories align only to a certain extent with the racialising aesthetics of authentication thus described. As is the case with genre corpuses, there are films which reproduce this aesthetics more fully and faithfully and then there are, obviously, others that are more tangential. In the next chapters, taking a cue from Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to film genre, I describe and catalogue the semantic elements that make up the typical 'gypsy'-themed film, outlining common motifs, personages, character traits and time-spaces, but also lighting set-ups, colour schemes, film sets, etc. At the same time, I consider the structures in which these building blocks are arranged, the meaning-bearing syntax of 'gypsy'-themed films. As a result, my approach should be meticulous enough to dissect the corpus of 'gypsy'-themed films and bring to light the features they share, and yet inclusive enough to acknowledge the unique in each and every artistic work.

4.2 Questioning 'Gypsy'-themed Films or the Racialising Aesthetics of Authentication Described as a Technology of Truth Production

The film titles included in my film corpus have been subjected to a series of questions[65] that target the strategies of authentication filmmakers

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65 The analysis proposed here relays the ideas and perspectives developed by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their influential book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*. The authors emphasise the need for a nuanced and multi-level analysis of subaltern representations in film and discuss an impressive number of works featuring minority groups from all over the world (cf. 178–219). Yet, interestingly enough, there is not a single mention of 'gypsy'-themed films in their comprehensive

avail themselves of when staging the 'gypsy' mask before the camera. The questions crystallised during an intensive phase of film viewing, and as such provide the backbone of a comprehensive methodology for analysis and evaluation of 'gypsy'-themed films. The algorithm of questions highlights five key levels of analysis:

1. production set-up;
2. content of the 'gypsy' mask – character portrayal and plot;
3. form of the 'gypsy' mask – conventional use of visual tools and devices, such as lighting and camera work, colour themes, costumes and props, casting, music; cinematographic style;
4. claim to truth – film's visual aesthetics, genre, and self-presentation in paratexts;
5. functions of the 'gypsy' mask in the given socio-historical context.

4.2.1 Production Set-up

Questions on the production set-up: Who has power to define the 'truth' about 'gypsies' on the big screen? Who is in a position to decide what their appearance, behaviour, customs and way of life should be, what stories they should participate in, and what qualities they should display as human beings? Who is responsible for the film script? Is the script based on or influenced by other earlier texts or artworks? Who directs the film? Who is behind the camera? Who is in charge of costumes and film set? Who selects the actors? Who is cast in the leading roles? Who is cast as extras?

Summary of findings: The analysis of the production set-up throws light on the radical asymmetry of power between the dominant national culture and the Roma minority when it comes to self-definition and self-representations. In the production of a 'gypsy'-themed film, all decisions concerning script, direction, camerawork and editing, casting, costumes and props, music, etc. are taken by ethno-national ('white') professionals. (As an exception, when discussing the production set-up, I use the term 'white' to denote actual people who relay the perspective of the dominant (national) culture and who are perceived and self-perceive as 'white'.) The script is often based on a literary text (novel,

research, a symptomatic sign that the gypsy phantasm is a blind spot not only for European studies but also for postcolonial studies.

short story, theatrical play, poem, etc.) written by a 'white' writer. Often 'gypsy'-themed films are auteur works in which the film director takes charge of more than one aspect of the film work, such as script, editing, music, etc. The leading roles are often given to national or international/Hollywood 'white' celebrities, which makes these films akin to blackface minstrel shows. At the same time, 'gypsy'-themed films often make use of Roma extras, a very widespread authentication strategy, which makes them also akin to ethnological exhibitions or human zoos. In short, these films are produced by 'whites' for the entertainment of 'white' audiences featuring 'white' actors in the lead, frequently aided – for the sake of marketable authenticity – by Roma extras.

For a detailed discussion and film examples, see Chapter Five.

4.2.2 Content Analysis of the 'Gypsy' Mask: Character Portrayal and Plot

Questions on character portrayal: How is the 'gypsy' mask coded in the film, in terms of character traits? Is it explicitly or implicitly contrasted to the 'white' mask? What qualities are ascribed directly (through speech acts) or indirectly (through actions and emotional states) to it? What aspects of human existence do these qualities reflect (personal integrity, social and professional integration, parenthood, sexuality, religious belief, language mastery and education, diet, health, and personal hygiene, national affiliation etc.)? What kind of cluster do these qualities form? Is the 'gypsy' figure individualised? Does it have a name and how is it characterised through its name? How is it coded with regard to time (day vs. night/linear vs. circular) and space (light vs. shadow/city vs. forest)?

Questions on plot: What kind of plot is the 'gypsy' figure set in? Is the 'gypsy' figure the main hero in the story, and if so, is there an option for him/her to complete the hero's journey, to transcend his/her limited circumstances and achieve a higher level of individuation? If the plot negotiates the relationship between a 'gypsy' figure and a 'white' figure, a representative of the mainstream culture, does it allow for the possibility of coexistence (a love relationship or marriage)?

Summary of findings: Each of the films listed above constructs its own 'gypsy' world and manufactures its own 'gypsy' mask in explicit or implicit opposition to the 'white' mask. To preserve this element of artistic uniqueness, my analysis refrains from a taxonomic listing of

'gypsy' stereotypes,[66] but rather aims at abstracting the qualities and values ascribed to the 'gypsy' mask in two model films in the form of keywords (see Chapter Six). Thus, I demonstrate that the 'gypsy' mask has several layers of signification – mythic or symbolic, socio-cultural, religious, 'ethno-racial' – that mutually reinforce each other and are activated *en bloc*. This approach lays bare the plasticity and artificiality of the 'gypsy' mask, offering an explanation as to why almost anything deviant can be ascribed to it. At the same time, it demonstrates its universality, its simple grammar: 'gypsy' signifies either absence or insufficiency of a norm-setting value (e.g. the 'white' mask is coded with the value of 'cleanliness', which is absent in the 'gypsy' mask, the latter being coded with the value of 'dirtiness') or its misapplication (e.g. the 'white' mask is coded with the value 'proper use of language/ good command of one's language', while the 'gypsy' mask is coded with 'improper use of language/substandard command of one's language'). To put it another way, the juxtaposition of the 'white' mask against the 'gypsy' mask foregrounds the question of self-mastery, highlighting the grave consequences of failure, that is, if one fails to have control over oneself in certain areas of life. Put in abstract terms, the 'gypsy' mask is used to stage a cluster of heterogeneous attributes that stand in direct opposition, signifying absence or misapplication, to a set of heterogeneous values associated with the norm-setting 'white' mask.

Set in motion, the 'gypsy' mask enacts the myth[67] of human self-destruction. It represents the anti-hero who is unable to complete the hero's journey and who, by failing to take control of his/her own nature, dooms him/herself to perdition. As such, the 'gypsy' mask is auxiliary to the individualised figure of the 'white' hero; its purpose is to deliver a cautionary message, thereby staging the spectacle of failure and/or

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66 For a detailed study of 'gypsy' motifs in literature, see Brittnacher, *Leben*; as to photography, see Reuter, *Bann*.

67 Here, I use the term 'myth' in the sense elaborated by Lotman: it is a text-engendering mechanism organised according to cyclical time whose function is to create "a picture of the world". Mythological texts recount of events that are "out of time, endlessly repeated, and in this sense, unchangeable" and, thus, provide information about the laws immanent to the world (*Universe* 152). In terms of their structure, myths can be reduced to the following basic series of events: "entry into a closed space – exit from it" (158). Lotman's schematic rendition of myth-plots corresponds to Joseph Campbell's description of the monomyth, in which the hero's journey is broken down into six stages but is organised around the same two-step movement: entry into a closed, dark space and return to an open, lit-up space (*Universe* 28–29).

punishment. When placed in a leading role, which is what happens in 'gypsy'-themed films, the 'gypsy' mask is at loggerheads with its conventional use. To overcome this contradiction in terms, filmmakers tend to de-individualise and thus to de-centre the lead 'gypsy' character by delineating him/her as a generic figure that epitomises the entire group. The 'gypsy' hero is deprived of elaborate individuality on the level of both character portrayal and plot development. Just as in film *noirs*, this anti-hero is unable to transcend his/her nature/'blood', lifestyle or environment and, in an oneiric state, condemns him/herself to moral defeat and a foreseeable, non-tragic death. Films about the relationship between a 'white' and a 'gypsy' character proclaim such bonds to be impossible, demeaning or even lethal; they often serve as a warning story, for it is the 'gypsy' character who is shown to be the source of (lethal) danger.

For a detailed discussion and film examples, see Chapter Six.

4.2.3 Formal Analysis of the 'Gypsy' Mask

Questions on cinematic conventions and devices: How is the 'gypsy' mask visually characterised in terms of lighting, framing, colour schemes, make-up, hair-grooming, costumes and props? What qualities are ascribed to it? Is it crafted in juxtaposition to the 'white' mask and how? Who is privileged by the use of facial lighting, close-ups and white colour schemes? Who is de-individualised and how? Is the film explicitly intent on constructing social and/or 'ethno-racial' alterity? What aesthetic strategies does it pursue to achieve this goal? How is the 'gypsy' mask coded using editorial and cinematographic style?

Summary of findings: The general tendency is to portray 'gypsy' characters as metaphorically or literally 'non-white'/'black' in a realist style, which often alludes to and borrows from the authority of the ethnographic documentary film genre, reducing the central 'gypsy' heroes to representative figures instead of endowing them with an elaborate individuality. The cinematic tools and devices here are so numerous and diverse that it only makes sense to study their combined use and meaning-generating functions in the context of individual films.

For a detailed discussion and film examples, see Chapter Seven.

4.2.4 Claim to Truth and Authentication Strategies

Questions on genre and self-promotion: How does the film present itself and its relation to the socio-historical world? Does it lay claim to

authenticity? If so, what aesthetic strategies does the film use to attest to its alleged truthfulness? What elements are deployed to produce an effect of authenticity? How does the effect of authenticity come to bear upon the film's storyworld, on the delineation of its 'gypsy' characters and on its bottom-line message? What paratexts are circulated in support of the film's truth claims?

Summary of findings: The advertised aim of the 'gypsy'-themed films is to reveal the 'truth' about 'gypsies' in general, corroborating the cultural expectation that this European minority is intrinsically, radically and irrevocably different. These fiction films turn 'gypsy' ways and lifestyle into their central point of appeal, creating a much-lauded and just as lucrative authenticity effect through strategic deployment of Roma extras, Romani folklore/Gypsy music, Romani language, costumes, props and setting, etc. Visually, 'gypsy'-themed films are invested in realism as a style,[68] according additional authority to their truth claims by borrowing themes, motifs, stylistic devices and aesthetic techniques from the ethnographic documentary genre. The claim that these films are in a position to reveal the otherwise inaccessible 'truth' about 'gypsies' is also promoted through various paratexts: from DVD blurbs and advertisement posters to making-of films and interviews with the filmmakers.

For a detailed discussion and film examples, see Chapter Eight.

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68 The concept of realism is a famously vague, hard-to-pin-down one, associated with a broad spectrum of theoretical definitions, some of which are mutually exclusive, so a disambiguation note is required here. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Shohat and Stam provide an illuminating discussion of the question of realism in filmic representations of subaltern groups, pointing out that the aesthetics of verisimilitude implicitly makes claims to socio-historic truths and is decoded as doing so (cf. 178). In reference to Brecht, the authors are careful to distinguish between realism as a style or a set of conventions used to produce "an illusionistic 'reality effect'" and realism as a goal, also called "progressive realism", the aim of which is to lay bare social hierarchies and hegemonic representations (180). Clearly, in my critique of 'gypsy'-themed films, I have in mind the first notion of realism. In their *Film Theory*, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener consider the 'classical' cinematic style through the conceptual metaphors of window and frame, pointing out the paradox that a maximum of technique and technology is required to create "the effect of an unmediated view (window)" (19, cf. 14–38). In *Hollywood Lighting*, Patrick Keating details the technical means and codified rules that define classical cinema, further distinguishing between realism of roundedness, of presence, of mood and of realist detail (cf. 5). The psychological "appetite for illusion", another important aspect of pseudo-realism in plastic arts, is addressed in André Bazin's book *What is Cinema?* (11).

4.2.5   Functional Analysis of the 'Gypsy' Mask

Questions on socio-historical context and reception: What is the unstated purpose of staging the 'gypsy' mask in the film? What unspoken needs of the dominant culture are met through the story, what socio-political anxieties are alleviated, and what kind of identity crises are stabilised? What is the reception of the film? Who is praised and who profits directly from its success and who is excluded from the success?

Summary of findings: The staging of the 'gypsy' mask fulfils an array of disparate functions, similar to the ones identified in relation to blackface minstrel shows; we can distinguish between the following five main categories: the aesthetic, disciplining, carnival, subversive and socially integrative functions. The 'gypsy' mask is ubiquitous in film narratives and therefore it can endow figures and stories with a high level of visibility (aesthetic function). The enactment of the 'gypsy' mask, in turn, may be used in a way that stabilises the norm-setting 'white' mask by way of ostracising and punishing deviance (disciplining function); it may be used in a way that enables filmmakers to give vent to pent-up emotions and broach taboo topics (carnival/expressive function); or it may enable them to voice a critical view of the 'white' mask and put forward alternative models of social cohesion (subversive function). The subversive potential of the 'gypsy' figure may also add a measure of self-reflexivity and/or true originality to the film, two aspects of great cultural significance. Just as in blackface minstrel shows, the performance in 'gypsy' mask may have a strong uplifting effect on the professional career of the non-Roma filmmaking crew, elevating the film director and the lead actors – and sometimes even the national cinema they represent – to the first ranks of the international film scene (socially integrative function).

For a brief concluding discussion and film examples, see Chapter Nine.

The panoramic overview of 'gypsy'-themed films provides enough evidence in support of the claim that they represent highly complex artworks with a specific internal structure that sets them apart from other film forms and with a specific role in the dynamics of national cultures. Drawing on the summary description of 'gypsy'-themed films, I can also offer the reader some irony-loaded guidelines to pinpoint once again and in a condensed form the racialising essentialism that lurks behind this aesthetic phenomenon. (Here, the reader should be

reminded that in the context of the production set-up (Step No. 1), the term 'white' is used to denote actual people who relay the perspective of the dominant (national) culture and who are perceived and self-perceive as 'white'.)

4.2.6   How to Produce a 'Gypsy'-themed Film in Five Steps

Step No. 1: Get a team of 'white' filmmaking professionals to script, stage, shoot and produce a film about 'gypsies'. Invite 'white' celebrity actors for the lead roles and, if need be, typecast a crowd of Roma extras.
Step No. 2: Shoot an entertaining and simultaneously instructive story that revolves around the demise and punishment of a 'gypsy' hero. Refrain from portraying this anti-hero in a tragic light; make clear instead that 'gypsy' 'blood' and way of life are to blame for his/her undoing. Associate him/her with the oneiric and with the obverse mythic world (night-time, shadow, cyclical time, and forest) to achieve the effect of radical Otherness. If a 'white' character is unwise enough to socialise with the 'gypsy' hero, show their joint downfall. Individualise the 'gypsy' hero only partially; emphasise rather that he/she is a representative figure.
Step No. 3: Visualise the 'gypsy' mask as an embodiment of darkness (= absence of light). Cement this archetypal perception by bringing the 'gypsy' figure into connection with shadow, night, vivid and/or black (costume) colours and 'non-white'/'black' skin colour.
Step No. 4: Stick to the conventions of realist film, mobilising in aid of your truth claims lighting, make-up, costumes, props, Roma extras, and Romani folk music and language. No matter the film genre, include sequences shot as if you were an ethnographer documenting life-cycle rituals (baptism, marriage, funeral) and details from daily life. Make your film's carefully crafted authenticity its main selling point.
Step No. 5: Finally, don't forget that you are using the 'gypsy' mask as a projection surface to address important (political, aesthetic, ethical, etc.) questions that are relevant to the national majority but cannot be raised in public. All art requires courage and so does filmmaking!

Described in an ironically distanced way, the formula outlining the conception, production and self-presentation of 'gypsy'-themed films may elicit laughter, but this formula – which is intrinsically antigypsy – constitutes the norm in filmmaking and is extolled by scholars and experts in all earnestness. I want to conclude my overview of 'gypsy'-themed

Fig. 17. Screenshot from the website of the Harvard Film Archive. Film Series/Events. *Nicholas Ray: Hollywood's Last Romantic*. Short announcement of his film *Hot Blood* (1956). Web. 24 Apr 2020.

films with one highly illustrative example taken from the website of the Harvard Film Archive that bespeaks the normality of antigypsy representations on the big screen. In 2010, a retrospective of Nicholas Ray's work organised by the Harvard Film Archive had the following film announcement in its official programme (**Fig. 17**):

> *Hot Blood*
> Directed by Nicholas Ray.
> With Jane Russell, Cornel Wilde, Luther Adler.
> US, 1956, 35mm, color, 85 min.
> Print source: Warner Bros.
>
> Although inspired by careful research conducted by his first wife, the journalist Jean Evans, Ray's rarely screened exploration of gypsy culture is more fever dream than documentary, replete with saturated colors and hallucinatory dance sequences. The story of a community pushed to the far outskirts of society and a hero who attempts to assimilate into the "straight" world, *Hot Blood* bends its ethnographic impulse around Ray's deep empathy for outsider culture, creating a unique cultural document that revels in day to day details of gypsy life while simultaneously rendering them strange and exotic.

The synopsis of *Hot Blood* may be just a few lines long, but it reiterates in adulation most of the typical and highly problematic characteristics that I have identified in my multi-level description of 'gypsy'-themed films. I will refrain from a close textual analysis and leave the reader the pleasure of working out the antigypsy formula in the quoted synopsis. However, I want to draw attention to the normality of antigypsyism; here, it is reinforced not only by the film's inclusion in the Harvard celebratory retrospective as one of "Ray's iconic and deeply influential films of the Fifties", but also by Ray's canonisation "as one of post-war American cinema's supremely gifted and ultimately tragic filmmakers." The authors of the retrospective add that Nicholas Ray was "embraced as a cult director, crowned as auteur and celebrated for the searing romanticism, eccentric visual style and single-mindedness which would force him into one conflict too many with the Hollywood establishment." In other words, the appraisal of the film *Hot Blood* is embedded in and augmented by the appraisal of the director's lifetime achievement where the judgement of artistic value is authored and authorised by none other than the Harvard Film Archive. The reputation of Harvard as an academic institution inexorably comes to play a part in the process of normalising antigypsy attitudes. After all, one of the world's most renowned universities provides the institutional context in which Ray's film is publicly hailed as worthy of emulation. In the light of this, I can define the aim of my research as the uneasy task of questioning the overwhelmingly ubiquitous normalcy of screen antigypsyism. Moreover, I do so by comparing it to racist artworks produced in other space-times to achieve the effect of de-familiarisation, by exposing it for the highly complex cultural construct that it is as well as by furnishing evidence that antigypsyism constitutes one of the mythic pillars of European cultural consciousness, whose purpose is to maintain our shared sense of reality (normality).