

2

On the Film Corpus



The creation of the film corpus at hand has been steered by two aims. The first is a broader one, and it is to identify a body of films in a pan-European and US American cultural context that – put in very general terms – address in some way the topic of imaginary ‘gypsies’. The second aim is more specific in that this research aims to identify regularities and describe common cultural tendencies in the conception, production and reception of what – again, very broadly formulated – I call ‘gypsy’-themed films. The current chapter presents the five main criteria that have been used for the selection of these films: their theme, form, spatial and temporal provenance, and their level of popularity.

2.1 The Corpus Structure and Selection Criteria

During the phase of film research and film viewing, my primary interest has been to identify film titles that centre around the topic of the imaginary ‘gypsy’ figure, its world and way of life. Such films, very broadly categorised as ‘gypsy’-themed films, form the core of the corpus and are the main object of critical assessment. As a peripheral residue resulting from the selection process, there are a number of titles in the filmography that feature isolated ‘gypsy’ figures, having other topics as their central concern. These films can also be of relevance to the study because a brief appearance of a minor ‘gypsy’ figure can often suffice as a trigger to evoke the imaginary underworld of the ‘gypsy’ Other and shape the film’s overarching message. One example that illustrates

this point well is the Czechoslovak film *Jánošík* (1935, Dir. Martin Frič), in which a female ‘gypsy’ figure makes a fleeting appearance near the end of the saga [56’16:56’26]. With her head covered in a dark-striped cloth, the nameless woman is of crucial importance for the story’s dénouement: she brings false tidings to the national hero Jánošík, and it is through her treacherous agency that the legendary Slovak finds his death, executed publicly at the gallows.

A second residual group of films that can be subsumed only tentatively under the thematic category of ‘gypsy’-themed films comprises works of a paradigmatically different nature. Conceived in conscious opposition to antigypsy imaginations, these films strive to offer a more adequate representation of Roma individuals and/or collectives. Considerably fewer in number, they present an alternative to the core of the corpus, forming an aesthetic countertendency to those films that can be unequivocally termed ‘gypsy’-themed. In short, as for its subject matter, the film corpus is organised around a topic that covers the spectrum from imaginary ‘gypsies’, on its one extreme, to representations of Roma, on its other extreme. Significantly, the boundary between these two constructs at the two ends of the thematic spectrum is permeable, often blurred and subject to playful artistic redefinitions.

As to the filmic model, during the film selection phase priority was given to feature-length films where the fictional element comes to the fore. As a result, the corpus contains ‘gypsy’-themed films that belong to a broad variety of local fiction genres and subgenres: the *bondedfilmer* or peasant films from the 1920s in Sweden; Gainsborough period dramas from the 1940s; *españoladas* or Spanish folkloric musical comedies from the 1950s; films that supposedly represent “the endemic Balkan cinematic celebration^[31] of free-wheeling Roma” (Iordanova, *Cinema* 214); auteur works that borrow from magic realism, film *noir* and/or ethnographic documentaries; trash cinema and other forms of fashionable slumming, and so on. At the same time, the corpus contains a number of film titles that belong to the non-fiction spectrum of cinematic forms and/or have other formats, such as full-length and short documentary films, TV series and reportages, or short videos uploaded on social media platforms. The decision to maintain an open stance

31 I strongly disagree with this often-quoted formulation of Dina Iordanova’s. In my detailed study of Aleksandar Petrović’s film *I Even Met Happy Gypsies* (1967), I shed light on the ‘ethno-racial’ masquerade that lies at the core of ‘gypsy’-themed films, and especially the kind of ‘gypsy’-themed films produced by national cinemas in the south-eastern part of Europe (see “Figure”).

towards the fiction and the non-fiction form, often seen as mutually exclusive, results from the observation that 'gypsy'-themed films frequently tend to employ a quasi-documentary style in recreating their imaginary topos, while documentary films about the socio-historical world of Roma individuals or groups often borrow motifs and expressive devices from cult 'gypsy'-themed fiction films. In summary, as to form, the film corpus encompasses the broad spectrum ranging from fiction films, on the one extreme, to documentary films, on the other extreme, the boundary between these two distinct cinematic forms being, once again, fuzzy and subject to idiosyncratic interpretations.

A third selection criterion for films was their popularity, taking at the same time geographic provenance as a primary cue. This rather broadly formulated criterion, which is indicative of the aesthetic long-term impact of the films, can be defined with greater precision by considering the films' international distribution, their participation in film festivals and thematic programmes, the number of awards they have won, and also by the frequency of their appearance in academic and other writing, as well as by the practical aspect of market availability, such as DVD or Blu-Ray re-editions, and/or accessibility on the internet. By coupling the criterion of popularity with that of geographic provenance, it is also possible to identify titles that have gained special prominence in certain language zones and national cultures. The phenomenon of cult 'gypsy'-themed films, ones that hold a distinct appeal for (inter)national audiences, deserves serious scholarly attention, especially with regard to its occurrence in time and across space. In my view, the phenomenon of obsessively popular 'gypsy'-themed films is symptomatic of larger, hard-to-reach, virtually invisible processes of 'white' national identity formation and/or stabilisation.

The geographic scope covered by the film corpus encompasses the European (Eurocentric) cultural zone, including the European family of national states, and the USA. By opting for such a sizeable cultural map, my aim has been to underscore the transnational nature of film production and reception, to acknowledge the significant contribution of translation and migration, and to throw light on the different speeds at which 'white' national identities establish themselves as such within the cultural realm of Europe and the USA. So, while, on the one hand, 'gypsy'-themed films are characterised, albeit tentatively, in terms of their country of origin and language, on the other hand, it is possible to view them from a supra-national perspective, one that goes above and beyond national and/or linguistic boundaries, thereby enriching the

analysis with one more significant dimension. Such a perspective is virtually non-existent in academic research conducted on the intersection of film studies and antigypsyism and, as recent literary scholarship has demonstrated (see here the works of Bogdal and Brittnacher), it can be very fruitful, without precluding the need for more narrowly focused studies. Also supporting my approach is Lou Charnon-Deutsch's observation that it is a dialogue both intercultural and interdisciplinary that has given rise to the construction of the imaginary 'gypsy' and this cultural phenomenon has eluded scientists until recently due to a certain tendency to primarily focus on a single culture or to stay within the framework of a single discipline (cf. 11).

The broad spatial axis of the film corpus is matched by a similarly broad temporal axis: there have been no limits imposed with regard to the release date of the selected films, again with the aim of promoting the contrastive-comparative approach in the ensuing discussion.

2.2 Quantitative Description

In its entirety, the film corpus comprises 153 film titles released between the years 1897 and 2019 within the cultural zone of Europe and the USA, forming a fairly representative body of works on the ambivalent topic of imaginary 'gypsies' as well as representations of Roma. The earliest title in the corpus is the British short film *A Camp of Zingaree Gypsies* (1897) shot on the first wide-gauge film (68 mm, no sprocket holes) and included in the compilation film *The Brilliant Biograph: Earliest Moving Images of Europe (1897–1902)* (2020, Dir. Frank Roumen).³² The latest title in the corpus is the British hybrid documentary feature film *The Deathless Woman* (2019) directed by Roz Mortimer. The titles in between are distributed fairly evenly across time, with a tendency to grow in number the more recent they are.

Broken down by film form, the corpus contains 118 fiction films (including twenty-two silent films, five television films, four television series, two children's films, one short film, and two animations) and thirty-five documentary films (including four television reportages, two silent shorts, two short films, two online video clips, and one student

32 Released by Eye Museum and British Film Institute, *The Brilliant Biograph: Earliest Moving Images of Europe (1897–1902)* shows a selection of digitally restored one-minute "time capsules" from the Mutoscope and Biograph Collection.

film). It should be noted that film series, like the British television drama *Peaky Blinders* (2013), count as one title, just as the German documentary project *Antigypsyism: a film series about Sinti and Roma and Antigypsyism* (2014, Dir. Yvonne Warsitz, and Andreas von Hören) does. The Bosnian film *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* (2013, Dir. Danis Tanović), treated here as a fiction film, is a good example of the borderline problematics that emerge with respect to the categorisation of films according to their form. Tanović's film belongs to both the fiction and the documentary filmic models and to neither of them. Various labels such as drama, semi-documentary, docudrama or documentary leaning towards conventional *cinéma vérité*, *An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker* reconstructs a real-life story in which the members of a Roma family are cast as the film's main protagonists, re-enacting before a handheld camera their own experiences, with their private home and the surrounding area serving as the film set.

Broken down by country of origin, the film corpus contains twenty-eight titles from the USA; twenty-four titles from Germany, including East and West Germany; nineteen titles from the UK; twelve titles from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Czechoslovakia; twelve titles from France; eleven titles from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, and the Former Republic of Yugoslavia; ten titles from Spain; nine titles from Bulgaria; seven titles from Hungary; four from Russia and the Former Soviet Union; three titles from Poland; two titles from Finland; two titles from Sweden; two titles from Romania; and one title respectively from Austria, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Norway, and the European Union. The sheer number of films is of minor significance here; the focus is rather on their geographic distribution, which allows me to spotlight 'gypsy'-themed films with a cult status/special prominence in the different European and US American geographic and language zones. One such example is the long-neglected Norwegian silent film *Gipsy Anne* (1920, Dir. Rasmus Breistein), recently released in a newly restored version that, it is hoped, will catapult Breistein's masterpiece "back into contention for a place among canonised Norwegian films" (Diesen 17). *Gipsy Anne* is based on a story written in 1879 by the Nynorsk novelist Kristofer Janson and as such "is the first Norwegian film adapted from literature" (Myrstad 184). It is also the first film in the history of Norwegian fiction films that explores the countryside, becoming at the time of its release "an immediate hit both with the critics and the audiences" (Diesen 18). The daily newspaper *Dagbladet* from 14 September 1920 comments that the



Fig. 4a and Fig. 4b. Screenshots from *Gipsy Anne* (1920, Dir. Rasmus Breistein): Gipsy Anne (Aasta Nielsen) working as a milkmaid at the summer farm in Storlien.

merit of *Gipsy Anne* lies in depicting “authentic Norwegian rural life” (25), a new cinematic topic that scholars deem “a breakthrough for the national character traits in Norwegian film” (18). Myrstad concludes in her analysis that the film is “nationalist in its choice and use of rural setting” (191). Paradoxically enough, it is by deploying a central ‘gypsy’ character that the pioneer director “succeeded in confirming ‘Norwegianness’” (Diesen 29), in emancipating Norwegian cinema from the Swedish influence and in establishing “his own ‘Nynorsk’ trend” (19). The character Gipsy Anne is the emblem of nature in his film: it is mainly in association with this female figure (Fig. 4a and Fig. 4b) that Breistein introduces the much-celebrated scenes of contemporary rural life that will come to define Norwegian national iconography³³ (cf. Iversen).

Back to the description of the film corpus, it should also be said that the breakdown of films according to their country of origin contains an element of arbitrariness and aims, in the first place, to provide a bird’s-eye overview. Many of the films, and especially contemporary

33 In a rather similar way, the British silent film *Betta the Gypsy* (1918, Dir. Charles Raymond) is celebrated for featuring British nature in a novel way. As one film review for *The Bioscope* from 1918 puts it on record: “[i]n selecting, for their first British production, a Romany story, Famous Pictures have certainly scored a triumph, for they have demonstrated once and for all that our island is capable of affording scenic effects equal to those of any other country. We have grown to regard flat fields and typical pastorals as our specialty, but here we have mountain gorges, roaring cataracts, and dizzy precipices, and if they are not in reality important enough to open a Cook’s office and tramway to the spot, then all credit is due to the producer who has so contrived each picture as to be a masterpiece of dramatic natural setting” (“*Betta the Gypsy*” 30).

productions, are the outcome of a multinational enterprise; they are often multilingual, some featuring up to six different languages, and quite often they are set in several countries. Therefore, in categorising a film, in the cases when there is more than one country of origin listed, decisive factors were the film's main language, the setting and/or the director's nationality. For example, the film *Just the Wind* (2012, Dir. Benedek Fliegtauf), a co-production of Hungary, France and Germany, is categorised here as Hungarian, because the film's main language is Hungarian (in addition to Romanian and English), the story takes place in Hungary and the director is Hungarian. Tony Gatlif's film *The Crazy Stranger* (1997), a co-production of France and Romania, featuring the French, Romanian and Romani languages, set in Romania, is however categorised here as French on account of the director's nationality. The international and multilingual aspect of individual films is highlighted to point out the limitations of the category "country of origin", its historical instability and vagueness, and at the same time to offer another argument in support of my view that 'gypsy'-themed films need to be assessed from a supra-national perspective.

2.3 Sources of Information

It goes without saying that the singular make-up of the filmography of 'gypsy'-themed films presented here has been influenced both by my specific research interests and by my personal circumstances. Throughout the duration of my research from 2015 to 2020, I was based in the town of Heidelberg, the site of the Documentation Centre of German Sinti and Roma, which explains my over-reliance on sources located in Germany. My main sources of films include:

- my personal collection of films on the topic;
- the film archive at the British Film Institute, London;
- the film archive at the Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin;
- the film archive at the Documentation Centre of German Sinti and Roma, Heidelberg;
- the film archive at the goEast Festival, Wiesbaden;
- the film collection at the Library of Heidelberg University's Slavic Institute;

On the Film Corpus

- the film programme of the goEast Symposium “Constructions of the Other – Roma and the Cinema of Central and Eastern Europe”, screened in Wiesbaden in 2019;
- the film programme “Kino Romanes”, screened at Kunstverein Heidelberg in 2015.

Further sources of information that were consulted during the phase of film selection, categorisation and description include the official websites of the respective films, when these are available, the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), the websites *Amazon*, *YouTube* and *Vimeo*, and the online catalogues and archives listed in Annex I.

2.4 The Corpus Building in Retrospect

The process of compiling the film corpus at hand can be described as a progressive transition from total chaos to relative order. At the beginning of my research, I strove to view every single film I could track down, which in itself is an overwhelming task. At the same time, I had a specific interest in abstracting the cultural grammar that governs the ‘gypsy’ mask on the big screen, and more specifically that invariable component in its content and form that is decipherable across time, culture or medium. Working on this assumption – that the ‘gypsy’ mask is a material expression of a cultural universal – I have developed a set of selection criteria that steer towards an ahistorical, interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and transmedial approach to film analysis.

In order to work out the universal component encoded in the ‘gypsy’ mask, I have made a point, on the one hand, of considering these films as autonomous works of art, each of them creating their own system of signification that functions independently, outside of their cultural and historical embeddedness. On the other hand, I have been interested in the ‘translatability’ of the ‘gypsy’ mask, a tell-tale sign of its universal dimension, and have, therefore, attempted to establish connections, to highlight lines of tradition across time zones, across cultural and linguistic zones, and across genres and media. More than half of the films in the corpus have been subjected to numerous viewings, coupled with meticulous note taking and a review of the accompanying promotional materials, the so-called ‘paratexts’, such as film press kits, magazine reviews, DVD bonus features and commentaries, interviews with film directors and the cast, festival programmes, etc., as well as scholarly

articles. My first and foremost questions with regard to each film have been: Does the film aim to authenticate the 'gypsy' mask? Does it stage 'ethno-racial' alterity? If so, how? If not, what does it do instead? As a result, I was able to identify three aesthetic tendencies in film productions that make use of the 'gypsy' mask. Characteristic of the first type of films is the (often non-reflected) intention to authenticate the 'gypsy' mask, to simultaneously reify its existence on- and off-screen, and thus by implication to authenticate and reify the 'white' mask. Such films perpetuate an essentialist worldview of 'gypsy' culture and insist on the identity between the socio-historical world and the fabricated screen images, between really existing humans and the figures of film language. These films employ an intricate technology for truth production, which is an object of comprehensive discussion in the ensuing chapters. The second type of films tend to take a consciously playful stance towards the 'gypsy' mask, and while making deliberate, even exaggerated use of it, they furnish it with a new content. The development of this artistic strategy can be well traced by studying Tony Gatlif's prolific body of work. The third type of films are films that transcend the 'gypsy' mask; they entirely abandon the essentialist aesthetics of authenticity, directing instead their critical gaze towards the dominant culture and its structures of power. These films tend to embrace a constructivist worldview, displaying a high level of self-reflexivity; they develop representational alternatives to the 'gypsy' mask, i.e. more balanced and adequate depictions of Roma individuals and/or collectives. My initial intention was to also cover here this body of innovative artistic work, but in the process of writing, I realised that the topic of 'gypsy'-themed films is large and complex enough to fill the pages of a single book. It also became clear to me that to do justice to the phenomenon of oppositional films, I would need to analyse them in the same level of detail as I do 'gypsy'-themed films, and this is something I intend to do in the near future as a logical continuation of this study. A final remark: the reader should also bear in mind that the research presented here attempts to offer an interpretative coordinate system for a sizeable number of unique works of cinematographic art. So, in many cases, the proposed 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 categorised as one of these three types often adhere not only in different degrees but also in a different manner to the respective aesthetic tendency.