

Review [summary] of
the children and youth film *Nellys Abenteuer*
(Nelly's Adventure)

Author: Pavel Brunßen, Technische Universität Berlin
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Review of the children and youth film *Nellys Abenteuer (Nelly's Adventure)*

The movie *Nellys Abenteuer* (Germany / Romania 2016) begins with a popular and well-loved topic for children: Vacations. Nelly and her parents, the Klabunt family, are planning to go to Romania this summer. There, Nelly learns that her parents plan to move to Romania. Furious about this decision, Nelly runs away and is quickly kidnapped to a Roma village by the Roma Hokus and Iancu. A German man, Reginald Wagner, is behind the kidnapping. He wants to prevent Nelly's father from working on wind energy development in Romania, which competes with his dam project. Nelly is kidnapped several times over the course of the movie, ultimately succeeding in escaping from the Roma village with the help of two children, Tibi and Roxana, then preventing Reginald Wagner's dam project - saving the Roma village from flooding. At the end of the film, Nelly and her parents decide together to move to Romania.

In its press packet, the movie is announced as a "thrilling family movie about courage, foreign cultures, and real friendship." In contrast, the press packet does not note that Nelly's adventure does deal with family, courage, and friendship, as well as a wide range of antigypsyist clichés and homogenizing and essentializing presentations of Roma people. The movie *Nellys Abenteuer* is a movie of special interest for dealing with antigypsyist sentiment, since it received over 900,000 euros of state film grants, was shown at a variety of movie festivals, won multiple awards, and was produced in cooperation with *Südwestrundfunk (SWR)* and *Saarländischen Rundfunk (SR)*. The movie is planned to be shown on the ARD kids' channel and on the third program on SWR for fall of 2017.¹ In addition, the movie is also explicitly directed towards school classes, and attempts to portray itself as educational material. The website www.nellysabenteuer.de includes a contact address for school presentations and a link to download "extensive educational materials."²

Roma are portrayed as different and foreign throughout *Nellys Abenteuer*. This is the conceptual basis of the film. It attempts to create a sharp contrast between the more "rationally" thinking Germans and the "freedom-loving" Roma. The Roma's activities and characteristics in the movie follow antigypsyist tropes. According to such tropes, Roma appear in the movie as small-time criminals, con artists, beggars, as doing 'traditional' dances, as kidnappers of children, etc. No Roma are shown in any other living situation, such as in 'regular' professions or as students.

The portrayal of the Roma village, which is characterized as impoverished, could also be (mis)understood as a well-meaning attempt to draw attention to the life-threatening conditions that many Roma live in. However, the filmmakers do no work to problematize these circumstances or to discover their causes. The movie remains on the level of reproducing clichés and stereotypes, and there is no attempt to problematize antigypsyist stereotypes.

The assertion that the movie is a successful attempt to confront such stereotypes is not correct. Research on stereotypes has found that we should not look to subjects affected by discrimination to find the root causes of stereotypes, but rather to those who articulate them. The movie ignores such research.

Looking into the educational materials, some things become even clearer than they are watching the film itself: The presentations of Roma in the film *Nellys Abenteuer* construct an insurmountable difference between the German majority society and the Roma minority. Roma is implicitly agreed to relate to one specific nationality – Romanian in this case – and the Roma people reduced simply to their identity as Roma.

¹ SWR - Südwestrundfunk (2017): Debut on the third program: *Nellys Abenteuer*. Available online at <https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/kommunikation/27-debuet-im-dritten-nellys-abenteuer/-/id=10563098/did=18879764/nid=10563098/16s1f41/index.html>, last reviewed on 06/23/2017.

² www.nellysabenteuer.de, last reviewed on 06/09/2017.

A comparative analysis of *Nellys Abenteuer* with the representation of Sinti and Roma in media reporting or photography shows that the stereotypical representations in *Nellys Abenteuer* are not an isolated case. Homogenizing and essentializing representations based on stereotypical images are the rule, not the exception. Media creators and audiences remain trapped in a social context that has been breeding antigypsyist sentiment for centuries and can lead to stigmatization and persecution.

The following section provides a summary of some of the antigypsyist motifs in the movie.

- Not working: No scenes in the movie show Roma involved in “regular” jobs. Their activities include only begging, stealing, card tricks, street music, “traditional” dances, or criminal activities like kidnapping. This reinforces the broad association in our society between Roma and ‘criminality.’
- Uncivilized, pre-modern, and backwards: Roma in the village appear to be a ‘clan’ which is driven by instinct and undisciplined. Roma are assumed to be carefree and unconcerned with structure. Roma are primarily identified as an ethnic group, and not as citizens of their country. Implicitly, the suggestion is that Roma do not have a nationality, and are intrinsically ‘homeless.’
- Kidnappers: Nelly is kidnapped (multiple times) and taken to a Roma village. The specter of the kidnapping ‘Gypsy’ is an antigypsyist stereotype with a long history.
- Child marriage and forced marriage: 15 year-old Roxana is going to be married on her 16th birthday. 13 year-old Nelly is warned by Tibi to protect her virginity. This paints Roma as people living outside of civil law, driven by instincts and uninterested in recognizing women’s or children’s rights. Characteristics undesirable in the ‘we’ group of the German audience are projected onto a group of ‘others.’
- ‘Positive’ antigypsyist sentiment: In addition to negative stereotypes, viewers are also shown a romanticized image of the ‘gypsy’s joyful lives’ filled with dance, ‘traditional’ music and clothing, and card tricks. These representations of alleged ‘traditions’ do not represent a break from the stereotypes in the film, but rather complement them. People who live carefree, joyful lives during the day need to steal at night to have something to eat.

The camera perspectives make this mechanism clear by focusing on what is ‘foreign’ and ‘unusual.’ At various points throughout the film, Roma are shown from Nelly’s distanced perspective, representing the majority society. This makes the Roma minority a foreign and threatening collective to viewers. The musical choices – which are sometimes threatening, sometimes ‘folkloric’ and ‘traditional’ – also contribute to this perception of Roma as foreigners.

Ultimately, Hokus and Iancu turn out not to be the Roma masterminds behind Nelly’s kidnapping; instead, they are acting on behalf of the German, Reginald Wagner. However, the image of a criminal, uncivilized, undisciplined, and instinct-driven Roma people with no morals remains. Against this background, the fact that the movie is shown on television and in cinema, as well as considered educational material for children and young people, this should be considered critically. The movie’s stereotypical representations provoke generalizing and essentializing views of Roma people. Essentializing representations of *the ‘culture’ of the ‘other’* do nothing to dismantle stereotypes. Instead, they reinforce existing social notions of supposed foreignness, then transmit these to children and young people.

For a complete analysis of the movie, please see: <http://zentralrat.sintiundroma.de/gutachten-zum-kinder-und-jugendfilm-nellys-abenteuer/>

Press release, September 15th 2017

Central Council of German Sinti and Roma appeals to German television channels KIKA and SWR: Stop showing antigypsyist children's film

In an expert conference on September 14th on the topic of "Antigypsyist sentiment and state film funding," Romani Rose – Chair of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma – repeated his appeal to Südwestrundfunk (SWR) not to show the children's film *Nellys Abenteuer*, and not to include the film in the program of KIKA (children's channel), the joint program of ARD and ZDF.

In the view of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, the movie contains serious antigypsyist clichés and stereotypes which make it entirely unsuited for its target child audience. The pedagogical age recommendation indicates the movie is suitable for children nine years and up, and for third-grade students. During the conference, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma presented an expert review by Pavel Brunßen, Technische Universität Berlin, upon which this declaration was based.

The detailed film analysis states the following:

"Roma are portrayed as different and foreign throughout *Nellys Abenteuer*. This is the conceptual basis of the film. It attempts to create a sharp contrast between the more 'rationally' thinking Germans and the 'freedom-loving' Roma. The Roma's activities and characteristics in the movie follow antigypsyist tropes. According to such tropes, Roma appear in the movie as small-time criminals, con artists, beggars, as doing 'traditional' dances, as kidnappers of children, etc. No Roma are shown in any other living situation, such as in 'regular' professions or as students. [...] However, the image of a criminal, uncivilized, undisciplined, and instinct-driven Roma people with no morals remains. Against this background, the fact that the movie is shown on television and in cinema, as well as considered educational material for children and young people, this should be considered critically. The movie's stereotypical representations are echoed in the associated educational materials and provoke generalizing and essentializing views of Roma people." (page 19).

Prof. Urs Heftrich from the University of Heidelberg verifies in his remarks on the movie that it does not disassemble antigypsyist clichés, but rather cements them:

"Drawing on their characterization as notorious pickpockets, *Nellys Abenteuer* presents Roma as henchmen helping to commit a crime that would be punished with "imprisonment of at least five years" according to Sec. 239a StGB (German Penal Code): "Abduction and kidnapping." The fact that the mastermind behind this plot isn't Roma, that this mastermind (as Prof. Becker indicates in his statement) expects Roma will be disposed to kidnapping and calculates this as part of his plot, and the fact that Nelly is ultimately rescued with the help of a young Roma person – none of this changes the fact that Roma (specifically Roma *men*) are the ones who actually commit the crime in the movie. Racist movies in the USA have almost always portrayed adult male African-Americans as especially dangerous. We're clearly dealing with a racist archetype here."

During the expert presentations, several participants clearly indicated that *Nellys Abenteuer* does generate and reproduce antigypsyist prejudice. Markus End, Chair of the Gesellschaft für Antiziganismusforschung (Society for the Research of Antigypsyism) explained that because current media reporting consistently associates the image of Sinti and Roma with criminality based on their

origins, this produces a distorted image that makes the movie's viewers disposed to accept and confirm such stereotypes.

Participants in the conference agreed that the ethics of making movies with or about Sinti and Roma need to be discussed, at film universities, academies, and institutions providing film subsidies as well. It could be a good impetus for such institutions to add an ethics officer to their juries. This would not represent a restriction of artistic freedom; instead, institutions funding such films should be expected to create, protect, and adhere to ethical standards that protect the dignity of minorities.

The Central Council of German Sinti and Roma believes that its critiques of the film and of German film subsidies in general have largely been confirmed by the conference. It is incomprehensible that such a film could make it through the granting institution's committees without its reproduction of stereotypes being noticed. Romani Rose hypothesizes that a similar film about anti-Semitic stereotypes and attitudes in the context of a trip to Israel would be immediately rejected by any jury. The movie *Nellys Abenteuer* was financed with over 930,000 euros from tax revenues.

After holding a discussion in early September 2017 with the program director at Südwestrundfunk (SWR), Dr. Christoph Hauser, and representatives from the production company and MFG Filmförderung Baden Württemberg about *Nellys Abenteuer* without coming to any consensus at all, the Chair of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, Romani Rose, renewed his appeal to no longer show this movie on publicly financed television channels.

"It is completely unimaginable that a movie with such antigypsyist content is first subsidized using tax money, then shown on publicly financed television as a children's program in Germany," Romani Rose declared. Because of this, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma will submit an official complaint to the SWR, their directors, the broadcasting counsel, and programming officials at KIKa, a children's channel run jointly by ARD and ZDF.