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March 28th, 2001
(Recycling Conference. UCD)

Carmen: Re-cycling par excellence
From Literature to Film

Literature has been the source of numerous adaptations, and various librettists have found their inspiration in great as well as obscure literary works. Themselves, the librettists have never been recognized as poets, they are considered to be intermediaries, and the first mention of the title appears in an Italian dictionary, in 1839, a time when the relationship between authors and composers finds itself engaged in the Romantic Movement, which gave opera a renewed impetus. Many stories have awakened the inspiration of great artists who have married various forms of arts, but none more than Merimée's novel *Carmen*, and therefore, the most immediate influence upon *Carmen* derives from French literature, and when they read the novel, *Carmen* (meaning song in Latin) captured the imagination of the librettists Meilhac and Halévy. Both were successful playwrights of their time. They collaborated on numerous libretti with Jacques Offenbach, the father of the operetta. Meilhac and Halévy were masters of energy and lively existence, and together, with their friend and composer Georges Bizet, they created the operatic masterpiece *Carmen* that has since inspired numerous scriptwriters, film directors and choreographers. All have tried to communicate their vision of the magnetic Gypsy. They have exposed her through different principles and techniques meant to stimulate and challenge the public, thus raising controversies every time the story is retold.

Let's begin with the birth of *Carmen*. Mérimée's novel *Carmen* is based on a Spanish travelogue written by Prosper Mérimée (1803-1870), which begins with an

introduction to Gypsy life, thus making the story appear to be an anthropological study, while the narrator witnesses a drama. In the course of his research in Spain, the narrator has made the acquaintance of Don José, an outlaw. Don José relates his tragic relationship with Carmen, a free and sexy Gypsy who worked in a tobacco factory, Mérimée meets her and he falls under her spell (He calls her “La sorcière de Carmen”) and describes her as “*plus jolie que toutes les femmes de sa nation que j’aie jamais rencontrées*” [The most beautiful woman among her nation that I ever met]: “*Sa peau, d’ailleurs parfaitement unie, approchait fort de la teinte du cuivre.* [To resume: she had a perfect complexion in a copper tone] *Ses yeux étaient obliques, mais admirablement fendus* [she had slanted eyes perfectly set]; *ses lèvres un peu fortes, mais bien dessinées et laissant voir des dents plus blanches que des amandes sans leur peau* [the lips were sensual and her teeth as white as almonds without their skin]. *Ses cheveux, peut-être un peu gros* [thick], *étaient noirs à reflets bleus comme l’aile d’un corbeau* [as the wing of a crow], *longs et luisants...* *C’était une beauté étrange et sauvage, une figure qui étonnait d’abord, mais qu’on ne pouvait oublier* [a face which first caught you by surprise, but that you could not forget]... *Ses yeux surtout avaient une expression à la fois voluptueuse et farouche que je n’ai trouvée depuis à aucun regard humain. Œil de bohémien, œil de loup.*” Her eyes particularly fascinated him, and it is these wolf eyes which seem to have hypnotized all those who discovered Carmen.

Bizet's opera retells Don José's story as an adaptation to the operatic stage. Georges Bizet (composer. 1838-1875) with his librettists, Henri Meilhac (1831-1897) and Ludovic Halévy (1834-1908) rearranged the narration of Don José's series of falls and suffering into four acts. To suit the opera tradition of the *Opéra-Comique*, the librettists had to soften some aspects of Mérimée's characters, and they subdued the personalities of Carmen and Don José. The amoral Carmen became less sexually active, and she drove the love-struck Don José to commit fewer crimes. Then, in order to stress the contrast

between Carmen and what a decent young woman should be, the librettists introduced Micaela, someone with an honorable background and raised with recognizable values.

Carmen, when performed at the *Opéra-Comique* in Paris on March 3rd, 1875, was received harshly by the critics, who were appalled at the realism of the subject matter and its staging: Women were working in a tobacco factory; Carmen was smoking on stage and attacking co-workers with a knife; Carmen, a gypsy, was represented in a leading role, and to top it all, in the end, the soprano was stabbed on stage instead of dying gracefully of consumption. In spite of all these elements, *Carmen* is still the most often performed opera, and it has inspired the production of more than 30 films.

For example, Charles Vidor has reinvented *Carmen* for the American movie theater in 1948. For Vidor, Rita Hayworth was the reincarnation of Carmen as a redhead with eyes not quite so wolf-like. (Glenn Ford was cast as Don José.) The film is titled *The Loves of Carmen*, and it is an English spoken version of the story with a musical background composed by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

Video example 1
The Loves of Carmen

Carmen has also been readapted to modern times, in an African-American version, *Carmen Jones*, in 1954, by Otto Preminger (Screen play: Harry Klecner). Otto Preminger chose Dorothy Dandridge as his Carmen and Harry Belafonte was chosen for the role of Don José. In this adaptation of Bizet's opera, the language of the libretto has been rewritten to suit the new setting and to suit the English language; the bullfighting has been replaced by boxing, and the setting is the American South.

Video example 2
Carmen Jones

Then, in 1983, Francesco Rosi, adapted Bizet's opera to the screen, and the Spanish director, Carlos Saura, produced a flamenco version of Mérimée's novel the same year. Both kept the original name for their productions, but, in adapting *Carmen* to film, Rosi and Saura opted for different approaches. For the most part, Rosi took an opera away from one medium, the operatic stage, where word and music are the leading elements, and dramatized it into an "operatic film" where the visual plays an important role. Saura, used Mérimée's novel and Bizet's music as a springboard for a vision of his own based on a physical interpretation of the novel through dance, and both directors added new elements to their films meant to make the story as realistic as possible and also to cast their version with new challenging elements.

In Rosi's Franco-Italian production, the world of Carmen and Don José is preserved much as Bizet, Meilhac and Halévy had envisioned it for the operatic stage. However, we are no longer in the presence of performers dependent on the conductor's baton, as in a standard operatic stage-production. Here, the characters move in the new dimension of film. For the role of Carmen, Rosi found his "wolf-eyes" in Julia Migenes-Johnson, and her victim in Plácido Domingo (Don José.)

Rosi preserved the visions of the opera's libretto, in action and passion, Carmen remains a bewitching amoral woman who exudes sensuality and likes to get what she wants without worrying much about consequences, whereas the handsome Don José lives only through his love for Carmen. Rosi brought *Carmen* to Mérimée's setting by shooting the film in Spain, a country where he had already been inspired by bullfighting and bullfighters when filming *Il momento della verità* in 1965. He succeeded in setting *Carmen* into tableaux, which blend harmoniously with the Spanish scenery and include an arena and a bullfight - visual dimensions that make the film more explicit and realistic.

Rosi filmed the opera in Ronda, a small old mountain town in Spain: The town is "arid, rugged and mountainous, its sunflowers barely alive, its landscape studded with cows grazing on the winding roads and sharp cliffs...Its houses are white-washed and

edged in green and brown" (Rubinstein 13); and he filmed also in Carmona, a fortified town, thirty-three kilometers from Seville. In these locations, Rosi added movement to the plot of the libretto and expanded the visual effects, he created a visual excitement which is not possible with a staged performance. The photography of the Spanish backgrounds is lavish, the filming preserves the dust and flies which increase the realism of the film, and the camera adds not only movement to the beautifully sung drama, but also expands the space of the action. The setting sets the stage for Julia Migenes-Johnson's sensual performance.

Video example 3
Carmen (Rosi's version)

In Carlos Saura's adaptation, *Carmen* represents a complex interpretive task, with a repeat of the excellent Flamenco performances found in Saura's *Bodas de Sangre* and in *El Amor Brujo* (produced in 1987). The screenplay was written as an adaptation of Mérimée's novel and draws from the music of Bizet's opera, which recurs in nostalgic leitmotifs. Antonio Gades' choreography for the film focuses on the intense interaction between two Flamenco stars, Antonio (Gades himself) and a young woman named Carmen (Laura Del Sol). Saura related that: "it was difficult to make *Carmen* without doing the opera, without doing a pastiche," (Besas 236) and in order to avoid falling into this pattern, he researched thoroughly Mérimée's novel and created a plot with a story-within-a-story, as a result, Saura's *Carmen* offers dual plots. The fictional intrigue, introduced as a desire to adapt Mérimée's story to dance, is intertwined with the relationship of the film's characters, Antonio and Carmen. In the film, Antonio is a producer in search of a dancer who will be the star performer in a Flamenco production of *Carmen*, and he becomes attracted to a dancer whose name is Carmen

The action gives two points of view, the first one, a reflection on *Carmen* narrated by Antonio who explains the novel's plot to his dancers before he begins choreographing

it and staging it (he even gives a copy of Mérimée's short story to Carmen, the flamenco dancer), and the second one, the development of a sexual relationship between Carmen and Antonio, which parallels that of Mérimée's characters, presenting the same problems of jealousy and desire. Antonio becomes Carmen's lover only to find out that she is already married, and that her husband (a drug smuggler) is coming out of jail. As was the case with Mérimée's Carmen, the "Flamenco" Carmen is attracted to many men, and after the two performers dance their last steps together, Antonio, crazy with jealousy, murders her. In a parallel to Micaela of the operatic plot, Saura creates Christina, Antonio's assistant and a very gifted dancer who lacks Carmen's savage beauty. She is the character who represents the qualities of dedication and loyalty, which are lacking in Carmen.

All details superfluous to the romance, which takes place between Carmen and Don José, are eliminated. As a result, Saura makes no use of the outdoor scenes described by Mérimée, and instead, he develops the eroticism of the bedroom scene. In his film, which becomes a Spanish film, including Spanish dialogues and songs, Saura presents the duality of his plot through dance and settings which are always uncluttered and stripped to a minimum.

Saura's filming blends a guitar interpretation of Bizet's music which lends itself well to the strong rhythms necessary for Gades' choreography. With the camera, Saura emphasizes the theme of duality and confrontation. With alternating shots, which juxtapose the performance of the narrated plot and the events actually taking place between Carmen and Antonio, Saura transports the viewer to a dimension of illusion. This effect begins when the dancers are seen through a two-way mirror, then, it is developed further, with two "pas de deux," one danced by Carmen and Christina (Antonio's assistant) and the other by Carmen and Antonio. In this manner, Saura shows Christina and Carmen competing on stage and creates the parallels between Carmen and Don José/Antonio's love, which develops both on and off stage. At that moment dualities

merge and that at both levels, on and off Antonio's stage, and the plot will end dramatically.

Video example 4
Carmen (Saura's version)

With Charles Vidor, Otto Preminger, Rosi and Saura's *Carmens*, the spectator is presented with totally different approaches to the adaptation of Carmen's story into film. Charles Vidor takes Carmen out of her opera setting. Otto Preminger brings her to the twentieth century, he gives her a new life staged in a new background. Rosi, in the opera tradition, has emphasized the vocal aspect and has brought *Carmen* to the screen in a manner which tried not to transgress from the standard operatic stage performance by retaining the continuity of the opera's action. At the same time, Rosi has added movement and interpretation to the opera, giving a new perspective to its visual effects. As a result, Rosi's *Carmen* is the most sophisticated opera on film. It has become a work of great sophistication because of Rosi's understanding of the story and libretto. Saura's adaptation of *Carmen* is also a masterpiece at three levels. On the first two levels, thanks to the memorable choreography of **Antonio Gades**, Mérimée's novel is adapted not only to film but also to dance, and then, with genial inspiration, Bizets' music in turn finds a new medium when adapted and blended with the rhythms of Flamenco. In his adaptation, Saura has introduced Carmen through the element film expresses best: motion.

Vidor, Preminger, Rosi and Saura, have dared challenge the traditions of opera and dance, proving that directors with insight and sensitivity can find new ways to deal with adaptation and to re-cycle *Carmen*. They have developed a symbol of emotion and reality through the setting they have chosen to tell their story, and they prove that Mérimée's story will continue to exert its fascination on artists for a long time to come.

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