

The kiss-curl and the resisting eyes: reassessing *Carmen* (Feyder, 1926)

Phil Powrie

Abstract

In common with most adaptations of the Carmen narrative, Feyder's Carmen (1926) was praised at the time for its 'authenticity', by which was meant local colour, but also the use of a Spanish star, Raquel Meller, to play Carmen. In this article, I show how 'authenticity' is a vexed issue, as one would expect, but particularly so when the star in question clearly resists the stereotype of the passionate femme fatale.

The Franco-German TV channel Arte has been screening often restored silent films as part of the series 'Le muet du mois' (This month's silent film). Amongst the French films screened or to be screened are *L'Homme du large* (L'Herbier, 1920), *Nana* (Renoir, 1926), *Le Joueur d'échecs/The Chess Player* (Bernard, 1927), *Monte-Cristo* (Fescourt, 1929), and *Carmen* (Feyder, 1926). *Carmen* was one of the first French films to be shot more in authentic locations than in a studio, in this case various locations in Spain (the Ronda valley and Seville where Mérimée sets his original novella), and in France (Côte d'Azur, Bayonne, and Fontainebleau); studio shoots took place in the Joinville, Montreuil and Nice. It premiered in Paris in November 1926 (at 3000 metres). It was restored by the Cinémathèque française in 1985 (3408 metres), work which was mainly the reconstitution of intertitles. The Cinémathèque completed a further tranche of restoration in 2001 working from two copies of the film in their collection, one a nitrate negative, and the other a nitrate print, this time mainly working on coloration, producing a film of 3824 metres. The restored film, with Ernesto Halffter-Escriche's original music adapted by François Porcile, was premiered at the Il Cinema Ritrovato festival in Bologna in July 2001, and finally screened on Arte in June 2002. Although, as we shall see, contemporaries thought well of the film, film historians have in general not been kind to it (see for example Ford 1973: 28). The film's restoration and a recent article by Anita Leandro in a special number of the Association Française de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Cinéma's journal *1895* on Feyder (1998) suggest that the time is ripe for a reassessment.

'Authenticity'

Leandro considers that location shooting inscribes the authentic into the fabric of the film, working against the stereotype of the Carmen story. It is an authenticity she tries to intensify by showing how the camera offers the spectator subjective viewpoints, whether that of Don José at the beginning of the film in a nostalgic pastoral sequence, or of Carmen as it accompanies her technically brilliant long walk in the Rue du Serpent, or indeed of other more minor characters. This article will show how such a naturalising 'authenticity' is not tenable, and that the film, by virtue of its status as a star vehicle, as much as by aspects of the mise-en-scène, constantly undermines the 'authentic', highlighting instead problems of 'fit' for the star which are located in gender issues. I read Feyder's film more as a struggle between the directorial vision of Spanish stereotypes on the one hand, and the star's resistance to that stereotype on the other, a resistance which can be understood in the context of women's changing place in French society.

The film was conceived as a star vehicle for the Spanish actress Raquel Meller by the dynamic Films Albatros, a group of Russian expatriates whose films enjoyed particular success in the 1920s due in part to great actors such as Ivan Mozzhukhin and set-designers such as Lazare Meerson. Meller was originally a popular singer; her song 'La Violetterra' had been an international success, and was eventually used by Chaplin in *City Lights* (1931). She had become a star in the films of Henry Roussell: *Les Opprimés* (1922), *Violettes impériales* (1922-23), and *La Terre promise* (1925). A short festival with extracts from her films was devoted to her at the Vieux Colombier in Paris in February 1925 (Albera 1995: 148n37). Feyder is reported to have said ironically a few years later that he had been asked 'not to do a film of Carmen with Raquel Meller, but to do something with Raquel Meller on Carmen' (Chaperot 1930). Typically for the Albatros film company, the film was a lavish production, with careful marketing, which included a making-of book by Meller to coincide with the film's release.

Meller may have had the benefit of bringing popular song as a backdrop to her performance, but in other respects proved to be a problem for the director, as her conception of Carmen was a very personal one: 'Carmen could have been interpreted in many different ways. Is she fundamentally bad? Or is she on the contrary trapped by her situation and her race, which makes her act as she does, without really being bad (...). I think very few people do not have a heart' (Meller 1926: 43-44). Feyder was later to explain how this attitude led to problems when filming, as Meller insisted on seeing Carmen as a victim of her circumstances:

She did not like reading very much. So she got her secretary to read her the story aloud in snatches, all the while unconsciously creating her own story more to her taste and corresponding to her ideals.

Very pious and full of rigid principles, she only wanted to play pure, noble and chaste heroines on screen.

It is not surprising then that there were a few conflicts between the two of us over the interpretation of Mérimée's Carmen.

Because I felt that Carmen was slipping.

The capricious and passionate gypsy was slipping into an insignificant pure young girl, whose platonic love for a toreador was provoking, by a twist of fate, her fiancé Don José's crime.

One morning, in the famous stone bullring of Ronda, pearl of Andalusia, we argued over a kiss she thought inappropriate just when we were about to shoot.

Maybe because I felt for the 600 walk-ons waiting under a leaden sun, or maybe it was the sun's effect on me, unusually for me I raised my voice. She raised her arms to the sky, her bracelets tinkling, and cried out: 'I don't give a fig about this Mr Mérimée; anyway, where does he live, this Mérimée? I'll phone him!' (Feyder and Rosay 1944: 52-53).

The film was nevertheless a great success. After unanimous praise from French reviewers, it was hailed as 'the greatest French production of the year' on the front page of the British journal *The Bioscope*. The theme of the reviews, whether French, British or American, was the film's simplicity and authenticity. A typical review, in this case American, makes the point forcefully: 'Here is the stuff of the story interpreted for the screen as dramatic material distinct from the stereotype model, refreshingly free of opera tinsel. It is a strong, sober story, its roots deep in human beings and in the circumstancing life that surrounds them' (Anon. 1927b: 6).

Authenticity was achieved in a number of ways. First, the return to Mérimée was foregrounded in the film's credits and the surrounding publicity, even if, as Breteque points out, Feyder retained some elements of the opera,¹ while expanding parts of the novella (Breteque 1988: 16). Of particular interest is the long opening section of the film in Don José's native village. This corresponds to a few lines at the beginning of chapter 3 of the novella, lines, indeed, which are repeated in a recitative in act 1 of the opera. The action begins *in media res* as a youthful José (Louis Lerch) runs frantically across the fields back to his mother's house where he kneels by her side and explains tearfully in flashback how he has accidentally killed a player who had accused him of cheating at *pelote Basque*. We see him leave his village with a long and nostalgic backward glance, arrive in a Castilian village comically hidden in a hay-cart, and be recruited by soldiers to the army.

This expanded opening pastoral sequence fulfils two functions in relation to a perceived authenticity. First, its flashback structure echoes Mérimée's framing in the novella, where the narrator frames Don José, who then frames Carmen. It thus recalls, however imperfectly in this case, the source text to the spectator. Second, the *topos* of the native village is part of a more general focus on 'authentic' local colour, allowing impressive shots of countryside and buildings. Similarly, the incarceration and escape of Garcia, Carmen's husband (played by Gaston Modot), mentioned in only a few words in the novella, are an occasion to focus on impressive architectural mass in the form of steep prison walls, contrasted with an expanse of ruffled sea as the smugglers take him away in a boat.

A second means of achieving 'authenticity' was by the use of a documentary style (terms used by reviewers Elie 1926 and Bonneau 1926) in the *mise-en-scène*. This does not apply only to the many exterior shots mentioned above. Costumes, for example, are ornate, heavy and multi-layered. The taverns have dirt floors and are full of 'authentic' detail in the bric-a-brac which fills them (pitchers, guitars, and so on); a brigand lights his cigarette using a burning twig from the fire which he grabs with some tongs (as Leandro says, such an image is 'full of ethnic value'; Leandro 1998: 106); when Carmen removes her ring in the final scene, her fingers and nails are clearly dirty. Most 'authentic' of all, though, are the exteriors, particularly the final bullfight, filmed in the famous arena of Ronda in Spain. This was the 'high spot' for *Variety's* reviewer, who comments that 'it looks like the most authentic affair of its kind ever shot and holds a kick for everyone' (Anon. 1928: 29). As a French reviewer put it, during such scenes 'the impression is given that quite by chance a cameraman happened to be there, out of sight, and that he is recording scenes from the life of normal people' (Mirbel 1926).² *The Bioscope* stressed both sides of this kind of realism: the film is 'a very grim and bloodthirsty record', but its 'chief interest is in the magnificent natural settings' (Anon. 1927a: 56).

¹ The changing of the guard; the card-reading; and lengthy scenes in Lillas Pastia's tavern corresponding to act 3 of the opera.

² The same point is made in almost the same terms by Bonneau 1926, and again about a different scene, the fight between Garcia and José, by an American review: 'A savage convincing affair, with apparently many a chance taken of being stuck, a fight beautifully managed and extremely realistic --a gypsy fight pure and simple with no quarter asked, as if actors were not fighting before a camera' (Anon. 1927b: 6-7).

Finally, the music, which was specially composed by Ernesto Halffter Esriche, was very unlike Bizet's multi-faceted and festive music.³ Halffter's music was more sombre, tragic even, echoing the more fatalistic streak of the novella so as to 'recreate the fiercely romantic and brutally passionate atmosphere which Bizet's music had completely toned down' (Ploquin 1926b: 553). But, more importantly, the music was inspired by folk music (Ford 1973: 27), specifically Andalusian melodies, according to the composer (Ploquin 1926a). This, when added to the documentary style of much of the film, suggested authenticity far removed from the Opéra Comique, the 'opera tinsel' mentioned above.⁴

And yet, the film's *mise-en-scène* is often complex as well as technically brilliant. One of the most extraordinary scenes is that of Carmen's escape from Don José in the winding Rue du Serpent. It is extraordinary for two reasons. It is not an exterior but a very complex set, and the camerawork is technically brilliant for the time: 45 shots lasting almost three minutes, most of which are travelling shots, with the camera hopping from backwards travelling in front of the group to forward travelling as it follows the group. Its technical brilliance was pointed out by Meller in her memoirs of the film, who saw it as 'head and shoulders above the most audacious recreations made in France until then' (Meller 1926: 114). This was due largely to the set designer, Lazare Meerson, 'who brought back from Spain all the topographical documents he needed' (Meller 1926: 115). His drawings (held at the BiFi in Paris) show particular attention to ornate sculptural details such as the wrought ironwork of balconies and window-grilles, or arches, which are the most defined features in his hasty sketches of buildings. Despite the evident technical brilliance of this scene and its studio location, it is mentioned in reviews as yet another example of documentary realism.⁵

Similarly, the use of light is frequently, and theatrically expressionist, with key-lit faces against a dark decor, pools of shadow under archways, human shadows cast sharply onto walls. Carmen herself appears on several occasions in hallucinatory shots from José's point of view, such as when she is framed by the town gates and emerges ghost-like from the shadows to confront José, or the scene of her murder when the image of her face breaks up with an iris distortion which is doubly and ambiguously subjective. It could be taken to represent José's tear-filled eyes; but it could equally, as Leandro suggests, be taken to represent Carmen more directly, as 'a metaphor of Carmen's soul rising heavenwards. Nature, character and camera are as one in this last image of *Carmen*' (Leandro 1998: 103).

The two scenes mentioned above as exemplarily 'authentic' (the opening pastoral and Garcia's escape) can be construed differently, however, as carefully constructed exercises in contrast. In this sense they neutralise the naturalising tendency of location shooting which, Leandro claims, 'authenticates' what would otherwise have been stereotype (Leandro 1998: 100). The opening pastoral, despite its drama, roots José in his native Navarre, connoting it firmly, and literally, as a fertile and nurturing motherland. When José looks back longingly, his knapsack on his shoulder, he is looking back at his mother, his house, his village, and the village in verdant fields, and

³ Halffter (1905-1989) was a pupil of Manuel de Falla, and, following his very successful *Sinfonietta* (1925), of Maurice Ravel in Paris.

⁴ Although a comment by Fescourt suggests that the music did not go down well: 'exhibitors played what they liked' (Fescourt 1959: 262).

⁵ 'The film was shot in Spain, against a natural background, in hot fields and rocky sand-duned hills and winding streets' (Anon. 1927b: 6).

these are clearly contrasted with Carmen, the smugglers' bivouacs, the caves, and the dry gullies later in the film; as one review said of the characters, 'the land's effect upon them is steadily revealed --they love it but its dry hotness burns them, it orders their emotions but they love and wander and hate with its dust upon them' (Anon. 1927b: 6).

The scene which expands Garcia's stay in prison fulfils a contrastive function of a different kind. Gaston Modot's naked torso, his melodramatic prayers to the crucifix he places on his bed, and his dramatic escape down the immense prison ramparts construct him as a fetishised macho hero in contrast to José's effeminate character. It is to the issue of gender roles that I now turn.

Gender roles

Returning to the opening pastoral, the fact that José kneels at his mother's side to complain about his fate echoes the penultimate scene where he does the same with Carmen before killing her. The film, and José himself, are thus framed by women, reinforcing José's more general weakness. Indeed, much is made of this weakness in the film, as José swoons after killing his officer and, later, Garcia, to be tended by a solicitous Carmen in both cases. Her solicitousness is certainly justified by Mérimée's text if not by Bizet's, and we shall see below how it is socially significant. Similarly, Meller's interpretation of Mérimée's heroine, although skewing Carmen away from the capricious and deadly femme fatale, can also be upheld. Meller viewed Carmen as a creature trapped by her racial circumstances: 'A sort of fatality pushed Carmen despite herself, simply because of the character and the law of her race, the law of the Calé (...). She was, in part atavistically, obliged to be Carmen' (Meller 1926: 44-45). This echoes the final sentence, by Don José, in Mérimée's novella: 'Poor child! The Calé are guilty because of the way they brought her up' (Mérimée 1998: 53).

Despite favourable reviews, commentators soon began to criticise Meller's performance, which 'does a disservice to the film. The artist does not seem to have understood her character' (Desclaux 1928). We can perhaps take issue with such comments, however, by suggesting that Meller's view of Carmen was not just inflected by her reading of Mérimée. It was inflected by her situation as a Spanish star in a French film, by the repressive Catholicism to which she subscribed, and also by her situation as a woman in an environment which could be described as fundamentally macho, as the following anecdote by Buñuel, who was an extra on the set, makes abundantly clear: 'During a scene with Don José, Carmen was sitting motionless at a table, her head in her hands. Feyder told me to do something, anything, some kind of gallant gesture. I did, but unfortunately the one I chose was an Aragonian *pizco*, a real hard pinch, which got me a resounding slap from the star' (Buñuel 1984: 90).

I am suggesting then that Meller was acting against Feyder's conception of Carmen, in a performance which could be said to be *against the grain*. It is for that reason that I disagree with Breteque's analysis of one of the more stunning exteriors, Carmen and Don José's tryst on the ramparts of Seville. This cuts away from medium shots of the lovers sitting on the ramparts with the countryside in the background, to extreme long distance shots of them taken from the countryside, where they are reduced to pathetically small figures, overwhelmed by vast expanses of stone and sky. Breteque suggests that this scene demonstrates Carmen's devilry, as she tempts a Christ-like José with the world laid out before them (Breteque 1994: 18), taking no

account that the shot-reverse-shots place both of them within a larger pathetic fallacy, as victims of their environment and of their different races.

Meller's impact as Carmen is, as Fescourt pointed out in the 1950s, paradoxical, although it is difficult to decide whether this is because of what we know of her views. For him, her 'appeal is difficult to define, physical, a sex-appeal which is paradoxically suggestive and pure' (Fescourt 1959: 337). Both of these terms are figured in what we might otherwise consider a minor detail, Carmen's kiss-curl, which figures prominently in one of the more famous posters for the film, and which is reprised in Viviane Romance's Carmen twenty years later (Christian-Jaque, 1945). The kiss-curl makes Meller's performance of Carmen's sexuality both suggestive and, paradoxically, pure, although this is clearly in combination with other features of costume and performance. The kiss-curl is a synecdoche for a full head of curly hair, unrestrained by combs or headdress. Fullness of hair is itself connoted in Western culture as a marker of sexual availability. This is double-edged, however. The curls of the Medusa, which could turn men into stone if they looked at the face which they framed, as Freud memorably showed, connote the possible consequences for a man if he indulges that sexual availability, castration. The stereotypical kiss-curl therefore marks both sexual availability, and, because it is only what remains of a fuller head of hair, the containment of its castratory consequences.

In Meller's case, however, any notion of sexual availability is countered, first by hair which is not long at all (unlike Romance's or Hayworth's in *The Loves of Carmen*, Vidor, 1948, for example). Moreover, availability, which could also have been signalled by revealing clothes, is avoided by having close-fitting and heavy costumes. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, Meller's eyes do not appear to connect sexually with Louis Lerch, who, as though in compensation, over-acts in contrast to her. His eyes plead, almost as if he were pleading for her to conform to stereotype, as if they were saying 'be the dangerous femme fatale, and not this rather more ordinary woman'. Her eyes, by contrast, are full of compassion, as though to comfort him for his delusion: 'I cannot be the femme fatale you so desperately want me to be' they seem to be saying. They even suggest submission to her fate – 'kill me not because I want to be free, but because you want me to be something I am not' -- thus running on both counts quite counter to the stereotype of Carmen. Paradoxically, though, the submission she claims in her performance is a desire for freedom, however misguided that submission may be: she wants to be free to be unfree.

This attitude corresponds very much to the changing status of women in post-war France, which one could characterise as superficial change: apparently radical but still deeply conservative (I shall return to the way Meller as a Spanish actress intersects with this). The period 1870-1914 has been called the 'era of the great feminist congresses' (Albistur and Armogathe 1977: 523), some eleven, representing an even larger number of feminist associations. This was also a period of intense activity for the feminist press, with some 35 periodicals or newspapers appearing, some, like *La Fronde*, known internationally (Albistur and Armogathe 1977: 545). Feminism in the post-war period, as in the pre-war period, was fundamentally reformist and bourgeois, corresponding in part to the gradual increase of female employment in the tertiary sector from just over a million in 1906 to one and a half million by 1921, an increase of approximately 30% (McMillan 1981: 117). Not many associations involved working-class women, and relationships with the unions remained difficult, not least because the overwhelmingly male unions considered that women in work tended to drive wages down. The associations campaigned for suffrage, a cause which seemed

to enjoy considerable public support. But the campaigning led to nothing. In the mid-1920s, the main gain made by women was the Strauss Law which gave benefits to women on maternity leave (Albistur and Armogathe 1977: 577); legally, however, women remained under the tutelage of their husbands, a situation which did not begin to change until 1938, with the vote being granted in 1945, and full independence from their husbands only in 1965.

Nevertheless, some things had begun to change, however superficial. At least in Paris, women were wearing shorter dresses, and had their cropped like men. There seemed to be more emancipated women than in the nineteenth century; we even find Régina Badet, the actress who played Carmen in an early Film d'Art (Calmettes, 1910), in a rather different environment, as 'a stripper convicted several times for appearing nude who would do belly dances with a pearl in her navel to the accompaniment of an invisible orchestra' (McMillan 1981: 171). Attitudes had also begun to change. A Belgian writer visiting Paris in the year of Feyder's *Carmen* relates how the girls he talked to remained committed to the idea of marriage, but with a hint of independence: 'They will marry late, if necessary: they can wait. In marriage, they will bring a greater awareness of realities, the habit of personal initiative, perhaps a devotion that is less spontaneous and less disinterested, but often more enlightened and more energetic' (McMillan 1981: 128). We can see this superficial independence in Meller's Carmen, who claims the freedom to choose lack of freedom. We can also see how importing a specifically Spanish actress into the role, whatever else it may have done for 'authenticity', clearly managed to suggest this contradiction: Meller's Spanishness guaranteed the stereotype of the passionate ethnic Other, while Meller's own well-known prudish views and adherence to the tenets of Catholicism worked to undermine the dangerous difference inscribed in the passionate ethnic Other.

The American review which I have frequently quoted brings together some of these issues. It points out the paradox of suggestiveness and purity in Meller's Carmen, using the very apt metaphor of the dead centre, the centre which is impermeable and resisting:

Her Carmen is a woman, full blown, tormented, veering, yet ever returning to the dead centre of her nature. She is no child and no fool, nor is she wilfully wanton. Her emotions within the range of her being are as ascertainable in their undulance as the length of her skirts --real Spanish skirts, thank heaven, and not the abbreviated article that someone out to turn Carmen into a flapper would make them (Anon. 1927b: 6).

Apart from the insistence on 'authenticity', curiously displaced onto costume ('real Spanish skirts'), this statement targets both her attractiveness as the stereotypical femme fatale ('tormented, veering') and her resistance, her gravitation to something which is both central, but because central to her and her alone, 'dead' for the seeker of voyeuristic pleasures.

And that surely is the point: Meller's Carmen was criticised because she would not conform to sexual stereotype, despite the very visible and curiously immobile stereotype of the phallic woman, the kiss-curl, 'an abbreviated article' if ever there was one, plastered absurdly and rigidly above her resisting eyes.

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