

## VERSIONS OF *CARMEN* IN AMERICAN CINEMA

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This dissertation is a part of the research project “Presencias españolas en el cine norteamericano / Spanish presences in American cinema”, financed by the Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología de España, which is, in turn, the Spanish contribution to the European and US bilateral macro-project, “Film Studies Program Europe/Hollywood: The Europeans in the American Cinema”. This macro-project based on la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme de Paris, studies the influences and contributions of “Old World” countries to the American film production from the invention of the medium until today. This research includes both biographical data about film professionals who migrated to North America (actors, directors, writers, technicians...) and the representation of European stereotypes (characters, myths, types, landscapes...) in Hollywood studio films.

My project focuses on the different versions (explicit adaptations) of the Carmen myth in classical American cinema. This myth deals with Spanish identity and stems from the foundational novel written by Prosper Mérimée. Later on, Georges Bizet re-worked it as an opera. I claim that *Carmen* is particularly suitable for continuous innovations, re-readings and updates. Moreover, it has clearly proven its capacity to connect with the different historical epochs, regardless of the particular socio-cultural coordinates of its first formulation. The main issue I attempt to research is *why* and *how* Carmen has been adapted in the US context throughout the period from 1915 to 1954 (classical cinema).

The first half of this research is divided in the three parts. Firstly, I explain Carmen’s myth in general terms. It is a myth that cannot be separated from the myth of an exotic and sensual Spain. This image of Spain was fundamentally created by a variety of travelers, writers and painters, most of whom were French like Mérimée himself, Gautier or Doré (but also Anglo-Americans such as Washington Irving or George Borrow) during the 19th century. Their works drew an imaginary erotic geography that defined the stereotype of the Andalusian woman (and especially the Gypsy, since she was considered to be more “oriental”) as pure sexual ardor. Carmen is also intimately related to the long-lasting Western cultural archetype of the *femme fatale* initiated by the religious dichotomy that confronts the woman-as-mother with the woman-as-pleasure.

Secondly, I focus on Mérimée’s novel and Bizet’s opera. I utilize these two works as the point of departure for the later film adaptations that compose my field of analysis. Specifically, I study the manner in which they treat the national stereotype (Spanishness), ethnic or racial identity (Gypsiness) and gender/sexuality (*femme fatale*). Lastly, I explore in general terms how the Spanish stereotype is constructed in

American culture throughout history. I bring to the fore the fact the United States is a nation made of immigrants and has had to articulate different views of the “Other” (the European, the black, the Latino...) throughout history.

The second half of my research is chronologically organized according to the most relevant versions of *Carmen* in classical Hollywood cinema. Chapter 1 focuses on *Carmen* (1915, Cecil B. DeMille), since it imported the soprano Geraldine Farrar into the cinematic screen and rivaled in its opening with a now lost version of *Carmen* (1915, Raoul Walsh), starring Theda Bara, the first *vamp* in the history of American cinema. In this section, I also study a parody of DeMille’s film, directed and interpreted by Charles Chaplin. Chapter 2 centers on *Loves of Carmen* (1927, Raoul Walsh), starring Mexican actress Dolores del Rio. Chapter 3 analyzes *The Loves of Carmen* (1948, Charles Vidor), with Rita Hayworth. These last two films are star vehicles for Latino-type actresses, who were believed to be particularly suitable to play the Carmen role. Finally, chapter 4 deals with *Carmen Jones* (1954, Otto Preminger), a musical set not in Spain but in the United States, featuring African-American actors. In addition, this film is an adaptation of a famous Broadway show.

The structure of each of the described chapters is similar, so that the changing dimension of the various aspects analyzed can be more accurately evaluated. Not only do I deal with the textual and aesthetic aspects of the film themselves, but I also examine archival material such as movie reviews, trade and fan magazine editorials and letters, production papers, press books, promotion and advertising materials and censorship files. Therefore, my research relates the films with the Hollywood studios’ cinematic and industrial practices. I also study marketing and promotional strategies, critical and spectatorial reception, and the role of each of the *Carmen* versions in the construction of the star persona of the actresses that perform the lead role in each of the films.

My project also studies the manners in which each of these versions of *Carmen* represents racial and sexual Otherness – a key aspect in the figure of Carmen – from the Latino Carmen (Dolores del Rio) to the African-American (Dorothy Dandridge), and from the silent film *vamp* (Theda Bara) to the *femme fatale* in the 1940s film noir (Rita Hayworth).

Besides, the films analyzed reflect important social processes that take place in the United States from 1915 to 1954, such as the changing immigration landscape, the increasing presence of women at work, the visibility of the New Woman or the first feminist and civil rights movements. I also relate filmmaking with historical discourses dealing with racial, sexual and national identity (i.e. assimilation and nativism theories).

Thus, my study of the versions of *Carmen* in US cinema is based on the combination of a thorough cinematic formal analysis (mise-en-scene, narration, film genres etc.) and other socio-historical discourses. Film texts, like any other text, are symptomatic of the wider cultural milieu in which they come into existence. Films are cultural products that reveal significant aspects of their production context, historical reality and the ideological positioning of those who produce them and those who view them. They do not simply reflect or interpret a particular socio-historical reality; they document it by condensing the tensions and contradictions of a given period of time and social space in a symbolical fashion.