The Place of Carmen

Prosper Mérimée’s Carmen (1845) is one of the most popular works of French literature not to have been carefully read. Perhaps because the novella was superseded, in 1875, by Georges Bizet’s celebrated opera of the same title, then made into more than fifty film versions in the twentieth century, the original story has been lost under the sheer weight of its adaptations. This essay addresses the problem of narrative frames in Mérimée’s text (the way in which a serious or pseudo-serious ethnographic discourse envelops, undermines and ironizes the central story of love and death). Its contention is that the theme of intellectual uncertainty, which characterizes the ethnographer’s reflections (and which is absent from the opera and film adaptations), is also the main theme of the novella, appearing in the fictional guise of geographical uncertainty—i.e., uncanny (unheimlich in the Freudian sense) locations. Carmen has been misread as a work of mere exoticism, of exciting and seductive dépaysement, whereas this exoticism is the seductive overlay masking the unsettling dis-placements of the uncanny—that domain in which love and death, in Baudelaire’s expression, exchange “des regards familiers.”

I. On the Multiplicity of “Carmen”

If I make the simple statement, “Today I would like to speak about the place of Carmen,” my statement is not, in fact, as simple as it appears. To pronounce the title Carmen is to open up an area of referential uncertainty. It is impossible to know, from my statement, whether I am referring to the 1845 novella of Prosper Mérimée, to the 1875 opera of
Georges Bizet, to the more than fifty film versions of the story (Cecil B. DeMille, Charlie Chaplin, Ernst Lubitsch, Charles Vidor, Otto Preminger, Carlos Saura and Antonio Gadès, Francesco Rosi, Peter Brook, Jean-Luc Godard, et al.), or even, to a recent theatrical version that was staged between April 25 and May 21, 2001, at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, Florida, entitled “Carmen Libre,” described in its press release as a “new and vibrant work […] which places the sultry freedom fighter in Cuba, somewhere in the near and inevitable future.” It would seem that the “essence” of the Carmen story is to call for repetition—more than most stories, more than any other story?¹ One never has enough of Carmen. One becomes insatiable with Carmen. But why is this?

The most obvious answer is the theme itself: passionate love and death in the (for the French reader) exotic Spain of the nineteenth century, with enough cultural clichés and theatrical props from melodrama—daggers and roses, castagnettes and seguidillas, soldiers and contrebandiers, tobacco factories and ventas, fortune-tellers and picadors, assignations and duels—to satisfy the most gourmand of pleasure-seeking readers. These props, of course, are freely-circulating signifiers that can be replaced and altered with great ease: change the dress, the time, the geographical space, and the occupations of the actors in the drama—transpose them, in other words, and you go from Mérimée to Bizet to Preminger to Godard, while still remaining, in some sense, in the universe of “Carmen.” What I am suggesting, then, is that it is tempting to postulate some fundamental mythème, some underlying primordial Carmen-Stoff out of which the innumerable variations on the theme are elaborated. Just as Stendhal, in his theory of love, hypothesizes that underneath all the “crystallizations” there lies a simple branch (without which the beautiful configurations of the crystalline structures would be impossible), in the same way, does it not follow that an interpretive community should have some kind of pre-understanding of the “Carmen story” in its simplest and most essential outlines that allows it to speak about this story without falling into ambiguity—or worse, undecidability?

¹ For an excellent reading of the metamorphoses of the “Carmen” story through literature, opera, and film, see Evlyn Gould. Gould’s study is particularly interesting in its precise historical delineation of the concept of “Bohemia” in the nineteenth century.