This chapter explores the ways in which Metropolitan opera star Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967) changed the status of the motion picture and also changed the interpretation of the opera Carmen itself with her appearance in Cecil B. DeMille’s film, Carmen (1915). Extensive use of contemporary accounts documents contemporary reactions to Farrar’s Hollywood experience and her transfer of the film’s overt sexuality and physicality to live performances of Carmen at the Met. The role of Farrar is revealed to be key to a wider moment in cultural history when the ultimate in theatrical grandeur was transferring from the opera stage to the movie screen. Reactions to performances of the restored original musical accompaniment arranged from Bizet by Hugo Riesenfeld with unrestored and restored versions of the film allow us to critique the contemporary accounts.

DeMille, Cecil B.: Carmen
Farrar, Geraldine
Musical accompaniment to silent film
Opera and film
Riesenfeld, Hugo

There must hereafter be a recognized line between the Carmens who have feathers and scratch and those that have whiskers and bite. (New York Sun 1915)

1. Introduction
Since its inception the moving picture has been associated with grand opera. In 1893 in an article in The New York Times, Thomas Edison painted a futuristic vision that was not to be realized until the advent of television and the videotape recorder:

My intention is to have such a happy combination of photography and electricity that a man can sit in his own parou and see depicted upon a curtain the forms of the players in opera upon a distant stage, and hear the voices of the singers.¹

Edison went on to make a 22-minute Parsifal (1904) and a shorter version of von Flotow’s Martha (1906) whose music had to be produced live with the mechanical image. These were only two of many subsequent examples of opera stories transferred to the screen by many different film directors. In 1916, taking a different tack, Thomas Dixon advertised his The Fall of a Nation with its completely original score by Victor Herbert as the first ‘grand opera cinema.’ In
almost every instance the association of opera with film was made by film directors who were trying to capitalize on the status of opera to elevate their movies. Even the term ‘silent films’ made its very first appearance in association with opera. A 1918 headline for a review of Hellocat starring opera singer Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967) read ‘Two Opera Stars in Silent Films.’ The headline emphasized how ironic it was to have opera singers working in a medium which could not reproduce their voices.2 By the 1920s, the motion picture had reached such a level of popularity that it was beginning to threaten the once unassailable position of opera as the pinnacle of theatrical glamour. Geraldine Farrar’s entry into film in 1915 made a substantial contribution to this shift in status. As one of the finest American sopranos of her time, known for the mellowness and maturity of her voice, the breadth of her vocal range, and her superb gifts as an actress, she was famous in both Europe and America for her interpretations of Puccini, also for her Carmen as well as many other major roles.3 Choreographer Agnes DeMille referred to Farrar in the following terms:

Grand Opera meant far more in those days than it does now or possibly ever will again. It represented the ultimate in theatrical grandeur, honor, permanence and splendor and Farrar was among its most dazzling names. (DeMille, A. 1952: 22-24)

Farrar’s appearance in Hollywood and her participation in a film lent her celebrity status to the medium. It was part of a calculated attempt to elevate the status of the motion picture, and it largely succeeded. On 23 April 1915, Hollywood producer Jesse L. Lasky attended Farrar’s performance of Madame Butterfly at the Metropolitan Opera House. He wanted to attract players from the legitimate stage to motion pictures and with them a new, upscale audience. He also wanted to make his company competitive with that of Adolph Zuckor whose stable of players was led by Mary Pickford. After the performance and an introduction by Farrar’s friend, Morris Gest, Lasky put his proposal to Farrar:

I don’t know whether you have even seen a motion picture, but my company makes them, and I’d like to persuade you to do the story of Carmen for us […]. We have no trouble securing famous plays and engaging their stars […] but they’re always afraid acting in a movie will hurt their stage prestige. I could see by the ovation you got today that your prestige is such that whatever you do, your public will accept it as right. (Lasky and Weldon 1957: 116)