Rehispanicizing Carmen: Cultural Reappropriations in Spanish Cinema

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The chapter examines the different forms of cultural reappropriation that the myth of Carmen has undergone in Spanish cinema, with particular attention to Florián Rey’s *Carmen la de Triana* (1938), Tulio Demicheli’s *Carmen la de Ronda* (1959), and Carlos Saura’s *Carmen* (1983). At key historical moments in the modern reshaping of the nation—in the middle of the Spanish Civil War, under Franco’s dictatorship, and during the post-Franco process of European integration—Carmen’s myth is reappropriated and made a site of struggle for cultural identity. Spain’s position in this process was singular and contradictory, for as an integral part of European culture it participated in this exotic venture in search of the picturesque, at the same time that its own eccentric cultural construction was highly mediated by orientalism. The chapter traces throughout the three films the ways in which the reabsorption and reproduction of these foreign-made constructs responds in large measure to the process of commodification of Carmen, already a well-known cultural product of continuing valuable currency in foreign markets, but also allows the reappropriation and contestation of those constructs for the purpose of internal national identification.

*Cultural reappropriation*
*Demicheli, Tulio: Carmen la de Ronda*
*Myth (of Carmen)*
*National Identity (Spanish)*
*Rey, Florián: Carmen la de Triana*
*Saura, Carlos: Carmen*

I would like to examine some of the different forms of cultural reappropriation that the myth of Carmen has undergone in Spanish cinema, with particular attention to Florián Rey’s *Carmen, la de Triana* (1938), Tulio Demicheli’s *Carmen, la de Ronda* (1959), and Carlos Saura’s *Carmen* (1983). At key historical moments in the modern reshaping of the nation-state—in the middle of the Spanish Civil War, under Franco’s dictatorship, and during the post-Franco process of political transition and European integration—Carmen’s myth is reappropriated and made a site of struggle for cultural identity. The colonized marginal figure of the Gypsy woman is symbolically relocated to the centre in the process of reconfiguration of national identity, revealing the cultural anxieties provoked by the complex conflicts of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality in the formation of the modern self.

The mythical construction of the Gypsy in the European imagination is directly related to the orientalist discourse of exoticism. The conflation of orientalism with the exoticized and idealized images of Gypsies have also been intimately linked and confused with the
modern construction of Spanishness. Spain’s position in this process was singular and contradictory, for as an integral part of European culture it participated in this exotic venture in search of the picturesque, at the same time that its own eccentric cultural construction was highly mediated by orientalism (Colmeiro 2002). This contradiction engendered the creation of an internal other in the figure of the Gypsy, and through the absorption and reproduction of the foreign orientalist perspective, the establishment of the Gypsy as a privileged symbolic representation of national culture. Spain occupied in the European imagination the same space that the Gypsy occupied in the Spanish self-image: that of an exotic internal other. As cultural critics such as Mitchell (1994) and Charnon-Deutsch (2002) have shown, Spanish artists, musicians, and writers of all political inclinations have been complicit in the perpetuation of this mythologized and exoticized vision of Spain since the dawn of modernity. In reaction to the perceived dangers brought by modernity, many artists and intellectuals searched for ancestral and ‘authentic’ notions of la raza, a racialized cultural construction of the nation. Through this myth, radical differences are sublimated and Gypsies become symbolic token figures in the process of constructing a national identity. The mythical figure of the Gypsy is then reduced to a discursive trope, a convenient synecdoche for Spanishness.

The representation of the Gypsy followed a consistent pattern from the nineteenth-century costumbristas (writers treating traditional local customs and types) through to the modernist mythical re-elaborations of Falla, Manuel Machado, Martinez Sierra, and García Lorca, to the endless exploitation of the spectacle of Gypsy flamenco in national folkloric cinema beyond political or ideological orientation, during the silent film era and the Second Republic, on both sides of the Civil War, and on through Franco’s nationalist regime. The Gypsy was dependent on an ambiguous Romantic vision of the natural, instinctual individual, necessarily marginal and outcast. Moreover, the Gypsy enabled a symbolic construction of a Spanish cultural identity predicated on a racial figure at once affirming and denying difference, an ambiguity for which the Carmen myth, forever entangled in a European/Spanish, Gypsy/payo, self/other battle for cultural definition, would be perceived as an ideal instrument.

Curiously, it is the international recognition of the Carmen story beyond Spanish borders that explains the internalization of the myth in Spanish culture throughout the twentieth century. Clearly, the reabsorption and reduplication of these foreign-made constructs, the topical ‘typical Spanish’ images endlessly reproduced, responds in large measure to the process of commodification of Carmen, already a