Putting the Blame on Carmen: 
The Rita Hayworth Version

Peter William Evans

Coupled again with Glenn Ford (as in *Gilda*, 1946 and *Affair in Trinidad*, 1952), Rita Hayworth in *The Loves of Carmen* (Charles Vidor, 1948), is caught between, on the one hand, late 1940s Hollywood versions of sexual difference and ethnic/racial otherness and, on the other, what Richard Dyer (1978), writing about *Gilda*, has defined as the star’s ‘resistance through charisma’. *The Loves of Carmen* links its interest in the otherness of the Spanish/Gypsy settings with anxieties over sexual difference focussed, above all, on its star vehicle, Rita Hayworth, in whose languid, mocking and treacherous sensuality this film, as in other Hayworth vehicles such as *Blood and Sand* (1941), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) or *Salome* (1953), gets more than it bargained for. The essay explores the various competing discourses of *The Loves of Carmen* mainly through questions about the shifting and contradictory meanings of the persona or ‘masquerade’ of Rita Hayworth. After a theoretical and historical introduction it moves to discuss Hayworth’s Carmen in terms of the erasure of Gypsy ethnicity through Americanization, and Carmen’s betrayal of don José as another example of the betrayal of the *femme fatale* of American noir. The essay concludes by positing both Hayworth and her Carmen in terms of mimicry and masquerade.

Ethnicity (Gypsy), cultural representations of
*Femme fatale*
Hayworth, Rita
Masquerade
Star persona
Vidor, Charles: *The Loves of Carmen*

**Introduction**

Rita Hayworth’s transformation from Margarita Carmen Cansino—her real name—into ‘Rita Hayworth’, the revered 1940s sex goddess, crystallizes in miniature the larger processes of narrativization of gender and history in one of her most characteristic films, *The Loves of Carmen* (Charles Vidor, 1948), the principal role in which her own middle name seemed to make her destined to play. My essay is divided into four parts; a historical and theoretical introduction that will also point ahead to ways in which I shall focus discussion as a whole, followed by three sub-headings, Americanization, Betrayal, and Mimicry or Masquerade, beneath which I shall consider Rita Hayworth’s persona and its adaptation to her role as Carmen.

Born in 1918 in New York, she was the daughter of Eduardo Cansino and Volga Haworth or Hayworth (biographers differ on the point), the latter an Irish/English American, the former a Spaniard and
Spanish and Latin American dancing teacher. Taking after him, Rita Hayworth—the name she adopted pretty soon after she was contracted by her first studio, Fox—began her performing career as a dancer. From Fox, where in a tiny dancing role she made her first film, *Dante’s Inferno* (Harry Lachmann, 1935), closely followed, in an acting part, by *Under the Pampas Moon* (James Tinling, 1935), she moved under the tutelage of her manager and first husband Ed Judson to Columbia, the studio of her greatest triumphs. The first few films saw her in support roles, a period important not only in building up a respectable film CV but also, while at Columbia, in transforming her physically from the raven-haired, low-forehead, Latin-looking ‘B’ actress into the auburn-haired, electrolysis-improved hairline American beauty with a *soupçon* of exoticism. Her first real break—though still in a support role—came with Hawks’ *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939). After further exposure in films where she was loaned out to other studios, for instance to Warner Brothers for *Strawberry Blonde* (Raoul Walsh, 1941), and perhaps especially to Twentieth Century Fox for *Blood and Sand* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1941), a key film as a sort of precursor to her *Carmen*, Columbia finally recognized her enormous potential, and set up productions for its timely fulfilment. Fred Astaire and Cole Porter combined on *You’ll Never get Rich* (Sidney Lanfield, 1941), Astaire again and Jerome Kern on *You Were Never Lovelier* (William A. Seiter, 1942), Gene Kelly and Kern again on *Cover Girl* (Charles Vidor, the director of *Carmen*, 1944), to provide her with ‘A’ movie musicals that paraded her versatility as a dancer and icon of sensual, exotic-American beauty that would turn her into one of the studio’s most bankable stars.

But it was perhaps *Gilda* (1946), again directed by Vidor, that truly established the meaning of Rita Hayworth, a film that added further sexual experience and betrayal (already detectable in *Blood and Sand*) to all the more wholesome ingredients of fun and vivacity associated with the major earlier films.

Around the time of *The Loves of Carmen* the aura of peaches-and-cream beauty crossed with exotic, self-conscious sexual difference is being further nuanced not only through her roles in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1948), *Affair in Trinidad* (Vincent Sherman, 1952, a film in which she teamed up as in *Gilda*, *Carmen* and *The Money Trap*, 1965, with Glenn Ford), and *Salome* (William Dieterle, 1953), but also through her chaotic offscreen life, characterized by her marriages and divorces from Ed Judson and Orson Welles, followed by her elopement to Europe with Aly Khan,