Cinematic *Carmen* and the ‘Oeil Noir’

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In the ‘Toreador’ song, Escamillo reminds himself that an ‘oeil noir’ is looking down on the Toreador while he battles: the eye—human’s or bull’s—makes him subject to the Lacanian gaze, and is a key for thinking of Rosi’s film of *Carmen* (1984). This inherently technologizes looking, itself so much a thematic feature of Bizet’s opera, implicit in almost every line of the text: the camera becomes the ‘oeil noir’ that encapsulates the male gaze but also induces male paranoia. The chapter then turns to the film *Mongkok Carmen* (aka *As Tears Go By*, 1988) to suggest that the seductiveness of the woman cannot quite compete with a violence in the male which destroys the self and other, and which has its own feminine aspect, and, through reference to the orientalizing aspects of Argentine literature and tango, and to Rita Hayworth, goes on to claim that no Carmen, however affirming, has the power to be other than subordinate within a culture of violence. Ultimately Carmen rather than don José is betrayed.

Kar-wai, Wong: *Mongkok Carmen*

Habaneras

Lacan, Jacques

Mamoulian, Rouben: *Blood and Sand*

Puig, Manuel: *Betrayed By Rita Hayworth*

Rosi, Francesco: *Carmen*

Tango

1. The power of the eye

To begin with two quotations, first with the chorus for the most famous of all opera tunes:

> Et songe bien, oui, songe bien en combattant,
> Qu’un oeil noir te regarde
> Et que l’amour t’attend.

(To translate: think carefully, yes think while fighting, that a black eye looks at you and that love waits for you). Not ‘two dark eyes’ as many translations of the libretto render Escamillo’s words, but *one* eye.

The reference to Mérimée’s *Carmen* is helped by Naomi Segal (1988: 47-49) who shows how the single eye overlooks the novel. García, Carmen’s husband, is one-eyed, and Segal connects that to the ‘oedipal loathsomeness of the legitimate rival’. As don José leads Carmen to prison, ‘she slipped her mantilla over her head, leaving only one of her large eyes visible, and followed my men, quiet as a lamb’. When she involves José in deceiving the Englishman, ‘the blinds were half-open, and I could see her large black eye watching
me’. And after José has stabbed her: ‘I can still see her large black eye staring at me, then it clouded over and closed’. The woman is made grotesque. Naomi Segal gets from the single eye three meanings: in the husband, castration—or perhaps the castration fear—and then the sense of the evil eye, and, as having genital significance, that it is ‘the black gulf to the tempted hero, the pool in which Narcissus finds death’.

The second quotation runs:

There is no trace anywhere of a good eye, of an eye that blesses. What can this mean except that the eye carries with it the fatal function of being in itself endowed […] with a power to separate. But this power to separate goes much further than distinct vision. The powers that are attributed to it, of drying up the milk of an animal on which it falls […] of bringing with it disease or misfortune—where can we better picture this power than in invidia?

Invidia comes from videre. The most exemplary invidia […] is the one I found long ago in Augustine, in which he sums up his entire fate, namely that of the little child seeing his brother at his mother’s breast, looking at him amare conspectu, with a bitter look, which seems to tear him to pieces and has on himself the effect of a poison.

In order to understand what invidia is in its function as gaze it must not be confused with jealousy. What the small child, or whoever, envies is not at all necessarily what he might want […] Everyone knows that envy is usually aroused by the possession of goods which would be of no use to the person who is envious of them, and about the true nature of which he does not have the least idea.

Such is true envy—the envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness closed upon itself, before the idea that the petit a, the separated a from which he is hanging, may be for another the possession that gives satisfaction, Befriedigung […]

The evil eye is the fascinum, it is that which has the effect of arresting movement, and literally, of killing life. At the moment the subject stops […] he is mortified. The anti-life, anti-movement function of this terminal point is the fascinum, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly. (Lacan 1977: 115-116; 118)

If you felt that the eye that was watching you while you attacked the bull was the evil eye, that would be the power of castration. Mérimée’s anti-feminism works that way; the woman’s eye destroys the power of the man. Bizet’s text is more ambivalent. The oeil noir looks at you, but love waits for you. It is not possible to say that the eye is evil; it is rather like Derrida’s pharmakon, medicine and poison at the same time (Derrida 1981: 63-171).

Rosi’s film of Carmen begins with the bullfight, and the wounded bull in profile looking at Escamillo, so that the ‘oeil noir’ is