

performed against an ironic backing of highly amplified taped music, the stage orchestra visibly pantomiming their instruments. At Lillas Pastia's inn, a violinist steps forward to accompany Carmen's dance, her castanettes fragments of a plate she has shattered. The interrelationship of singer and instrumentalist was organic, fluid: in some ways reminiscent of popular Indian dance or of Middle Eastern epic theatre.

Searching for Carmen by Jean-Claude Carrière

Carrière's preface to the C.I.C.T. text of Carmen, the libretto of which he adapted.

At the period in which Mérimée situates his *Carmen*, in 1832, in the eyes of the rest of Europe Spain was still a savage country. Goya had died four years beforehand. The French retained vivid memories of the terrible guerrilla conflict (that was when the word came into our vocabulary) in opposition to Napoleon's invasion. The Sierra Morena bandits were a reality. Right up until 1850 or 1860, a specific literary genre, 'the Journey to Spain', attracted such writers as Théophile Gautier and Gustave Doré. They wrote of a dark and beautiful country, both dangerous and hospitable, the heart of which remained undiscovered. What little we knew of the customs seemed strange, alien, almost African.

In 1852, just after the century's mid-point, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte was installed on the French throne under the name of Napoléon III. He married a young lady from a well-known Spanish family, Eugenia de Montijo: it was in the wake of this princess that Spanish folklore, unknown until then, began to permeate into France and the rest of the world. Of course, court protocol demanded that it be consumed in a sugared, softened, emasculated form, while travellers continued to declare themselves stunned by the sensual violence of Spanish dance.

In other words, the image of Spain swung brutally from one extreme to the other: from Goya's dark and monstrous visions, the fruit of 'the sleep of reason', a truly dynamic Spanish current, fusing blood, faith, madness and sex (it recurs much later in Buñuel's films, *Las Hurdes* and *Viridiana*), to the miserably limp and hollow imported imitations whirling and stamping their feet in the *café-concerts*.

Even today, classical and contemporary Spanish culture remains almost entirely unknown in France, with the exception of two or three painters and a film-maker. Of course it's simpler and more palatable to stick to the clichéd folkloric surface. But it could also be suggested that a fundamental difference exists between France and Spain. Rational on this side of the Pyrenees, irrational on the other. The place of reason in the two cultures – the respect it inspires, the confidence it instils – is not

at all the same. Indeed, much stronger links exist between Spain and Russia than between Spain and France. André Malraux even wrote, in a preface to a work by Jose Bergamin: 'If a masterpiece proclaims that supreme truth is inseparable from the irrational, it's either Spanish or Russian.'

Despite Bizet's efforts to avoid all hackneyed folklore (there's not a single guitar note in the score), *Carmen*, which became a comic opera in 1875, didn't entirely escape boleros and castanets. It might even be suggested that this work has acted as a kind of standard-bearer for the completely denatured Spanish culture, diminished to a mediocre folkloric spectacle, that has become known around the world. *Carmen* opened the door to gazpacho, fixed bullfights, skyscraper holidays in Andalusia.

Everyone is more or less agreed on this point. Difficulties arise as soon as one tries to go a little further, reading the novella for example. Mérimée presents himself as a sort of scientist, an archaeologist: never mentioning a word of the clichéd folklore which does not yet exist, he tells a particular story; he claims it is close to reality, insisting on the gipsy aspect. Today he touches us through a certain elaborately detailed dryness and coolness, a long way from romanticism.

I have made several attempts to work out how Meilhac, Halévy and Bizet worked. They were confronted with a precise problem: how to present *Carmen* to an audience of their time. They were profoundly aware of the fact that they would never be able to portray on an official public stage a thief-cum-prostitute-cum-witch: the dark criminal (or at least the instigator of crimes) as she appears in the novella. Nevertheless, groping tentatively forward in a minefield of taboos, they managed to create a character who seemed wholly scandalous to audiences in 1875. A scandal which, like most others, is incomprehensible to us today, as a result of the total eclipse of that era's moral restrictions and constraints.

To make the transition from Mérimée's dispassionate and almost indifferent concern for detail to the sentimental and decorative simplifications of the lyrical work, they found certain ingenious solutions: for example, the creation of Micaëla, an indispensable character dramatically, the sole representative of Don Jose's village past, his roots, his attachment to his mother. Similarly the development of the character of Escamillo (a simple picador in Mérimée, just one amongst many others) is useful from all points of view. He embodies all the men Carmen could have known. But Escamillo's development is pushed too far, and in the end to absurd lengths. His appearance in the mountains in the third

act, bang in the middle of the smugglers' camp, has always seemed unrealistic.

Somewhere along the line, Meilhac and Halévy also diminished the character of Don Jose. In the novella, he appears much stronger and more dangerous: a true bandit. During a ball game in his Basque village, he became involved in a fight with another player whom he had seriously injured. For this very reason he left home and enlisted in the dragoons, long before meeting Carmen.

Later on he finds himself face to face with Garcia, Carmen's 'husband', a formidable character. Yet Don Jose provokes him into a duel and kills him. Another episode missing from the lyrical work.

Although Carmen herself has inevitably lost a significant part of her youthful sensuality and her total absence of scruples, nevertheless I believe she owes her dimension as great tragic heroine to the opera. With great clarity Bizet established the fundamental contradiction in her character – uniquely through the card aria, one of the most beautiful moments in the work. On one hand, Carmen submits entirely, almost blindly, to destiny, which she knows to be implacable. Things happen just as they are written: you cannot change one letter. On the other hand, she constantly affirms her freedom, savagely defending it, even at the cost of her life. 'She was born free and free she will die', she sings. And therefore we owe these two classically contradictory affirmations – fatality/liberty – to the lyrical work.

Any 'adaptation' presupposes that the conditions surrounding the genesis of a work have changed, that they never stop changing. They had already evolved between Mérimée and the lyrical work, and more than a century has passed since then. How can we fail to take that into account?

Preface to the C.I.C.T. text, translated by David Williams.