

SILENT MOVIE OPERA

Research notes for the company

Introduction

Carmen 1910 was made by the Film d'Art Company. This was a company set up to raise the cultural status of film by associating it with traditional "high" art genres. One of the company's best known ventures was to commission respected cultural figures such as Saint Saens to write scores for film versions of classic dramas. For the Film d'Art Company opera would have represented the highest art form, and an art form whose own penchant for melodrama and spectacle obviously suited the visual language of silent movies. *Carmen* 1910 is not the first silent-movie opera, but having trawled through the complete available collection at the British Film Institute we are certain that it is one of the best.

1. "Carmen"

The name "Carmen" means song. In Bizet's opera *Carmen* is characterized as "singer". Socially powerless, she employs popular song as a power; a means to attract and seduce.

In Bizet's opera *Carmen* is both empowered and rendered powerless through song.

Through song she is permitted to speak as outsider. *Carmen* deploys song to be heard where she would otherwise be denied:

"Je ne parle pas - je chante pour moi meme".

But within the hierarchies of "high" vs "low" art *Carmen* is relegated to the realm of low art (popular/ethnic music). She represents cultural energies that must be repressed: *Carmen* personifies the wild, the primitive, the sexual, the sensual. These are also some of the ways in which music is figured, but they are the attributes of music that tend to be suppressed in western music - cf Susan McClary in *Feminine Endings* - "fear of the body informs western music". Note the way that cultural reactionaries brand jazz or rock as primitive, mindless, sexual, narcotic...the attributes of *Carmen*.

Through song *Carmen* is only permitted to speak in "borrowed" voices. She cannot speak as herself. Unlike Micaela in the opera, *Carmen* never sings alone. She lacks interiority. *Carmen* exists only through the cultural imagination of others.

The silent movie deprives Carmen even of her voice. She is rendered mute. Her only access to speech and interiority is when she *writes* (we need to consider the relationship of the text of her letter to texts of the titles - what do they represent - a failure of pure expressive signification... a controlling discourse ?).

The first aim of our piece is find and restore the suppressed voice(s) of Carmen.

2. Sound and image

The original silent movie would have been provided with musical accompaniment - probably a piano playing a medley of themes from Bizet's opera. Recently a number of composers (Carl Davis, Philip Glass) have created new musical scores to be played live to accompany classic silent movies.

In these scores, as in other conventional films, music is employed to provide continuity, atmosphere, space, interiority, and emotional arousal for the film image. Its role is meant to be subliminal. As Adorno and Eisler write in their analysis of film music, music is cast as feeling and intuition (nature ?) against the mechanical image:

“The function of music in the cinema is one aspect - in an extreme version - of the general function of music under conditions of industrially controlled cultural consumption. Music is supposed to bring out the spontaneous, essentially human element in its listeners and in virtually all human relations.” [Adorno and Eisler, *Composing for Films*, 1994, pp.20-22]

Adorno and Eisler argue that film music should be employed critically, to comment upon, undermine, subvert the film image, rather than re-enforcing it. In our piece the sound score should perform this function, engaging in a dialogue with the film, opening a space between the film image and the live performance that is filled with tension, questioning the function of music (and by implication of Carmen) as the “spontaneous, essentially human”.

The sound score should resist the temptation to establish a “naturalised” source of authenticity - whether from within the temporal precedence of the sound that emanates from the interpolated film material, from the “voice-over” authority of the pre-recorded sound-track, or from the live presence of the performers.

In Brechtian terms, these disjunctions should also work to unpack the seamless unity of sound and image (eg, in the synchronised voice) that is employed by classic realist film,

exposing the film “apparatus” - the mechanisms of production. There should be continuous dislocations between seeing and hearing.

3. Framing the female voice.

“Classic cinema is the site at which the [male] viewer’s discursive impotence is exhumed, exhibited and contained.” Kaja Silverman (*The Acoustic Mirror*, 1988. p.31]

Film-theorist Kaja Silverman, suggests that in the majority of films the female voice, which is an object of both desire and threat for the male viewer, is controlled by being confined to the interior of the narrative space of the film (she notes, for instance, that the omniscient, non-corporeal voice-over is almost always masculine).

“Women’s words are shown to be even less her own than her looks. They are scripted for her, extracted from her by an external, agency, or uttered by her in a trance-like state... The first of these operations folds the female voice into what is overtly indicated as an inner textual space, such as a painting, a song-and-dance routine, a film-within-a film.” [pp31, 56] Silverman also notes devices such as the “psychological talking cure”, and the linguistic impediment, strong accent, uncontrolled sounds (cries, moans, screams, etc).

Consider the way in which Godard frames the female voice within his film *Passion* in the light of this observation. The sequences in our piece in which Frances, Jenny and David listen to, and attempt to sing along with, Bessie, Janis and Annie, are ripped off from the astonishing sequence in *Passion* in which Hanna Schygulla is made to watch herself on video attempting to sing along to a Mozart aria.

Bessie Smith, Janis Joplin, Annie Lennox. As artists they offer a kind of model for a liberated female voice, unconstrained by the conventions of artistic good taste. They sing openly of women’s forbidden desires, each of which is relevant to the sensual desires that Carmen represents - food and drink, freedom, sex. Their personal stories are also uncannily relevant to Carmen - Bessie Smith a black woman in the South who died when a whites-only hospital refused to treat her after a car crash; Janis Joplin, a victim of a commercial entertainment system that often destroys those whom it elevates to stardom (the price of self-expression is death); Annie Lennox, disco diva and survivor.

Within our piece the attempt to identify alternative voices acts as a balance to the search for more abstract vocal sounds - the impossibility of finding authenticity either within, or in the neo-primitivist identification of authenticity with ethnic “otherness”. The ethnic has always already been appropriated and mediated. There is no originary “real” voice of Carmen - she resides only in representations. When Frances, Jenny and David seek to imitate Bessie/Janis/Annie (two of whom have themselves appropriated the music of the ethnic other) we recognise that the voice of Carmen exists only as series of cultural

constructions; these sequences question the search for the authentic voice from within, placing the singers in a position of listening, seeking by external imitation.

Bessie Janis and Annie represent the politics of the piece. The moment in which David sings through Annie Lennox to ventriloquize desires that are forbidden to him as a man, and in which Jenny and Frances then mock David to re-appropriate Annie Lennox, was the most politically challenging moment of the work-in-progress version.

4. Carmen's Body and Space

In the film Carmen's muteness is compensated by her extreme physicality. Her physicality is a substitute for her voice. In the first scene she barges into the space aggressively, gratuitously shoving another woman. She continues to fight in the factory. She struggles with and spits at Don Jose. In the first three scenes she is represented as a caged animal. In the remainder of the film she is always shown as active - writing, unloading contraband, directing her colleagues, dancing to entertain the soldiers and Jose, brandishing a rifle...

Carmen's physicality struggles against the space of the film itself.

Except for the two open-air scenes the spaces of the film are cabined, cribbed and confined to a series of theatrical stage sets. The space is often over-crowded, making the action frequently difficult to follow.

The scenes of the film are shot in real time, so the action generally unfolds uniformly, without variations of pace, and at a speed that often makes the narrative difficult to follow.

The camera remains stationary, frontal and central to the action, which takes place in unvaried middle-distance (the only exception is the plain-air scenes).

5. The Liberation of Space

The visual elements of the interpolated film need to emancipate the space of the film image in the same way that the singers liberate the suppressed sound.

Working with the raw material of the visual image of the singers themselves as they search for Carmen's voice, the interpolated film might retrace the steps taken by cinema itself as it sought to open up the possibilities of space, action and time.

I borrow from the analysis of Giles Deleuze in *Cinema: the Movement Image* to catalogue a sequence of liberations, described by Deleuze himself as the passage from the “potential contained in the fixed primitive image, that is in movement when it was still attached to people or things. This movement already characteristic of the cinema, demanded a kind of emancipation, incapable of being satisfied within the limits set by the primitive conditions.” (p.25)

Deleuze considers the following components of the emancipated film image:

Framing.

- Geometric composition: repositioning of action within the frame (eg, at top, to one side, etc); partitioning of space to permit simultaneous actions in different parts of the shot.
- Spatial composition: the action of the silent-movie image usually takes place on one plane, although occasionally two planes are employed (eg, Scene 2, Scenes 11 & 12). Even so the invariable mid-distance position of the camera, and the limited depth of the stage space, do not permit variations of scale that would allow the use of depth for dramatic mise-en-scene.

(but nb Deleuze’s comment on Dreyer: “the more the image is spatially closed, even reduced to two dimensions, the greater is its capacity to open itself onto a fourth dimension which is time, and onto a fifth which is Spirit” p.17)

- Out-of-field space: the stage-set space of the silent-movie permits no extension of the framed space, whether shown literally through the sideways movement of the camera, or implied through the actions of the performers (by look, movement, address, etc)

Camera Movement

- The camera may move across and around the image. It may move closer into the image or away from it. It may move from one space to another. It may penetrate the space, opening it from within.
- The camera may assume the viewpoint of a participant within the action - related to “perception-image” of Deleuze. cf his definition of the “movement image” which can be broken down into action image (objective view of world, often located in middle-

distance), perception-image (the world as viewed by a character in the film, often located in long-shot), affection-image (emotional response, usually close-up).

Lighting

Lighting used mould, focus, frame, mobilise, disclose space.

Lighting used syntactically to suggest semantic meaning: good/evil; knowledge/ confusion; hope/despair; future/past....

Colour

Colour as realist plenitude.

Colour as an element of lyrical abstraction - as an aspect of abstract “any-space-whatever” (see below) as context for action and symbolic determinant of moral choices.

Milieu and Environment

The relationship between milieu and action is described by Deleuze in a number of ways:

- any-space-whatever - space is concrete but abstract, symbolic, non-social (characteristic of expressionist cinema, Dreyer, Bresson)
- naturalism - environmental milieu *determines* action, which never escapes from it. Action becomes impulsive and fatalistic (Stroheim, Bunuel, Losey). Time is entropic - ie, the situation can only decline and decay. This is the mode of the Carmen story as told in opera and film.
- realism- milieu precedes and motivates action; there is an active relation between social milieu and social character; character responds to given situation and modifies it . This is the characteristic mode of the “action image”.
- action discloses situation; situation has to be deduced from action. Place is often indicated indexically - aspect or part for whole (the rippling reflected light on the face rather than the lake itself; costume as indicator of period and location).

6. Warnings

We seek to show rather than conceal the labour of singing. Our film should explore formal meanings, be abstract where required, but should never fall into aestheticising the labour it represents.

The filmic emancipation of space should always be led by the work of the singers - spatial or dramatic situations should not be manufactured for formal purposes alone, but should always derive from the vocal and musical pre-occupations of the singers.

We need to beware of reifying THE VOICE.

The music should never become a soundtrack.

7. Spatial Analysis of the 1910 Carmen.

1. The opening scene presents a public space (street/square) in which there is an initial contrast between the unformed energies of the crowd (including women and children) and the rigid lines of the soldiers.
2. We enter an exclusively female space, the cigarette factory, which is clearly characterised as hysterical.
3. The square again. The crowd identifies with Carmen's rebellious energies, enjoying her subversiveness vicariously. Carmen is society's licensed rebel, a role which easily becomes that of a scapegoat.
- 4-9. The first empty space, interior (but not domestic). The classic metaphor of interior space as metaphor for interiority and femininity. The only scene in which Carmen is able to "speak". Carmen is clearly in control of this space, as is evident in the subsequent scenes.
5. Unloading the contraband. This is gratuitous in narrative terms: occasion for the original filmmakers to present a realist "genre scene" ? But Carmen is here also branded as "criminal" (rather than simply outsider) by her activities.
- 10.11. Plein-air scenes. The space is opened out, and Carmen gains a sort of freedom, albeit she is confined to the edges of the shot in scene 8 by the necessities of framing the dramatic action.
12. Public space in which Carmen is now insider rather than outsider: a part of the crowd. In her final confrontation with Jose she is separated from the crowd she had so briefly

joined. But once again the space is confined - there is no escape. Carmen's only escape is now through death.

8. Dramatic Structure

“Sounds can only be placed in unison after they have been differentiated from each other... the dream of recovering the mother's voice can only be born out of the experience of division and loss” [Silverman, p.85]

In the opening three scenes Carmen emerges against the context of a society that casts her as both object of desire and object of fear. The voices may emerge from the context of inchoate noise (real noise of the street ? electronic noise ?), start out inarticulate, pre-discursive, searching simply for basic vocalisation and articulation.

Carmen's escape from imprisonment - the move into some sort of individual and discursive freedom - different voices, different identities, language, varied groupings, conflicts...?

The open air scenes ... ?

At the end the performers have found, through the course of the performance, both the collectively striven-for voices of Carmen, and their autonomous presence as individual performers; the film Carmen is re-united with her voice; the time and space of the film become one with time and space of the live event.

9. Aims

What do we want the audience to experience ?

Our aim should be to restore the emotional truth that is missing from the silent movie; to lead the audience on a journey to the point where they are able to feel for the flickering film image. But not simply to feel in the way that a Hollywood movie manufactures instant ersatz emotions that can be triggered mechanically. To feel because of the complexity of resonances built into sound and image.

Carmen is only an image. As we move in to enlarge her she dissolves into pixels.

10. Silence

We need to think about the implications of silence. Silence may be positive as well as negative, a space that opens as well as agent of closure.

cf. John Cage's reversal of the figure/ ground relationship in music (ie, from silence as ground to silence as figure).

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