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Metafictional "mise en abyme" in Saura's "Carmen"

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In the 1983 film *Carmen*, Carlos Saura creatively refashions Mérimée's novella and Bizet's opera into an exciting new rendering of the Carmen myth. The foundation of this film rests on Mérimée's narrative, which Saura admires for having the ability to convey a passionate love that still seems as fresh and expressive as it was in its own day (52). Since Saura views the plot modifications introduced in Bizet's opera as being a betrayal of Mérimée's novella (55), he ignores the opera's story line and concentrates instead on its music, which he describes as being very beautiful, truly inspired, and having moments that are both extraordinary and unforgettable (56). This double heritage of Mérimée's plot and Bizet's music provides the context within which Saura is able to introduce yet another art form—dance—through the brilliant choreography of Antonio Gades.¹

Upon its release, this film was critically hailed as a flamenco version of the Carmen story. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Saura does not simply recast the Carmen story in the form of a flamenco ballet. Rather, his film is an account of the daily activities of a dance troupe while in rehearsal for such a production.² As such, the film consists of a frame (which shows the "real" lives of the dancers) and the embedded Carmen ballet (in which the dancers assume their roles for the rehearsals). Reviewers of the film generally consider the modern frame story to be superfluous, distracting, and inferior to the dance sequences (e.g., Canby, Forbes, Stein, Bowers). If we examine Mérimée's novella, however, we see that the Carmen story originally did exist within a frame. Chapters one and two of the novella are narrated by a French archaeologist who, during his travels in Spain, is told the story of Carmen's life by her lover, don José, in the novella's third chapter. For Bizet's opera the librettists discarded this frame and freely adapted Mérimée's material concerning the love affair between Carmen and don José. In Saura's film the framing device reappears—albeit in a different form—thereby restoring the Carmen tale to its original status of an embedded story within a larger narrative. In this way Saura echoes the overall structure of Mérimée's novella in addition to using the basic plot elements of its Carmen tale. More importantly, however, by placing the ballet within a frame story, Saura allows his film to display the textual self-awareness associated with metafiction. Not only can he show the

viewer how artistic illusion is achieved, but he can also use the framing device to establish a *mise en abyme* that draws parallels between the principal characters in the film's frame and the parts they play in the ballet. Through his use of the modern frame story Saura is able to recast the nineteenth-century material into a twentieth-century format that explores two major concerns of metafiction: the *process* of creating fiction and the transgression of narrative levels.³ In his previous flamenco film, *Bodas de sangre*, Saura had concentrated solely on the first of these concerns; in *Carmen* he includes the second as well. A brief comparison of *Bodas de sangre* and *Carmen* will clarify how Saura increased his metafictional thrust from one film to the next.

Saura's *Bodas de sangre* is divided into two distinct sections: preparation and performance. The performance portion consists of an uninterrupted dance adaptation of García Lorca's play by the same name. It is preceded by a lengthy back-stage look at the dancers, singers, and musicians making ready for that performance. The second section is totally detachable from the first and can stand on its own as a fully realized dance production. But by coupling it with the opening section, Saura is able to expose the *process* involved in creating an artistic *product*. In his next film, *Carmen*, Saura explores to an even greater degree the concept of art as an act of illusion making. Whereas *Bodas de sangre* simply shows the immediate preparations which go into a single performance, *Carmen* deals with the ongoing procedures involved in bringing an entire stage production into being. We not only see the casting, rehearsals, and behind-the-scenes intrigues of the dance troupe, but more importantly, we are shown the individual actions involved in the creation of the ballet itself. We see Antonio, the protagonist, listening to the soundtrack of Bizet's opera and we hear him quoting from the Spanish translation of Mérimée's novella as he instructs his dancers on how to portray their roles. Antonio, overtly engaged in the invention of his production, shows how the building blocks of various media—words, music, dance—combine to form a new entity. In this way Saura expands our view of the artistic process in *Carmen* beyond what is made visible in *Bodas de sangre*. We are not merely allowed a back-stage peek at the performers. Instead, we are now made privy to the deliberations involved at every stage of the production's composition. By fully exposing the creative process to our view, Saura openly acknowledges the artifice involved in all art. In so doing, he foregrounds the fundamental contradiction inherent in any realistic representation, namely that no matter how faithfully it imitates reality, it is in itself an artificially contrived fiction.

To further explore this issue of realistic art as fictional construct, Saura compounds the metafictional dimension of *Carmen* by adding a technique which is absent in his previous film. Whereas in *Bodas de sangre* there is no overlap between the "real" lives of the dancers and the fictional characters of the ballet, in *Carmen* the distinction between the dancers and their roles gradually disappears over the course of the film. This fluidity in reality levels is achieved through the use of a *mise en abyme*. Brian McHale explains how this technique functions:

A true *mise-en-abyme* is determined by three criteria: first, it is a nested or embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation *resembles* . . . something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this "something" that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world, salient and continuous enough that we are willing to say the nested representation *reproduces or duplicates* the primary representation as a whole. (124)

In this film Saura establishes a *mise en abyme* between the Antonio/Carmen couple of the "real" world (the modern frame story) and the don José/Carmen pairing in the fictional one (the ballet), and then he progressively blurs the line separating the two worlds. This is the essence of the "game of reality and fiction" that J.M. Caparrós Lera mentions but does not explain in his discussion of Saura's *Carmen* (246). Of course, since this film is not a documentary, the events involving the members of the dance troupe are not true. The frame story is in itself merely a cinematic fiction employing actors and written dialog, but Saura successfully projects it into the realm of reality by presenting it as a counterpoint to the obvi-

ously fictional ballet. The viewer readily accepts the frame story as the reality plane of the film, thereby permitting Saura to use the embedded story to transcend the limits of that reality. The remainder of this study will show how Saura's metafictional game is played.

We never see a finished production of the ballet. Instead, we are shown a production in the making, the creative process at work. Therefore, rehearsal, rather than performance, is what dominates the film. The development of the *mise en abyme* takes place through four separate rehearsal scenes—the tobacco factory stabbing, the seduction/bedroom scene, the card game/cane fight, and the murder during the bullfight—each of which evidences an ever greater violation of the boundaries separating the illusionary world of the Carmen ballet and the fictive reality of the characters in the film's frame. It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the film the *mise en abyme* appears to be reversed, with the frame story duplicating the ballet rather than vice versa. As the movie progresses, however, the true *mise en abyme* emerges when the actions in the ballet become adapted to those in the frame.

The first rehearsal scene, the Tabacalera, deals with the knife fight between Carmen and a fellow factory worker (unnamed in the novella but called Manuelita in the opera), followed by Carmen's arrest and subsequent release by don José. It is in this scene that the characters in the film's frame story become identified with the roles that they play in the Carmen ballet.⁴ The antagonism between Carmen and Cristina, the lead dancer of the troupe, as well as the sexual attraction between Carmen and Antonio are both replicated in the plot of this two-part scene. Indeed, the mirroring of life and art is made literal at the closing moments of the rehearsal when Antonio and Carmen face a mirror as they portray don José and Carmen. The *visual* equation of the characters and their roles is the key to Saura's *mise en abyme* and is based on the cinematic possibility of using a single actor (Antonio Gades) and a single actress (Laura del Sol) to play two parts. Since it is important in this first rehearsal scene for the viewer to firmly set in his or her mind that Cristina, Carmen, and Antonio correspond to Manuelita, Carmen, and don José respectively, the boundaries separating the world of the ballet and that of the frame are kept in tact. The beginning of the rehearsal is explicitly announced, and when the rehearsal is over, the dancers visibly relax and reenter the "real" world. Lest the viewer become too caught up in the emotional impact of the scene, half way through the rehearsal the camera cuts away from the dancers and shows the costume designer watching the stage action as he works at his sewing machine. This distancing device reestablishes the primacy of rehearsal over performance and calls viewer attention once again to the entire process of artistic invention. During this first rehearsal scene, then, the film is merely depicting a story within a story, and the viewer remains unchallenged by any slippage between the fictional and "real" worlds. Secure in this comfortable position, the viewer can take pleasure in the beauty of the dance number and, perhaps, derive some interest from seeing how the operatic and literary material is adapted to the dance format. In both Mérimée and Bizet's versions, the stabbing takes the form of an after-the-fact account made by witnesses. Here, however, the scene is spectacularly staged with the opera music entering only after the fight has ended. The viewer may note that it is the *entr'acte* to Act 3 that is being played during the encounter between Carmen and don José rather than appropriate music from Act 1, but there is no confusion in the mind of the viewer as to which moments pertain to the rehearsal and which do not.

The second rehearsal scene begins with the entire company listening to Antonio as he reads aloud from Mérimée's novella in preparation for Carmen and don José's love scene. Antonio first instructs Carmen how to dance this scene, and then he performs it with her. Since Antonio has asked his company to clear the area, he and Carmen seem to be alone as they go through their steps, the same ones used for Carmen's audition earlier in the film. The viewer may notice that Bizet's music is once again being used out of context because the famous *habanera* is played here instead of music from the opera's second act, but this does not affect the viewer's perception of this scene as part of the ballet Antonio is mounting. As the rehearsal progresses, however, it becomes obvious that the sexual tension between don José and Carmen is also present between Antonio and Carmen. Their physical isolation suggests that a real seduction is taking place, yet the stage props and the dance

movements remind us that this is just a rehearsal. The scene ends abruptly, with no evidence that the characters have now ended the rehearsal and are once again resuming their ordinary lives. Rather, the movie features a fastcut to the outside of the studio with Carmen driving back to see Antonio later that night. As Carmen enters the studio, the *entr'acte* heard in the first rehearsal becomes the background music for the movie. Thus, there is an *auditory* bleed-over from the stage production into the personal lives of the characters within the frame story. From this point on, the *entr'acte* will only be used in the frame, where it will serve as background music for tender moments between Antonio and Carmen. The "real" love affair now starts, and with a nice twist on both the novella and the opera, it is Antonio who dances for Carmen prior to their making love. This minor and yet obvious departure from the *Carmen* story foreshadows how the events in the ballet will eventually conform to the situation occurring in the frame.

With the parallel fully established between the film's frame and its embedded story, Saura can use the third rehearsal scene to bring about the boundary violation between the two narrative levels that was merely hinted at in the first two rehearsals, and which will come to fruition at the end of the film. The starting point of this rehearsal, unlike in the previous scenes, is hard to pinpoint. It is not until the actors begin to dance a highly stylized cane fight that the viewer knows that a rehearsal is taking place. However, the actions leading up to and determining this confrontation are firmly rooted in the frame story. Saura further identifies these actions with the frame by having the chromatic "fate motif" from Bizet's opera playing in the background.⁵ This music is never used in the film to accompany the dancers during their rehearsals. Rather, it serves exclusively as background music for the frame story, and in each instance it conveys a sense of foreboding. For example, it was heard earlier in the film when Carmen visited her husband while he was still incarcerated, and it later will return when Antonio discovers Carmen's infidelity with a member of the dance troupe. Here this motif is the musical backdrop for a card game. Included among the participants are Antonio and Carmen's husband, Montoya, who recently has been released from jail. During the game the card players discuss the perils of the drug trade, which Montoya intends to again pursue. The spoken rather than sung dialogue, as well as the modern content of the conversation both lead the viewer to the conclusion that an actual card game is taking place. As the betting escalates, real money is used, and when Carmen indicates that her husband has cheated, profanity appropriate to a real life situation is exchanged. At the moment when the viewer expects a violent fight to break out, however, the scene resolves into a dance sequence featuring the combatants. Bizet's music abruptly stops as Antonio seamlessly slips from his position within the film's frame into his role of don José within the embedded ballet. Carmen's husband is transformed as well, but in a more complex manner. Throughout the film Saura uses the actor Juan Antonio Jiménez to play two separate characters in the frame: Montoya (Carmen's husband) and Juan (a member of the dance troupe often seen with a cane while practicing his dance steps). Here Saura visually fuses them together in the rehearsal during Juan's portrayal of García, Carmen's husband in the ballet. Through this dance sequence the rivalry between Antonio/don José and Montoya/García is played out, with Carmen rejecting her husband for don José in the rehearsal just as she had done so for Antonio in the frame. The tension level which gradually has increased throughout this confrontation scene suddenly vanishes as the rehearsal ends. A lighthearted atmosphere resumes, and Juan literally unmasks the art of illusion making by removing the hairpiece he wore during the sequence. But something has gone awry with this process of artistic creation. Montoya, present at the beginning of the scene, has now disappeared. What happened to him? Because Juan had simultaneously embodied both the "real" and the fictional husbands during the dance, when García died, Montoya also ceased to exist. As we see Juan leaving the dressing room after the rehearsal—his hair no longer slicked back and his facial scar now gone—no trace of Montoya remains, despite the fact that we have reentered the realm of the film's frame. Montoya has been killed, not only symbolically, but metafictionally as well. In this, the first true intertwining of art and life, Saura chose to enact an event—the murder of Carmen's husband by don José after a dispute

over cards—which is part of Mérimée's *novella* but is not included in Bizet's opera. In so doing Saura takes advantage of the public's greater familiarity with Bizet's version than with its literary source. Indeed, Saura has commented that everyone has heard of Mérimée's *Carmen*, but very few people have ever bothered to read it (52). Thus, the film-viewing audience, largely unaware that a card game is part of the original *Carmen* story, readily accepts it as action pertaining to the film's frame rather than to the dance production. From this unguarded position, the audience feels a jarring shift when the "real" and fictional worlds meld together as one at the beginning of the cane dance. It is also interesting that *Carmen*'s dramatic gesture of throwing her wedding ring at her husband at the end of the scene has its counterpart in both the novella and the opera. In these earlier works, however, it is don José who is rejected in this manner. Saura incorporates this element of the *Carmen* story but alters it to serve the demands of the *mise en abyme*. Not only does the film's frame story duplicate the events in the embedded *Carmen* story, but the process now has become reciprocal. The embedded ballet has begun to mirror what is going on in the frame of the film as well.

The final rehearsal scene begins with the ritual dressing of the bullfighter, who walks out into the full stage and is met by a large number of the troupe dancing in pairs, among them *Carmen* and don José. When don José objects to the attentions paid to *Carmen* by the bullfighter, switchblades are drawn by various onlookers, but don José and the bullfighter engage in a duel using dance instead of knives. Once again we see that it is the embedded ballet that adapts to the action of the film's frame story. Although a bullfight is common to both Mérimée's and Bizet's versions, the confrontation between don José and his rival does not occur in either. In Saura's film, however, the bullfighter represents the man—significantly named Tauro—whom Antonio had recently caught in an amorous embrace with *Carmen* in the studio dressing room. The brief altercation between Antonio and Tauro, left unresolved in the film's frame, becomes fully realized in the ballet as don José and the bullfighter battle each other with aggressive dance movements. This duel is abruptly halted, however, when *Carmen* walks off the stage and is followed by don José. At this point the music from the end of the opera becomes momentarily superimposed over the rehearsal music before becoming the dominant sound. Since *Carmen* and Antonio are now off stage, the viewer is unsure if they are still playing their parts in the ballet. The presence of the opera music further confuses the viewer because as the movie has progressed, Bizet's music has become more associated with the film's frame than with the embedded ballet. Furthermore, the verbal exchange between *Carmen* and Antonio is spoken rather than sung, and passersby look at them as they would any quarreling couple. Also, as he grabs hold of *Carmen* for an embrace, she pushes him away and in an almost imperceptible voice she calls him Antonio rather than don José. From this evidence the viewer may conclude that the two characters are once again within the realm of the frame story. Yet, their actions are fully consistent with the finale of Bizet's opera, where the pleading don José, after being spurned by *Carmen*, stabs her to death. The murder weapon is the same kind of knife that was used as a prop just minutes before in the confrontation with the bullfighter, and *Carmen* clearly experiences a bloodless and stylized stage death. Moreover, as the camera pulls back, we see members of the troupe casually sitting at tables and showing no indication that a violent crime had just taken place. Indeed, in this final rehearsal scene the "game of reality and fiction" is complete, with the two narrative levels fused together in an ambiguous ending that requires the viewer to question the conventions of realistic cinematic representation that he or she has always taken for granted. In so doing Saura once again makes us aware of the nature of fiction as illusion which traditionally has attempted to appear as reality. When the "real" world of the frame becomes enmeshed with the fictional world of the ballet, the viewer is forced to acknowledge that the entire film, after all, is nothing more than a fiction. By disrupting our habitual mode of dealing with cinematic realism, Saura achieves the same kind of instability found in metafictional literature.

The metafictional component of Saura's *Carmen* is a fundamental aspect of the film which has not yet received the critical attention it deserves. When we examine the points at

which this film's modern frame story intersects with the flamenco version of the Carmen story, we find a finely crafted structuring device which steadily and systematically erases not only the line separating reality and fiction, but also the one that distinguishes between the process of creating fiction and the fictional object created. In *Carmen* Saura employs two works that form part of the Western canon—one literary and the other operatic—and then he causes them to interact with the film's frame story in a way that undermines the audience's acceptance of the realistic representation that forms the very backbone of that canon.

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Notes

¹ Edwards (136-49) and Sánchez Vidal (182-85) have discussed how Saura uses Spanish dance and music to assert a more authentic view of his culture than was done in Bizet's opera.

² Antonia Gades, however, later mounted a theatrical production of *Carmen* featuring the dance sequences but eliminating the modern frame story.

³ Metafictions call attention to their own fictionality by flaunting the conventions which normally are accepted without question, thereby foregrounding the process of creating the illusion of reality. Furthermore, metafictions often transgress the boundaries between the text and the outside world, as well as between the various fictional levels within the text itself. For further information concerning metafiction see Hutcheon, Spires, and Stonehill.

⁴ For discussion of the gender issues involved in the mirroring of the modern frame couple and their nineteenth-century counterparts see Hill, Wills 34-39, Fiddian and Evans 83-92, Heredia 85-87, Kovacs 111-12, Edwards 150-52, D'Lugo 211-12, and Hopewell 154-55.

⁵ See Hugh MacDonald 736, 738. For this and all other information concerning the musical construction of Bizet's opera, I wish to thank Wayne Wentzel from the Music Department of Butler University.

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