

#01

METAFICTION  
AND  
INTERTEXTUALITY IN  
*PRÉNOM:*  
*CARMEN*  
BY JEAN-LUC  
GODARD

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**Abstract** || J. L. Godard appears as a character in *Prénom: Carmen* (1983), not only as a homage to himself and/or to the cinema, to genres, to texts, to actors, etc., but also to leave his mark on his version, that is, the adaptation of the well-known myth of the modern and godardian *femme fatale*. Godard uses the recurrence to intertextuality and to metafiction as the only possible instruments to make and to think about the language of cinema and about art in all their splendour. In this way, prejudices of adaptation are overcome by cinema.

**Keywords** || Godard | Merimée | *Carmen* | Myth | Intertextuality | Metafiction | Postmodernism | Cinematographic adaptation.

## 0. Introduction

Nowadays, the cinema's communicating vessels, both with itself and with the rest of arts, while honouring its originally inter-artistic sap, seem to uncover themselves from a latent state, to be raised to their highest expressive level. So much so, that an author like Jean-Luc Godard has achieved to make this inter-artistic style a hallmark that is nothing but the mirror of a way of conceiving and making cinema. This sort of cinematographic philosophy that, as such, had to go beyond the expiration of the Nouvelle Vague, incites the French author to recurrently include metafiction and intertextuality in his films, spread out in numerous directions, as it happens in literature. One of his first and successful attempts has been especially pointed out, *Le Mépris* in 1963, although it is true he has never stopped turning to cinematographic reflexivity in works from other periods of his career, such as in *Prénom: Carmen*, 1983.

Although it received the *Leone d'Oro* that year, this film has gone unnoticed by both French and foreign criticism due to diverse questions. However, after the undertow of the French *new wave* in the sixties and after his *most* political period in the seventies, Godard continues experimenting with the cinema from the cinema, in the cinema and about the cinema during the eighties. Such experimentation is suitably served by the re-visitation of one of the artistic 'myths' that came from a literary genre, the *nouvelle: Carmen*, that *femme fatale* made literature by Mérimée in the 19th century, represents one of the most common hackneyed subjects not only in literature. Thus, that interartistic myth is used by the French director to his own advantage in this adaptation.

For that reason, the present analysis of *Prénom: Carmen* intends to be an example of the author's cinema throughout his career, and of his expressive resources, that of metafiction and that of intertextuality, unavoidable for his way of understanding cinema. On the one hand, Godard practices cinematographic reflexivity, that is, cinema from the cinema, which had a distinguished model in the aforementioned Nouvelle Vague and had its continuation. On the other hand, he also resorts to intertextuality, that is, cinema with or through cinema. For this film in particular, studies have been limited to superficial references in this sense; they usually move towards the study of the treatment sound and montage, for which he deserved recognition in the Venice Film Festival.

## 1. Cinema for the cinema, and cinema for literature: Godardian language

Jean-Luc Godard (Paris, 1930), not only thinks cinema but also feels it as a language according to the teachings of André Bazin<sup>1</sup>, one of the masters of those taking part in the Nouvelle Vague. He has symbiotically theorized and practiced filmmaking through that same language: cinema. Godard suggests the cinema in the cinema, making metafiction at a thematic level a recurrent feature of style in his evolution, from the fifties until the present, as it is confirmed in *Prénom: Carmen* (1983), filmed and released just at the mid-point in his career. Moreover, he practices cinematographic reflexivity (cinema from the cinema) and intertextuality<sup>2</sup> (cinema with the cinema). But not only cinema is resorted to intertextually, but also in a necessarily broad Godardian sense, to other languages, other texts, such as literary ones. Those constitute the milestones illustrated here from *Prénom: Carmen*, emphasizing metafiction and intertextuality working simultaneously. As we know for a fact, in this film these resources cannot be understood separately, for their functionality is consciously and necessarily reciprocal.

Those three expressions, distinguished by Pérez Bowie, who also provided guidelines for them (2005), imply cinematographic metafiction in particular, a 'meta-filmicity' connected with transmediality<sup>3</sup> by Cifre Wibrow (2005), according to the demands of the current context and with that inter-artistic essence put into practice by Godard. Praxis and theorizing, in symbiotic simultaneousness, correspond to what has been named and 'lived' as modernity or even postmodernity. One of its expressions would be trans-textuality, stated in exemplary fashion, in turn, by the author of the chosen work throughout his career. The *femme fatale* represented by Carmen continues living and occupying a privileged place in the pedestal of pan-European mythology: the myth has survived all the arts beyond the 19th and the 20th centuries in Europe. It also survived the attempts to demythologize the qualities it seems to personify, those granted to women; this stereotyped qualities have been reviewed in modern society and art with parodic and satiric emphases.

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### NOTAS

1 | "On the other hand, of course, cinema is also language", this is one of Bazin's key postulates (BAZIN, 1964, 16). Faced with this influence, "a theoretic base of considerable consistence is recognized –the so called *politique des auteurs* impelled by the *Cahiers du Cinéma* magazine with André Bazin's theoretic postulates as dogma–", continued, although in a dispersed way, as "symptom" of a tendency of French cinema itself (RAIMBAU, 2002: 26-27).

2 | We follow the first definition, Julia Kristeva's one: "The poetic meaning refers to different discursive meanings, in such a way that in the poetic statement other discourses are legible. Thus, a multiple textual space, whose elements are susceptible of being applied in a poetic text, is created around poetic meaning. We will name this space intertextual. From the intertextual point of view, the poetic statement is a subset of a bigger set, which is the space of the texts applied to our set." (KRISTEVA, 1978: 66) Thus, it all would link with Bazin's way of understanding language.

3 | "Metaliteratura y metaficción. Balance crítico y perspectivas" is the center of *Anthropos Magazine* nº 208. We emphasize and apply Patricia Cifre Wibrow's study, "Metaficción y postmodernidad: interrelación entre dos conceptos problemáticos" (CIFRE WIBROW, 2005, 50-58) and José Antonio Pérez Bowie's one, "El cine en, desde y sobre el cine: metaficción, reflexividad e intertextualidad en la pantalla" (PÉREZ BOWIE, 2005: 122.137). In spite of everything, more than presenting a typology of cinematographic metafiction adapted to a precise sole-criterion classification and terminology, such expert offers the labels followed in the present analysis to illustrate them with certain

## 1.1. Metafictions and intertextualities for another Godardian adaptation

If Godard likes to leave his personal stamp in all his works, in *Prénom: Carmen* it could not be different if we take into account that this film from 1983 is only one of the 77 that already in 2002 had resorted to the myth, character or motif of Carmen<sup>4</sup>. He gives expression to his stamp no less than with his own presence: Jean-Luc Godard appears as the almost homonymous Jean, uncle of the young and attractive main character, Carmen (Maruschka Detmers). He plays a slightly mad film director, also vengeful against the world that repudiates him. His niece turns to him in order to film a project she has, for which she needs his equipment and house. Although it is a supporting role and, hence, part of an accessory subplot that is dynamically and necessarily connected with the principal diegesis, that strategy will constitute one of the examples or types of cinema within cinema, that of metafiction at the thematic level.

Among those subtypes, in this work of Godard, those corresponding to the questioning of the spectator's universe would be absent, as well as the one for fiction in a second degree. Nevertheless, the metafictional strategies relating to the "mundo de detrás de la pantalla" and to the "disolución de la frontera entre la ficción marco y la ficción enmarcada" (as Pérez Bowie understands them, 2005: 123-125) are present in *Prénom: Carmen*. However, this last type could be considered a variation of that fiction in a second degree, already holder not only of a greater formal sophistication, but of its own function or functions, summed up in the analyzed work.

Indeed, this world necessarily and *actually* behind the screen (or behind the camera) gets to exist *fictitiously* in and in front of it, so, according to this first subtype of metafiction at the thematic level achieved by that work, "la trama del filme se sitúa en el mundo de la realización" (PÉREZ BOWIE, 2005: 123). We would have an example of it in one of the first sequences of the work, the one that causes the beginning of the main diegesis: Carmen's visit to her uncle Jean (Godard) in the insane asylum. But that fact does not only correspond to the motor of the plot of *Prénom: Carmen*, but to the starting point of other film, the one Carmen intends to shoot with the material and the equipment of that repudiated film director.

Likewise, the world of cinema is *thematized* in other sequences, as in that comprising the conversation in a café between uncle Jean and one of Carmen's fellows (a robbery- and cinematographic production-fellow) to deal with economic matters relating to her cinematographic project; or as in that in which several persons of the team rehearse (if not parody) the robbery and/or the robbery scene in the hotel room.

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cinematographic examples, labels that we specify from the example chosen by Godard. Thus, we take this number of *Anthropos* into consideration both to present a state of the conceptual-terminology matter from a recent perspective and in our field and to do so about cinematographic examples, taking in, of course, the unquestionable critical landmarks, as *Genettes's theories in Palimpsests: literature in the second degree* (1989) or *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation*, (1997) would be, for the matter of narrative levels, that here we extend to cinema.

4 | They were counted up in a conference about cinematographic adaptations of *Carmen* that took place at the University of Newcastle, 2002, as Linda Hutcheon (HUTCHEON, 2006) refers to. We could add, for example, Vicente Aranda's contribution, *Carmen*, 2003, with Paz Vega.

This sequence, in addition to the burlesque attitude of those who are rehearsing it, performs a parodic function, which in fact is exercised by this film, for example, in relation to other cinematographic genres like the detective one.

In addition to a supposed generic subversion, the fact of showing the world behind the camera, according to Pérez Bowie, works as a tribute as well as self-criticism, and here it might as well be about, from my point of view, a critical self-tribute. Indeed, revisiting cinematographic genres as the detective one or the film noir, even if with a parodic attitude and strategy, implies reviving them in parallel. For want of a better way of putting this paradoxical example, the remythologizing operation carried out on Carmen throughout the 19th and 20th century brings about, not the extinction, but the promotion of her initial mythemes<sup>5</sup> and also, simultaneously and symbiotically, her transmythification.

But the inclusion of cinema in *Prénom: Carmen* is also carried out through another language and other artistic worlds, that of quotations and that of self-quotations, Godard's admitted predilection: "Among the notes I take to use them in a film it is not difficult to find, if I like it, a Dostoyevsky quotation. Why not? If one has desires to say something, there is only one solution: to say it" (GODARD, 1971: 174). In this direction, he resorts to that "to be or not to be" of Shakespeare that in *Prénom: Carmen* certainly is a question; or to the simile of the female character with the "little Electra" that the uncle establishes with her niece (Shakespeare and Electra reappear in other works from different periods of Godard, too). But the musical intertextuality acquires a functional role within the story performed, and his prize in Venice was due to that. Indeed, the *leitmotiv* of Beethoven quartets comes to have narrative value—in a wide sense—and although Bizet's opera of 1875 is noted for its habanera, or precisely for it, it will only be whistled at twice in Godard's film.

But we can also hear *Ruby's Arm*, by Tom Waits, when Joseph sits on the TV set in the hotel room, as if defeated by Carmen. Likewise, other languages, other texts, are gathered. There are references to theatre in the film, like when one of Carmen's partners, when leaving the hotel hall, says: "Finis! Rideau!". There are references to painting as well, for example, when uncle Jean compares the yellow of the bathrobes with that of Van Gogh's painting; but not only with textual quotations, but with the "iconic" presence of paintings as backcloth of some interior sequences. However, the direction can be another one: Carmen was also brought into painting, among so many others, by another artist admired by Godard, Picasso, who even disguised himself as Carmen to be filmed by Man Ray.

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5 | Concept typical of C. Lévi-Strauss' anthropological structuralism, from the following idea: "If we try to understand the existing relation among language, myth and music we could only do it using language as starting point [...]" (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1990, 76). The *mytheme* would be nothing but the constant and minimum element of a myth that could be exchanged, reorganized, repeated, kept or modified in its positive or negative, masculine and feminine sign/ *seme*. This only is the place of the superficial review of the treatment of the myth of Carmen in the 20th century, stopping at Godard's cove; in spite of this, it would be extremely stimulating to study the metamorphosis or the transmythification on these grounds, in the relation myth-language-music, not only of this particular example.

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And the cinematographic self-references could not be absent, like when Carmen calls Joseph “petit soldat”, alluding to another famous Godard film, *Petit soldat*, 1960. The male protagonist’s characterization is far from the stereotype of the handsome guard due to his redhead and his “soldier” suit, and even due to his clumsy gestures during the pursuit, which would parody the detective genre and silent films at the same time. This Joseph will also appear in the following work of Godard’s, *Je vous salue, Marie*. Godard’s — character— himself quotes Mao, an inspiration from the period of that *politically political* cinema he previously realized. But Carmen also talks contemptuously about an American film of which she quotes a part of the script, and uncle Jean has in his knees a book about Buster Keaton during that *rendez-vous* at the bar, in the same sequence in which he asserts to have directed a film with Marlene Dietrich and Beethoven, and in which he says to Carmen’s partner not to stand up because his “scene” has not finished yet.

The subtype of fiction in a second degree would only be achieved on these grounds, when Godard attends, as Carmen’s assistant and uncle, that is, as a character, to the shooting of the film she had proposed, precisely at the end of *Prénom: Carmen*, although the shooting of the supposed documentary does not take place. However, with that ending we can doubt, and we must do it, as (fictitious) spectators of the shooting of the film devised by Carmen: it is possible to think about a relative degree of insertion of the second degree of fiction, an insertion that would cause the parallelism and the coincidence of the culminating moments of the action of the first and the second degree... even though the latter never comes to exist.

The dissolution of the border between framework fiction and framed fiction could also be illustrated with another work of the French author, *Les carabineers*, 1963. This attempt to resort to such strategy, I believe, represents one of Godard’s discoveries in *Prénom: Carmen*, not only due to the display of sophistication and skill showed after an already long career, but due to his consideration in the light of what *a priori* would constitute an adaptation of the myth, in its literary origin, of the *femme fatale* brought to life by Carmen. However, the blur of both levels, indeed, will be nothing more than an attempt; here is that strategic potentiality.

Therefore, one of the moments of confusion between what seems to be the production and the recording of the film at the hotel hall is presented, from my point of view, by the interruption on the right of Christine, a member of Carmen’s team, focused in a medium shot with a gun in her hand. Spectators doubt they are watching that robbery, which is mentioned constantly since the beginning in order

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to activate the horizon of expectations with premeditation (in view of this event of the plot in particular and in view of a cinematographic genre in general, detective films). But they doubt whether the robbery is real or fictitious, that is, whether it is “real” as it is happening in that first diegetic level, or whether it is “fictitious” as it would be in a second level, the one exactly meta-fictitious. Indeed, during that long final sequence we attend to a scene in which robbers and robbed are gather together, or what would be the same, supposed film makers and actors, among which, to greater confusion, some seem not to take the hint, in that scene, as if that robbery was nothing but a pretence, indeed.

That same puzzlement seizes spectators at the final moment, with that shot of Carmen face down, with a very weak light and on a red carpet. In the previous shot we could see Joseph and Carmen, one in front of the other, with her back to the camera and with his back to a mirror: although we hear a shot and we see how Carmen shrugs her shoulders, we never know if that shot was directed to her, nor even with to what we can glimpse at in the mirror, in which the fall of another person is lightly reflected. Another couple stresses the doubt, this one focused in close-up and in that dimly lit environment as well, the boss and a policeman, asking each other who the first in firing will be, if Carmen or Joseph. This are the same questions made by spectators and encouraging expectations. At the end, although that general view from head to toe allows us to see Carmen on the floor, we do not know if she is injured or not, and we will not know it because, precisely then, the film ends.

That splendid playing with the mirror in that scene in particular is not for free, just as in many others scenes of the film. Somehow, *it would thematize* or even *iconize* that attempt of *mise en abîme* or specular game masterly carried out by J. L. Godard. Thus, one of the possible aims searched by Godard would be achieved, through the inclusion of cinema in cinema in a second degree fading away: reality and fiction finally dissolve thanks to that game played by an active director, in and out fiction, requiring participative spectators as well, although they will finish confused. Did Joseph want to injure Carmen? Was it about a robbery or the filming of a robbery? From what moment could spectators be conscious of the blur of the fictional levels?

It is not a coincidence either that Godard, in charge of the montage of *Prénom: Carmen*, not of direction or adaptation of his script, decides to end the film in the crucial moment of confusion, at the dividing line. As film editor, he would only be present in the opening shot of the film, where the *Leone d'Oro* won in the Venice Festival for montage and sound quality is focused, as Godard's own voice-over comments. Somehow, including that comment, he is directing and

guiding a “reading” of the film and also the attention to an aspect, sound in cinematographic art, which could go unnoticed for that one who should not be just spectator. Indeed, the entire hearing spectrum in *Prénom: Carmen* is impeccable, even in order to pronounce that confusion, among shots and among diegetic levels, in a similar way as that crazy narrator-character in “modern” literature of the 19th century does it in the literary field, and to whom 20th century literature resorts so much. To that effect, it is not a coincidence either that the character of the homonymous director, uncle Jean, lacks mental sanity.

One of the ways to, not only think, but *activate* that self-reflexivity through the cinema’s own language is the violation of continuous and linear flow, narrative or realistic succession, so much discussed by cinema criticism since that criticism was born. Although in other cases the rupture is more clearly made, in *Prénom: Carmen* we can see a playing with that coherent theme that constitutes the principal diegesis. This ends up being a surprising game, precisely due to the rupture, not only with that necessary or logical or realistic linearity, but with the expectations of the genre or genres to which it seems to resort (to parody or honour).

This rupture takes place in that sequence including Carmen and Joseph’s conversation in her uncle’s kitchen at the seashore, in which she invites him to take part with a “role” in something that she will explain him later (it is possible to create from here certain anxiety on spectators with the recurrence of that enigma, so they have the same doubts as the male character). Therefore, she explains him what she intends to film: from an idea of Dillinger she saw in a comic, Carmen wants to “adapt” that story, about a bank robbery while a team, convincingly pretended to be shooting a film. But she wants to undertake the robbery, not the film. This allows Godard to play with intertextualities again, in this case with regard to another language in vogue, the one from comics.

Then, suddenly, a scene in which Joseph appears before the judge, defended by a lawyer for having committed his “crime” for love, and not for money; after this scene we come back to the shot where they both are in the kitchen, now with his back to the camera, in a medium shot through which he takes on a certain importance, as in so many other films when what it is intended to do is “as if” we were going into the character’s thoughts. In fact, the confusion produced by that swinging of scenes, repeated once more afterwards, becomes more pronounced due to the overlapping of sounds<sup>6</sup>: those of the courtroom when we are already seeing the scene at the kitchen, and the other way round, the conversation with Carmen when we already see the imagined scene (if it is not a prolepsis that would fill in some

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6 | “Independently of the director of photography he works with, Godard’s last films have the same shade of blue that homogenizes them, and resort to some particularly significant frames. Images are exact but there is something more than them in his films: they are real symphonies. Pioneer in the use of live sound, Godard incorporates dialogues with environmental sounds and music on an equal basis with image, so a gesture can be answered with a sentence, but one look can have its correspondence with a musical chord”, the director himself explained it this way in the press conference after the screening of *Prénom: Carmen* in Venice, as Esteve Rimbau states (RIAMBAU, 2002, 102). The detailed study of the insertion and functionality of Beethoven’s quartet in *Prénom: Carmen* is realized by Liandrat-Guigues and Leutrat (1994), although it is true it is one of the most celebrated and analyzed aspects of this work.

following narrative empty not taken in continuity to the diegesis). All that destabilizes that “line” of realism or narrative transitivity provided until that moment by the film, and contributes to the progressive pronunciation of the doubts on spectators, as well as on Joseph.

Indeed, it is a modern strategy, both in cinema and literature as arts, if it is not rather a postmodern strategy. Indeed, “the meta-”, as intertextuality, seems to be established in signs or symptoms of what is known as postmodernity, despite there are constant doubts, if not suspicions, about this concept. The same lack of consensus that incurs in the designation and in the concept itself falls on the question of the –cinematographic<sup>7</sup>– adaptation and on that of post-modernity, which boasts of its eclecticism, of absorbing and recoding all traditions but none, of playing and ridiculing, of apologizing the absence of certainties and sense(s)... what seems to be something also typical of Godard himself and of a modernity understood in a wide sense. Thus, saving the prediction for himself, we will take Godard’s as symptoms of a vital, historic and critical state, that of the present time.

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7 | In order to consider the adaptation of one text, a literary one in this case, another wide range of questions spreads out for the analysis, as suggested by Linda Hutcheon: what, who, why, how, where and when; questions to which she tries to give possible answers from some cinematographic adaptation of Carmen. Adducing the reasons of the survival of this myth and concluding in an opener way, Hutcheon adds and corroborates one of her proposals: “Like evolutionary natural selection, cultural selection is a way to account for the adaptive organization, in this case, of narratives. Like living beings, stories that adapt better than others (through mutation) to an environment survive: those of Carmen, Don Juan, Don Quijote, Robinson Crusoe, Dracula, Hamlet, and so on.”(HUTCHEON, 2006: 167). And in the conclusion, she will assert: “We find a store we like and then do variations on its own, separate from the palimpsestic pleasures of doubled experience; it does not lose its Benjaminian aura. It is not a copy in any mode of reproduction, mechanical or otherwise. It is repetition but without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty. As adaptation, it involves both memory and change, persistence and variation” (idem, 173). We bring up Hitcheon’s study due to the link it establishes, precisely, with other questions treated here. The Nouvelle Vague would not only be a symptom of post-modernity, but the same phenomenon of the adaptation, about which Hutcheon states in the preface: “We postmoderns have clearly inherited this same habit, but we have even more new materials at our disposal.” (idem, p. XI). In turn, she is one of the defendants of the relation of this question with the one on

## 2. Conclusions

In the light of what has been elucidated, it can be confirmed that Godard's cinematographic work, whose chosen sample has been *Prénom: Carmen*, suitably reflects the state of the current matter: it not only makes evident the validity of the godardization of his cinema during the eighties with the effective recurrence to metafiction in the most diverse directions, but also gives clear proof of the critical situation of studios, whose latent state during those decades has burst into present time until it stands out, especially, in the connection of that "state" of (post)modernity with symptomatic but unstable concepts like transtextuality, self-reflexivity, meta-art or adaptation, as symptomatic as its own conceptual fluctuation.

The inclusion of cinema inside cinema, thematically and/or intertextually, does not only imply a re-reflection on a cinema that in this way is built as a world with a particular continuum, but also a reflection on cinema and its history, paying tribute to it. Therefore, the author's presence inside the story of *Prénom: Carmen* is not for free at all, as in other films, as it is not a coincidence either that he plays the role of a frustrated and crazy director who wants to take revenge on history with another story.

The game with the ambiguity of the madman figure shows and adapts likewise to the playing with the diegetic levels and, hence, with the interpretation itself of cinematographic work. This confusing game, together with the strategy of recurrence to transtextuality and metafilmicity, necessarily requires another player, the spectator that, at the (post)modern age, should only be experienced and on the alert, willing to feel the vast labyrinth of quotations and self-quotations, of images and mirrors.

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adaptations, something shared by the authors themselves who arose from the Nouvelle Vague, like Rohmer and Truffaut. But she also defends the relation with intertextuality itself, which those cinematographic authors did not deny: A. Hitchcock, N. Ray, H. Hawks, F. Lang, Rossellini, R. Bresson, J. Tati, J. Becker, M. Ophüls, J. P. Melville, J. Cocteau... and A. Bazin.

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## Filmography

From Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues and Jean-Louis Leutrat (1994)

Script and adaptation: Anne-Marie Miéville.

Pictures: Raoul Coutard (Eastmancolor).

Sound: François Musy.

Music: Beethoven, quartets 9, 10, 14, 15 and 16, recorded by Cuarteto Prat.

Song Ruby’s Arms by Tom Waits.

Montage: Jean-Luc Godard and Suzanne Lang-Villar.

Camera: Jean Garcénot.

Costumes : Renée Renard.

Cast: Maruschka Detmers (Carmen), Jacques Bonnaffé (Joseph), Myriem Roussel (Claire), Christophe Odent (the boss), Jean-Luc Godard(uncle Jean), Hyppolite Girardot (Fred), Bertrand Liebert (guard), Alain Bastien-Thiry (Gran hotel servant [sic]), Jean-Pierre Mocky (the sick person shouting “Any French in here?”).

Production: Sara Films, J.L. G. Films.

Executive producer: Alain Sarde.

Awards: “Golden Lion” in the Venice Film Festival, 1983.

Length: 85 minutes.