

**From opera to cinema,
from cinema to opera:
the art of actor-singer**
*Da ópera para o cinema,
do cinema para a ópera:
a arte do ator-cantor*



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Abstract: This study raises questions concerning the participation of opera singers in silent movies and the influence of that experience on the creation of a more naturalist form of acting in opera. Considering the activity of acting under a broader perspective, we reflect about stage pictorialism, a common practice in non-musical theater by the end of the 19th century which is also adopted in opera. Our considerations are guided by a well-documented case of film screening, Metropolitan Opera House soprano Geraldine Farrar as Carmen in the homonym 1915 movie by Cecil B. De Mille.

Keywords: acting; silent film; opera; theater.

Resumo: Neste artigo, consideramos o aspecto da atuação no cinema silencioso de estrelas da ópera com o objetivo de trazer questionamentos sobre uma possível influência das experiências desses artistas em sua atuação operística no sentido de um maior naturalismo. Colocando a atuação nos palcos dentro de uma esfera mais ampla, estudamos o “pictorialismo” (as poses), comum no teatro não musicado do final do século XIX e adotado também na ópera. Para nossas reflexões, usamos um caso com boa documentação de exibição cinematográfica, o da estrela do Metropolitan Opera House, a soprano Geraldine Farrar, como Carmen, no filme homônimo de 1915 de Cecil B. DeMille.

Palavras-chave: atuação; cinema silencioso; ópera; teatro.

It is not uncommon to consider acting in silent cinema as influenced by operatic acting, with broader and more emphatic gestures³. Many authors throughout the History of Cinema have evoked a genetic affiliation from silent cinema to opera, especially regarding the putting into practice of the “total work of art” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) idealized by Richard Wagner, something usually affirmed without collating theories of Wagner himself and that has been used since the beginning of cinema as a way of legitimizing and promoting films to his audience⁴.

Until today seen within the spectrum of the popular, cinema, at the beginning of the 20th century, was in the midst of an attempt to expand its audience, attracting the bourgeois classes, and its legitimation, having been raised to the category of art by theorists such as Ricciotto Canudo (who coined the term, later popularized as “seventh art,” in 1911). Furthermore, at the same time, opera enjoyed a high position in the bastion of the arts, even though, as Branstetter (2006) observes, since its creation by the Camerata Florentina at the end of the 16th century, it has existed simultaneously both as popular entertainment as well as *high art*.

In the 19th century United States, Levine (1990) notes that the opera was shared by a very heterogeneous audience. Although the author also indicates that there was a change in the relationship of American society with music and other arts in the late 19th century towards a “sacralization,” he considers that, even so, opera stars still enjoyed great popularity in the beginning of the 20th century.

Such a combination of popularity and elitism/glamor of opera was well regarded by the cinema. Thus, in addition to the claim of Wagnerian affiliation, another tactic to achieve this status was the use of opera stars on the screens (TAMBLING, 1987; JOE, 2013). Considering this second aspect, we will focus on the issue of acting in silent cinema and its supposed two-way approach to operatic acting from a specific case: that of soprano Geraldine Farrar (1882-1967), Carmen’s interpreter in the homonymous 1915 film by Cecil B. DeMille.

Given this object of study, we can ask several questions: if today it is considered that the good acting of opera singers is fundamental in the opera

³ Michel Chion (2019), for example, although not limited to this aspect, cites a statement by Carlo Piccardi, made in a 1991 colloquium, that the recitation of silent films developed closer to music, “in the sense of his gestures, which developed in a dilated form (sic), similar to the hyperbolic curves typical of the movements of singers in opera” (PICCARDI, 1992, p. 85 apud CHION, 2019, p. 51, our translation, emphasis added).

⁴ We are not saying that there is no relationship at all, but we point out how Wagner was “fetishized,” reified and naturalized by Theory and History of Cinema (PAULIN, 2000), from the meanings of figures from the silent era, such as Samuel Rothapfel, the Roxy, evoked by Altman (2007). The deepening of these issues is beyond the scope of this article.

mise-en-scène as a whole, being even more imposed and required a *physique du rôle* suited to the character⁵, did all of this only begin in contemporary times? What would be the relationship between opera acting and non-musical theater in the late 19th and early 20th centuries? Could it be that in the era of silent cinema there was also a reverse genealogy (from cinema to opera) in acting? Farrar's case helps us to think about these issues, since the film is accessible and there is a lot of documentation about its exhibitions and about her relationship with this experience in the cinema.

The objective of this article is, starting from studies on the relations between theater, opera and silent cinema that include especially acting in these three domains, and, focusing on the specific case of Geraldine Farrar, to detect what it can bring us to deepen about these relationships. With this initial study, we intend to continue the questions in the previous paragraph that guide us in this research.

In the first part of the article, starting mainly from the detailed study by Brewster and Jacobs (2016), we considered the relationship between operatic performance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the poses coming from the non-music theater and present in manuals used by the theater of that time, in addition to practical problems, such as those indicated by Nash (2012). We also evoke Henson's (2015) study of 19th century singers associated with elements of "realism" in their performances. Next, we focus on Geraldine Farrar's case and analyze the possible effects of the experience in silent cinema on her operatic performance from the current bibliography on the singer, testimonials from Geraldine Farrar herself and her contemporaries, in addition to relating them to the film. Finally, we will consider the performances of other opera stars, in order to think beyond Farrar's case.

Acting: from the theater to the silent cinema of the 1910s, including the opera

Brewster and Jacobs (2016) build a path from the theater "pictorialism" to the silent cinema of the 1910s, which makes more complex statements such as that silent cinema performances are in direct continuity with the operatic performances of the time or with the pantomime.

⁵ This aspect is even more evident because of the broadcast of HD operas in theaters, started by the Metropolitan Opera House in 2006, having been followed by other opera houses. As a consequence, famous singers have already had to resort to surgical procedures to try to save their career (LALEU, 2018).

The “pictorialism,” or the “pictorial effect,” is not only related to the use of compositions framed as paintings or *tableaux vivants*, widely used in theater and in the early cinema as an autonomous genre or part of plays/films, but also punctual moments, which included, above all, a type of acting present in theater in general (and not only in opera) from the 18th and 19th centuries and which also permeates the 1910s cinema. The duration of these static poses was variable, managing to be very long in the dramatic theater, or much shorter in the cinema since it also depended on the extension of the shots and editing.

As Brewster and Jacobs (2016) note, such poses⁶, usually reminiscent of classic paintings and sculptures⁷, were part of the acting manuals of the 18th and 19th centuries⁸, studied by both actors and singers (Figure 1). The pose worked for the actor as his own control of his position in space, in contrast to what Stanislavski preached, for whom all the actor’s attention should turn to his psychological identification with the role. On the other hand, in the view of pre-Stanislavski theater, the poses did not mean a lack of psychology in the performance since the gesture (codified and studied from the manuals) was considered as capable of concentrating and externalizing inner states.

⁶ One can think of the idea of the “pregnant moment” evoked by Lessing as to the representation of an action in painting, as something that survives (in the sense of Aby Warburg; see note 7) in these poses. However, it is important to consider, although the actors/singers remained in a “pose,” unlike painting, theater and opera are arts of the time: during the pose, a text is recited, a recitative or aria is sung. Therefore, the pose may take the character to a pregnant a pregnant moment, but not the auditory part of theater and opera, in motion. In silent cinema, even without the sound of the word, there was the vision of moving mouths: the word was there, even without being heard (and it was read in the intertitles).

⁷ One can evoke the relationship of these poses with the *notion* of Pathosformel (“pathos formula”) by Aby Warburg, that is, the survival of gestures (that evoke feelings) of Antiquity in statues, engravings and paintings from later times. Although the actors and singers were urged to study ancient paintings and sculptures, the further analysis of this genealogy is outside the scope of this article, as we are more interested in the relationship between theater poses and practical issues of acting in the opera and how this adapts or not to the moving images and the cinema editing, in addition to the reverse action of the latter in operatic performance.

⁸ Among these eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century manuals are that of Franciscus Lang (1727), that of Johannes Jelgerhuis (1827) and that of Henry Siddons (1822). Also very influential in the 19th century was the manual *Applied Aesthetics* by François Delsarte (BREWSTER; JACOBS, 2016; HICKS, 2011).



Figure 1: Poses in the theater and their relationship to feelings.
Source: Siddons (1822) apud Brewster and Jacobs (2016, p. 71).

The poses also reflected answers to a practical problem: from Frederick Marker, Brewster and Jacobs (2016) evoke that, until at least 1860, there were few rehearsals, the modern figure of the “director” was not responsible for the conception of the play as a whole, and the staging was in charge of each actor. Thus, the poses facilitated the actor’s planning and his anticipation of what others would do in a given scene, enabling the management of the ensemble.

In relation to this, the figure of the “director” also does not appear in the early cinema, in which who produced the film was more important, along with the camera operators. In the case of opera, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, itinerant companies were common in American countries – such as USA, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina –, which performed various operas in a season concentrated on few days and aimed at several cities, for which, evidently, poses-based performances were advantageous.

As Nash (2012) indicates, even in productions in the great opera houses of the late 19th century, many of the stars ignored acting indications by the stage managers, refused to participate in rehearsals in which movement on the stage could be discussed and simply did not “act,” considering that their art consisted only of vocal quality. In the United States, the big stars’ costumes were provided by themselves. Therefore, in most opera performances of the time, there was no concern with the general conception of the spectacle, except, perhaps, for Nash (2012), Wagner’s theater in Bayreuth.

Nash (2012) notes, however, that already in the late 19th century, some singers started to go against these practices, giving rise to the actor-singer that we cherish today. Among them, Victor Capoul, Geraldine Farrar’s professor (on whom

we will focus on the next item), Victor Maurel⁹ and Emma Calvé. In a next generation of singers who combined dramatic qualities with the voice, Nash (2012) highlights, in addition to Farrar, the soprano Mary Garden and the Russian bass Fiodor Chaliapin.

In her study, which includes reviews, letters, indications present in Bizet's score and photographs, Henson (2015) detected elements of what would be the "realism" (the author herself uses the quotes several times) so evoked by the reviews in the performance by Célestine Galli-Marié, first interpreter of the protagonist Carmen of Bizet's opera in 1875. Among them, the liveliness of movements, which Henson (2015) attributes, among other factors, to the fact that Galli-Marié, as common to other mezzo-sopranos¹⁰, played various transvestite roles (both woman characters who dress as men in the diegesis and as woman artists playing man roles, such as Romeo by Bellini) and, with that, she was allowed greater freedom of movement with her masculine clothes and within the dramatic needs (for example, climbing stairs, in the case of Romeu). Galli-Marié passed this experience on to her Carmen.

Returning to the poses in the different instances of theater, opera and silent cinema, Brewster and Jacobs (2016) observe that, in the theater, in addition to being functional for the exchange of scenarios, the poses punctuated important narrative moments. In the opera, the authors evoke the question of the transition of poses in baroque arias, in which there is, as usual, the repetition of its first part (in the ABA tripartite structure) and very contrasting moments (the "A" and the "B"), for which the interpreter had to worry about how to make the transitions, sometimes having to interpose other poses between the two main ones.

In the case of cinema, according to Brewster and Jacobs (2016), the lack of spoken word should not make us think of pantomime, as Jacques Aumont (2008) does, as being a specific theatrical genre in which the word is replaced by gesture. Although the authors note that some pantomime gestures were actually present in silent cinema – we can cite the example of Aumont (2008) that, to show that she was married, the character indicated the ring finger –, they consider that the gestures go in another direction: while, for example, to indicate that he wanted a glass of water, a pantomime actor would make the shape of a glass of water with the hand, the film actor would simply point at the object. In addition, many film actors came from the

⁹ On Maurel, see also Henson (2015).

¹⁰ The character Carmen has since been played by both mezzo-sopranos (like Galli-Marié) and sopranos (like Farrar).

spoken dramatic theater and sought, in their performance, answers to the absence of spoken word in silent cinema.

At the beginning of cinema, in the short films of a single reel, there was a pressure for everything to be faster, and certain gestures were adapted to be more emphatic than in the theater. With the increase in the length of films and the increase in technical mastery, in the 1910s there was a slowdown and, in addition to the poses in certain situations, the movements of lips indicated the absent sound of words, written or summarized in the intertitles. On the other hand, films with more plans and a more emphatic role in editing did not allow such lengthy poses.

Tom Gunning's (2006) concept of cinema of attractions is well known and accepted, which would correspond to films from the first years of cinema, generally made with a single roll of film and in which the author observes a lack of concern with the narrativity of situations, or, at least, a lower weight of this characteristic. After a transition period from 1907 to 1913-1915, the narrative aspect would definitely impose itself in the prevailing cinema (COSTA, 2006).

Brewster and Jacobs (2016) put Gunning's thesis into perspective, showing that the permanence of poses in the 1910s and even in the 1920s films would not mean the survival of the cinema of attractions within the feature film, but that of a theatrical tradition according to which the poses served to score dramatic blocks or to highlight certain situations. They also observe the relationship between poses and genre: drama films in general had a slower style and more space for poses than comedies. In addition, they were used in moments of dramatic climax and not in prosaic acts. Aumont (2008) also observes the coexistence in silent cinema of different types of gestures, which he calls conventional (those related to poses), artificial although original, and others more naturalistic.

This question of naturalism in performances is precisely one of the most complexes for an analytical approach due to the distance of our historical object (opera and cinema from the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century) and the different ways in which realism/naturalism was conceived at specific times, either now in the 21st century, or in discourses about theater in the 19th century and what was considered important, at the time, in the judgment of a performance.

For example, Brewster and Jacobs (2016) indicate that, in the 18th and 19th centuries, a beautiful posture was much more important than "excesses" of performance, even if they were in favor of expressiveness and the dramatic situation. Such excesses were, at the time, sometimes associated with the terms "realism" or

“naturalism” and would hardly be judged by the public and critics of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The tradition of more naturalistic acting in a sense closer to what we employ today begins to be established in the theater in the 1880s. The tendency was to abandon both graceful postures and mannerist excesses in order to express the characters’ personality through common everyday actions, as it was the case in Stanislavski’s montages¹¹. This resulted in an opacity in gestural performance, in a way compensated by the emphasis on language. Although Brewster and Jacobs also see concomitant influences of this type of theater in some performances in silent cinema, the lack of spoken word was a challenge for actors in this tradition, who possibly needed to appeal to more “emphatic” performances in the new medium (BREWSTER; JACOBS, 2016).

We will return to these questions in the analysis of Geraldine Farrar’s performance in *Carmen*.

The Farrar case

Although some silent films used opera divas in their cast, they did not sing. Unlike the successful singing films in Brazil (whose peak was between 1908 and 1911), in which the great attraction was the live dubbing of opera scenes by singers hidden behind the screen and, sometimes, dubbing themselves¹² (PEREIRA, 2014), in the feature film *Carmen* (1915), by Cecil B. DeMille, the attraction is not the voice, but the image of soprano Geraldine Farrar.

As to the sound accompaniments – considering records of some important screenings of the film – there was no concern to include Farrar’s own voice. At the premiere at the Symphony Hall in Boston, the famous exhibitor Samuel Rothapfel (Roxy) was summoned from New York to supervise the score composed by Hugo

¹¹ Hicks (2011) considers that, in general, acting in the non-music theater and in the opera goes in the same direction of its base in the poses and in the already evoked acting manuals until the end of the 19th century, when there would have been a split: the Stanislavski’s influence becomes stronger and stronger in non-music theater, while the performance in opera still remains a long time based on poses. Despite being a general proposition that helps us to think, it does not consider the cases studied by Henson (2015) and our object, Geraldine Farrar.

¹² Pereira (2014) identifies as the main names of the singing films: Antonio Cataldi, Claudina Montenegro, Santiago Pepe, Amica Pelissier, Mercedes Villa and Ismênia Mateos. However, although these singers have constantly moved between screens and stages, in the case of the latter, they have worked mainly in magazine theater, operetta and non-music theater. As the object that interests us here is operatic art and its great stars (to the point that we evoke that they have propitiated or facilitated changes in the operatic interpretation), we will not consider these artists in the discussion that follows.

Riesenfeld, made with orchestral excerpts from Bizet's opera melodies. Geraldine Farrar herself attended this exhibition as a guest of honor (ESSE, 2016).

In other exhibitions, such as at the Imperial Theater in San Francisco, six singers from the Lombardi Opera Company were used in the first part of the film, but in the style of Brazilian singing films, that is, hidden behind the screen. The second part was only orchestral, arranged by C.W. Melville. Also in Chicago, there was a program with some vocal parts sung by Naomi Nazor and Burton Thatcher. Roxy himself, when taking the film to his movie-theater in New York, included singers in the presentation (ESSE, 2016).

Why choosing Farrar, and not just any actress, since there would not be her singing live? In the sense of what Tambling (1987) and Joe (2013) observed regarding the use of opera stars in cinema, Melina Esse (2016) stated that one of Farrar's greatest attractions for DeMille was the possibility of drawing a more cultured and elite audience. Another important reason was that Farrar already had an established reputation in the opera, with a large fan base (many called themselves *Gerryflappers*¹³). It was still a great advertising strategy to reach a larger audience for the cinema.

This is corroborated in the article by Anderson (2005), which describes when producer Jesse L. Lasky went to a *Madame Butterfly* performance at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 15, 1915, with the objective of attracting performers to the cinema, which resulted in Farrar's contract for DeMille's film that same year, despite the positioning of the Metropolitan Opera House being contrary to Farrar working in cinema¹⁴.

However, in addition to this legitimizing and/or advertising maneuver of the film, Esse (2016, p. 90) notes that the "impression of verisimilitude"¹⁵ [of performance

¹³ "Gerry" is a reference to Geraldine and "Flapper" was a 1920s slang term for transgressive women. *Gerryflappers*, as explained by Schroeder (2002), were mainly young women who tried to imitate the dress and general appearance of Geraldine Farrar, considered a transgressor at the time.

¹⁴ Despite being a pioneer in the transmission of operas in HD in contemporary times, the Metropolitan Opera House was opposed to the transmission of operas on the radio in the 1920s, unlike other theaters (IRINA, 2016). Irina (2016, p. 57) attributes this attitude to the Met's director at the time, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, former director of Scala in Milan, who feared the "destabilization of the status of the opera" on the radio.

¹⁵ The meaning "versimilitude impression" is a conclusion of Esse (2016) from a critique of the film of October 2, 1915 (in the *Boston Daily Globe*), comparing it with performances of the opera (not necessarily with Farrar as protagonist). The critique emphasizes the successes of the film by getting rid of "artificial episodes" of the opera and overweight performers, inconsistent with the *characters' physique du rôle*. He also praises the film for having brought "*subjects out of life, of believable and persuasive verisimilitude, men and women of flesh and blood*" (ESSE, 2016, p. 90).

in the film *Carmen*] seems to have owed much to Farrar's performance." Indeed, as we have already mentioned in the previous item, the artist was among those who, in the early 20th century, sought to bring acting qualities to opera performance, often sacrificing musical beauty for dramatic effects, and her performance was reputed for "its intensity and realism" (NASH, 2012, p. 1). Nash (2012) evokes several statements by the singer about the importance for her of the subordination of singing to acting in the opera. She also reports that Farrar was irritated by the lack of movements in the traditional style of operatic performance of the time and would have abandoned her classes with the method of Delsarte (one of which we evoke that was based on poses and gestures) in the 1890s for considering it deplorable.

About the film *Carmen*, Melina Esse (2016) cites reviews that highlighted her naturalism in general, identified by the external scenes and presence of animals, in addition to the "extraordinary vitality and energy" of the protagonist (ESSE, 2016, p. 91), "the vividness, strength, and grace of the constant play of mood in face and eyes" (BOSTON DAILY GLOBE, 1915¹⁶ apud ESSE, 2016, p. 91).

The book *Carmen*, by Prosper Mérimée, first published in 1845, is all told from the perspective of the male protagonist Don José (in relation to another character), Carmen being the personification of the sensual and dangerous woman¹⁷. In the opera by Georges Bizet, from 1875, with libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, the female protagonist receives romantic and tragic contours, which enables greater empathy with the audience, including the female audience¹⁸. In a 1915 interview, Farrar evoked her care not to transform Carmen into a simply sensual woman (ANDERSON, 2005). However, as the film was based mainly on the story of Mérimée's book¹⁹, Anderson (2005) notes that Farrar's cinematographic Carmen conveys less empathy, resuming the character's animalistic sensuality characteristics in the book, a fact highlighted in other reviews of the time, present in the article by Anderson (2005).

¹⁶ October 2, 1915 article, "Sees Debut of Own Pictures: Farrar Lives Carmen in Film Premier."

¹⁷ Mérimée is part of what became known as literary naturalism of the 19th century, which in its search for "reality" privileged and even exaggerated its ugliest aspects (in opposition to the meaning that Art should only represent beauty), often going towards the picturesque.

¹⁸ However, Henson (2015) observes the presence of the indication of Mérimée's book in Bizet's own score and attributes the "realism" that critics of the time saw in *Habanera*, Carmen's first aria in opera, to an attempt to transpose the atmosphere from the book to the opera.

¹⁹ According to Schroeder (2002), the reason for this was purely economic, thus avoiding paying royalties to Bizet's heirs and their librettists.

It is also important to highlight the aspect of realism/naturalism, which is quite evoked in the reviews of the time regarding Farrar's performance in the film, perhaps closer to what Brewster and Jacobs (2016) indicated regarding her association with an "exaggerated expressiveness" in the conception of the 19th century opera (the "vivacity" quite evoked). The exaggeration (in a conception closer to the current one) that Farrar could eventually bring in her acting in the cinema was quite feared by DeMille when hiring the singer. In his account, he expresses concerns with details of performance worthy of Stanislavski's conception of an interior monologue:

the best stage actor still has things to learn and unlearn when he comes before a camera; and that, I felt, was particularly true of one coming from grand opera, where the tradition is to over-act and where the glorious music can carry or cover a certain amount of less than glorious acting if necessary. [...] Until an actor learns to use his eyes and the slightest flickering change of facial expression to project what is in the mind of the character he is playing, the motion picture audience will not believe him. (DEMILLE, 1959, p. 141 apud SCHROEDER, 2002, p. 21-22)

DeMille observes that, in cinema, the artist depends entirely on his face and body, differently from what happened in the opera of that period, in which the singer could leave everything (or almost everything) on account of his/her vocal skills. Schroeder (2002) attributes to this position the search for the cinema of faces and bodies considered attractive.

The director's fear caused him, as a training for *Carmen*, to start shooting another film with Farrar, *Maria Rosa*. However, in the end, DeMille was convinced that Farrar had a "natural" talent for cinematographic acting (SCHROEDER, 2002).

Although an analysis of Farrar's performance taking into account the viewing of the film today is extremely complicated by the fact, already pointed out, that concepts such as pictorialism, naturalism and excesses are used in very different ways, we adopt parameters from other theorists who have focused on performances of the 1910s films.

Pearson (1992), in her analysis of the Griffith films of the company Biograph from 1908 to 1913, observes that the films of the end of this period, unlike the initial ones, have a "versimilitude code" often expressed in employment by actors of different small gestures in their performance and in the use of scene objects in a more integrated way with the narrative. In several moments of *Carmen*, these small gestures are present in Farrar's performance. She also makes constant use of her fan, hat and shawl, in addition to playing castanets in a reasonable performance of a "flamenco" dance.

However, if it is true that Farrar has moments of “pose” (of which we highlight one, which occurs just before the image in Figure 2, when Carmen opens the door, at the top of the stairs in the tavern, where the bullfighter Escamillo has just arrived), is not contrary to what normally happened in these films, nor are they exclusive to Carmen’s interpreter in DeMille’s film. According to Brewster and Jacobs (2016), the poses are survivors of the theater in cinema from that period and would not mean “less realism.” In addition, it depends on the film genre, with the *femme fatale* incarnated by Farrar being a highly codified character in cinema. In the case of Carmen, she also receives a profusion of signs of “Hispanicity,” like some of those already mentioned, and the frequent placement of hands on her hips (something that comes from the flamenco dance).



Figure 2: Geraldine Farrar as Carmen in the 1915 film.
Source: Carmen movie (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915).

Farrar’s face in Figure 2 can lead us to think of moments of exaggeration in the interpretation, with wide-eyed and fixed for some time. If we consider Jelgerhuis’ theater manual (1827), we can associate some of the face figures – a mixture of the eyes of the first (amazement) with the mouth of the second (laughter), in Figure 3 – with that of Farrar in Figure 2. On the other hand, Farrar is not the only one in this and other films to assume this type of expression, which makes it difficult to say what was her own or what was related to the type of performance at a time when the face would have to transmit much of the character’s feelings for the absence of spoken word²⁰.

²⁰ To reach deeper conclusions, it would be necessary to study only Farrar’s face in comparison to those present in the films of that time.

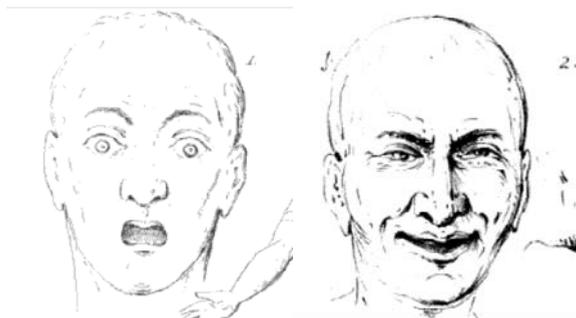


Figure 3: Faces of amazement/wonder and laughter.
Source: Jelgerhuis (1827).

Esse (2016) points out the shock and strangeness of Farrar when she later saw her image in motion in the cinema. From the reactions reported, the singer was surprised: “My land! Do I wear my hat like that?” or, still, “They have X-rayed my very soul upon the screen” (BOSTON DAILY GLOBE, 1915 apud ESSE, 2016, p. 93)²¹, it is to be thought that the fact of having acted in the cinema and watched her image on the screen influenced her later performance on the stage, although this opportunity in cinema happened when the singer was already facing vocal problems, being obliged to be away from stages for constant periods of rest.

In any event, Anderson (2005) seems to confirm this reverse influence of acting in the cinema on Farrar’s performance in the opera, when reporting that the singer performed in the same role as Carmen on the night of February 17, 1916, that is, little after the film, incorporating elements of cinema in her performance on stage, including the fact of “shoving the rose” in D. José’s face:

Without warning any of her fellow performers, she introduced a realistic fight in the cigarette factory into the first act of the opera. Then she stuffed her rose into don José’s (Caruso’s) cheek. In Act 3 she became so energetic and distracting while he was singing that Caruso grabbed her and would not let her go. (ANDERSON, 2005, p. 28)

Anderson (2005) also considers that, although her “sensual interpretation” caused a scandal at the Metropolitan Opera House at the time, much of Farrar’s “realistic” performance, inspired by her experience in cinema, was incorporated into subsequent creations of the character Carmen in operas. Farrar herself links

²¹ The first quote is in the article “Carmen in Camera’s Eye” of September 26, 1915 and the second in “New Hit in Carmen,” of August 7, 1915, both in the Boston Daily Globe.

this interpretation to her experience in cinema, as we can see in her testimony to the New York Times, on August 22, 1915: “When you see my *Carmen* of the pictures you will see *my real Carmen*, and someday I am going to *liven things up* a bit at the opera “(apud RINDOM, 2019, p. 305, emphasis added).

Farrar acted in films until 1920, (fourteen to be exact, many of them lost), not necessarily related to stories used in opera librettos. She abandoned opera performances in 1922, although she continued to present recitals.

What can the Farrar case prove to us?

The fact that Geraldine Farrar debuted in cinema in 1915 and was already, at the time, diminishing her appearances on the opera stage, until she stopped definitively in 1922, does not give us enough time period to reach to reach the conclusion that the sight of her image in cinema influenced her acting style on the stage, although Anderson (2005) makes some statements in this regard. Silent cinema appears as another way of acting for Farrar when her voice was already in decline, making her, as in the title of Melissa Esse’s article, a “silent diva.” Even though Anderson’s (2005) article brings conclusions about the initial question that names our article (the round-trip relations between opera and silent cinema), they refer especially to Farrar’s case.

However, we wonder if other singers could have a similar reaction when seeing the diva and thinking: “do I move like that?”. If today this is something pointed out by the constant recording and transmission of operas in HD in theaters, favoring seeing and reviewing every detail, one cannot help speculating that these images were relevant to artists of the silent film era. In addition, Farrar was not the only star of that period to have experience in the cinema world.

Despite the position that was quite refractory to Geraldine Farrar’s move to the cinema, an article in the *Vanity Fair* of May 1916 shows that the Metropolitan Opera House, in view of the success of the endeavor and the new medium, even had a project to film the opera *Tosca* with other stars: soprano Lina Cavalieri and baritone Antonio Scotti. However, the project never came to fruition (IRINA, 2016).

According to Fryer (2005), Cavalieri was the first star of that time to participate in a film, an adaptation of the opera *Manon Lescaut* by Puccini, in 1914. She was considered a beautiful woman, which was very convenient for the screens. As happened with *Carmen* in 1915, the screening, which premiered at the Republic Theater, did not feature the singer’s voice, but rather an orchestral accompaniment, just like at the Strand Theater in Washington (FRYER; USOVA, 2004).

Critiques of the time were not favorable to the singer's performance. In *Variety*, it read that she did well as a movie actress, but that "sometimes she seems to forget that, at the moment, she is acting in a pantomime role and not in a stage role, in which, with her voice, she already wins half of the battle" (FRYER; USOVA, 2004, p. 150). On the other hand, Cavaliere's husband and partner in opera and at the aforementioned film, the French tenor Lucien Muratore, although he attracted much less attention for not having the character of stardom of his wife, he was considered an excellent actor, having participated in different shows at the Variétés of Paris and at the Odéon theater before his opera debut. The couple made yet another silent film in 1915, unrelated to operatic stories and Muratore later acted in three sound films (FRYER; USOVA, 2004).

The great tenor of the time, Enrico Caruso, participated in two films. In the first, *My Cousin*, released in 1918, Caruso played two characters: a poor sculptor and his cousin, a famous opera singer. The film shows Caruso singing Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* on stage (FRYER, 2005). We have no information about his performance in reviews at the time.

The difficulty of working with opera stars like Caruso, at the time of silent cinema, can be attributed, among other factors, to the absence of voice, something essential to the art of a lyrical singer, because even if there was some intention on the part of producers of live singing in movie theaters, it would be impossible for the ubiquity of opera stars to be in more than one room in different cities, states and countries at the same time²², in addition to the fact that such singers would hardly be willing to stand behind the screen like the interpreters of Brazilian musical films. Sound cinema, as noted by Irina (2016), attracted several opera stars.

Thus, although it is not something related only to the image, we also evoke the possible influence of the experience in sound cinema on the operatic performance of tenor Tito Schipa from the study of Maron (2018). Schipa was an enthusiast of new technologies (gramophone and cinema) since they provided an extension of the scope of his work, besides that, as in the audio recording²³, the filming highlighted characteristics of his performance, such as the use of more subtle nuances in movement on stage and gestures (MARON, 2018).

²² The lack of physical presence in the cinema was seen as an advantage by Farrar, who was happy to be able to have tea with her friends, while new and old audiences saw her artistic work in the rooms (FARRAR, 1919).

²³ For more information on the influence of the gramophone on the technique and naturalness of singing, see Maron (2018).

In addition to peremptory conclusions about the influences of the cinematographic performance of these opera stars in the operatic performance of the time, what we claim is that the intermediality and the different transits of their actors from one medium to another should be considered when making statements about styles of performance in one or another medium. We must also consider the reviews of the time since what is considered “realistic” or “naturalistic” today often does not correspond to what these conceptions meant in the 1910s. As opera is a stage art, it is also important to consider the theater as a whole – and not only music – and the acting styles made famous by it.

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