Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*

To many common people the baroque and the operatic appear as an extraordinarily fascinating way of feeling and acting, a means of escaping what they consider low, mean and contemptible in their lives and education in order to enter a more select sphere of great feelings and noble passions. . . . But opera is the most pestiferous because words set to music are more easily recalled, and they become matrices in which thought takes shape out of flux.


There is no politics without human desire and madness.

— *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, 184.

Listening to Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904), I unwittingly participate in a history of racist imperialism. And yet at moments the opera works against its pernicious frame. . . . When Butterfly enters, I drift away from fixed vantage-point; the noose of gender loosens, and I begin to breathe.

— Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, 199.

One of the first thinkers in this century to reflect on popular culture as a political force was Antonio Gramsci. In his prison notebooks, Gramsci traces a connection between politics and particular expressive forms that, in each country, inscribe its dominant cultural narratives. For example, he remarks that the rise and fortunes of opera in Italy and of the popular novel in France and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with the “appearance and expansion of national-popular democratic forces throughout Europe” (1985, 378). Considered as a whole, as a genre, rather than as the expression of individual artists, the blossoming of opera was a “historico-cultural” event on a par with that of the novel, and both were forms of “popular epic” (378). We can certainly say the same of cinema in our century.

Those expressive forms, Gramsci observes, were clearly marked as fictional and served the purpose of entertainment or escape from the reality of daily life; but their effects had the power of “something deeply felt and
experienced” (378). While they allowed the common people to escape from “what they considered low, mean and contemptible in their lives” and enter into an exalted “sphere of great feelings and noble passions,” thus producing an artificial, cliché, deluded view of social relations, these popular forms also provided structures of cognition as well as feeling, “matrices in which thought takes shape out of flux” (378). Opera, Gramsci scornfully remarks, was “the most pestiferous” because it instigated in the Italian people what he calls “the operatic conception of life” (la concezione melodrammatica della vita) (377); but he immediately takes back the sarcastic emphasis to remark on the significance of the effect: for its viewers/listeners, who were uneducated, common people but not “superficial snobs,” opera had the effect of “something deeply felt and experienced” (378, emphasis added).

Popular culture forms have the effect of something deeply felt and experienced, and yet they are fictional representations. I want to suggest that they perform, at the societal level and in the public sphere, a function similar to that of the private fantasies, daydreams, and reveries by which individual subjects imagine or give images to their erotic, ambitious, or destructive aspirations. In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” Freud put it in a nutshell: “His Majesty the Ego [is] the hero alike of every day-dream and every story” (1953-74, 9:150). In this sense, the narratives inscribed in popular culture forms and their scenarios or mise-en-scène, complete with characters, passions, conflicts, and resolutions, may be considered public fantasies.

Gramsci further speculates that, if in Italy opera alone attained the popularity that the novel had elsewhere in Europe, this was because “its language was not national but cosmopolitan, as music is,” and did not necessitate the presence of a national-popular culture, which Italy lacked, or the “strict nationalization of indigenous intellectuals” that occurred in other countries of Europe at that time (1985, 378–79). To support his view of the cosmopolitan character of Italian opera, he observes that the plot of the libretti is never “national,” but European, in two senses. Either because the “intrigue” of the drama takes place in all the countries of Europe, and more rarely in Italy, using popular legends or popular novels. Or because the feelings and passions of the drama reflect the particular sensibility of eighteenth-century and Romantic Europe. This European sensibility nevertheless coincides with prominent elements of the popular sensibility of all countries, from which it had in any case drawn its Romantic current. (This fact should be connected to the popularity of Shakespeare and the Greek
tragic dramatists, whose characters, overcome by elementary passions, jealousy, paternal love and revenge, are essentially popular in every country.) (1985, 379)

Do Gramsci's speculations in the first decades of this century retain some value into its closing years? As we move from the nineteenth-century forms of popular epic to those produced in the twentieth by the historicocultural events of cinema, television, and the internet, the notion of a national-popular culture yields to that of a multinational, mass media culture with global reach. Perhaps we can no longer hypothesize a particular sensibility common to all Western countries, and surely the meaning of cosmopolitan has expanded beyond the European continent to, at least, the planet. Moreover, the former distinction between high and low cultures, between an elite culture of the educated classes and a popular culture of the "common people," is no longer tenable, owing in part to the social technologies of cinema, television, and the paperback industry. And yet, precisely through these technologies, the passions and dramas of popular mythologies—jealousy, revenge, violence, and indeed paternal love (now seeking to supplant maternal love)—continue to replay in the contemporary imagination, repackaged in the popular epic forms of our time, commercially successful films, television serials, and supermarket fiction. (Think of the film industry's standard practice of making famous novels and plays into films, and then making successful films into, precisely, remakes.)

As for a romantic sensibility in today's popular culture, is the romance of the child in Steven Spielberg's films, from E.T. and Close Encounters of the Third Kind to Jurassic Park, anything other than the sentimental reduction or, as Gramsci put it, the "politico-commercial degeneration" (1985, 379) of Wordsworth's vision of the child as father to man? Conversely, however, can one speak of degeneration for films like James Cameron's Terminator or Terminator II: Judgment Day, where the romantic elements of Christian epic, Genesis, and the Oedipus myth are re-imaged with the most spectacular special effects in a science fiction film? Perhaps the legend of King Oedipus no longer has the "universal" power to move it had for Freud; and yet it did have it for Pier Paolo Pasolini, who re-imaged himself as Oedipus in his film Edipo Re (Italy, 1967); for Matsumoto Toshio, who recast Oedipus as a young homosexual transvestite in Funeral Parade of Roses (Bara no soretsu, Japan, 1969); for Joy Chamberlain, who rescripted the story with an all-female cast in the British Broadcasting Corporation production Nocturne (UK, 1991); for Joy Chamberlain, who rescripted the story with an all-female cast in the British Broadcasting Corporation production Nocturne (UK, 1991); even, apparently, for the Hollywood audiences of Robert Zemeckis's Back to the Future (USA, 1985) and the two sequels it has spawned to date (1989, 1990).
And again, although Greek tragedy may no longer have the emotional impact attributed to it by Gramsci and Marx, think how many films in recent years have restaged Shakespeare’s plays and how many of Jane Austen’s eighteenth-century novels have been made and remade into films. Can we read such trends as symptoms of a national-popular drive resurfacing perversely in these times of global politics? Or is it rather the symptom of a dearth of new narratives in Western postmodernity? In any case, my purpose is not to reiterate a worn distinction between an authentic national-popular culture and its politico-commercial degeneration but to reflect on the re-use and mixing of popular forms and narratives in the cinematic construction of public fantasies.

Public and private fantasies

Fantasy is a fundamental human activity based on the capacity for imagining and imaging; for making images in one’s mind (imagining) and making images in material expressions (imaging) by various technical means that include, say, drawing and photography but also language and even one’s own body, for example, in performance. Psychoanalytic theory understands fantasy as a primary psychic activity, a creative activity that animates the imagination and produces imaginary scenes or scenarios in which the subject is protagonist or in some other way present. With the term fantasy Freud designates both these imaginary scenes and the activity of fantasizing, the psychic mechanism that produces the imaginary scenes. These, he notes in “The Interpretation of Dreams,” are in some cases conscious (e.g., daydreams, reveries, or “daytime fantasies”) but often “remain unconscious on account of their content and of their origin from repressed material” (1953–74, 5:492). Freud insists that both types of fantasies share many of the properties of dreams, and thus point to a common psychic activity or structure:

Like dreams, [fantasies] are wish-fulfilments; like dreams, they are based to a great extent on impressions of infantile experiences; like dreams, they benefit by a certain degree of relaxation of censorship. If we examine their structure, we shall perceive the way in which the wishful purpose that is at work in their production has mixed up the material of which they are built, has rearranged it and has formed it into a new whole. They stand in much the same relation to the childhood memories from which they are derived as do some of the Baroque palaces of Rome to the ancient ruins whose pavements and
columns have provided the material for the more recent structures.
(1953–74, 5:492)

One of the great contributions of Freud’s work to twentieth-century conceptions of the subject in culture is to have dissolved the qualitative distinction between fantasy as mere illusion and reality as something that really is. For Freud, psychic reality is everything that in our minds takes on the force of reality, has all the consistency of the real, and on the basis of which we live our lives, understand the world, and act in it. Fantasy is the psychic mechanism that structures subjectivity by reworking or translating social representations into subjective representations and self-representations.

Film theory has analyzed the ways in which our capacity to fantasize is intensely stimulated in watching a fiction film. By engaging the spectator’s desire and identification in the scenarios and the movement of its narrative, the film moves us (in both senses of the word) along with it, binding fantasy to images; placing, shifting, and re-positioning the spectator as a figure in that imaginary, imaged world, as one present or emotionally participating in it. That is to say, the film constructs a narrative space (Heath 1980) and makes a place in it for those who watch it. The film’s construction of a field of vision and meaning that are perceived to originate in those who watch it produces the spectator as the point of its coherence; it thus contributes to the production of subject positions and the construction—more rarely, the deconstruction—of social, gendered identities for its viewers in the very process of viewing (a process that film theory calls spectatorship). This is another way of saying that the construction of a popular imaginary by means of cinematic representations, cinema’s public fantasies, produces in the spectators structures of cognition as well as feeling, what Gramsci calls “matrices in which thought takes shape out of flux,” and these interface and resonate with the subjective fantasy structures of individual spectators.

What I mean by public fantasies, then, are dominant cultural narratives and scenarios of the popular imagination that have been expressed in myths, medieval sagas, sacred texts, epics, and other forms of oral, written, or visual narrative that tell the story of a people, a nation, or a representative individual (Everyman) and reconstruct their origin, their struggles, and their achievements. We are all familiar with some of these narratives in Western cultures, from Homer and the Bible to the Niebelungenlied and Kalevala, from Dante’s Divina Commedia to Milton’s Paradise Lost, and their modern counterparts in cinema: Birth of a Nation, Potemkin, Triumph of the Will, Paisan, Ben Hur, Gone with the Wind, Apocalypse Now, Terminator,
and many more. All of them represent, through various types of conflicts and moral choices, the construction of Nation, of a new society, and the place of the individual as agent and subject in that new world.

Some public fantasies narrow their focus to the individual character's story or to one aspect of the individual's development in a struggle between good and evil, from *Faust* to *Raging Bull*, from *Madame Bovary* to *Now, Voyager*, from *The Wizard of Oz* to the hologram of Leonardo da Vinci in *Star Trek: Voyager*. Other times the focus is set on a particular locale or narrative topos in which are played out the conflicts and moral choices of the members of a specific group, for example, a family, a school, a prison camp, or the United States--Mexico border—from Orson Welles's classic *Touch of Evil* (1954) to John Sayles's recent *Lone Star* (1996).¹ A comparison of the last two films would serve quite well to illustrate beyond a doubt how the construction of a popular imaginary—what I call public fantasies—by means of cinematic representations does not merely take up but significantly rearticulates existing cultural narratives. That is to say, it reuses their structures and thematic concerns, but brings in new material, new contents, new characters or cultural agents, new issues and themes drawn from the contemporary world and its social arrangements.

Here, however, I will take as my case study a film which, in addition, explicitly thematizes the effects of public fantasies on individual lives. David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* (USA, 1993) takes up and makes use of a dominant cultural narrative, although one not epic but sentimental and yet equally concerned with a "universal" problem: the questions of desire, of the cultural and racial other, and the so-called difference between the sexes. As its title suggests, the film re-proposes a stereotyped image of femininity, made popular by the heroine of Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*; but it does so in light of contemporary discourses on gender, sexuality, and racial-cultural difference from the vantage point of postcoloniality. In re-presenting it with another cast of characters, the film at once deconstructs and reappropriates the narrative of feminine love and honor as eternal and selfless devotion to her husband and young son, built around the exemplary figure of Butterfly. It deconstructs it by showing it to be a Western patriarchal construct and an orientalist fantasy based on hierarchies of gender, race, and colonial and political domination. It reappropriates it by showing the narrative's enduring power to affect and even shape individual lives precisely because it works in the cultural imaginary as a fantasy, as "something deeply felt and experienced."

¹ I am indebted to Luz Calvo, a doctoral candidate in History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz, for her comparative reading of the two films (Calvo 1998).
M. Butterfly is about that fantasy and is itself, in turn, a fantasy that links three continents and two centuries, that connects North America and Europe via Asia and reconnects the popular epic form of our century, cinema, with its nineteenth-century equivalent, opera. But the Butterfly fantasy did not originate with the opera that has made it famous worldwide. It already had a cosmopolitan history of its own when Puccini set it to music.

Birth of a fantasy
Its history begins in yet another genre of popular culture, travel literature, and from there the fantasy is reinscribed, translated, and transformed in other popular genres—the short story, personal diary, drama, opera, and film. In the process, the heroine's name changes from Chrysanthème (O-kiku-san) to Butterfly (Cho-cho-san) to Song Liling. To give just a very brief summary of her incarnations, she first appeared in 1887, when a French naval officer, Julien Viaud, published an account of his sojourn in Japan and his temporary marriage to a young woman of Nagasaki named O-kiku-san (Chrysanthemum). The book was titled Madame Chrysanthème (1887) and its author's name (a pseudonym) was Pierre Loti (1850–1923). More a travel book than a love story, Madame Chrysanthème was very successful; it fit into the vogue for the exotic, the Oriental, and in particular the fascination that the West—Europe and the United States—had for Japanese culture, art, and design in the second half of the nineteenth century, no doubt encouraged by Japan's opening of its ports to Western trade and travel around 1860. The story Loti told was not new, as Western sailors frequently engaged in temporary unions with Japanese

2 When I presented a version of this essay at the Seventh Tampere Conference on North American Studies in Finland, a member of the audience, who was herself a speaker at the conference, Professor Chalermsri Chantasingh of Silpakorn University in Thailand, very kindly informed me that a play drawn from the Butterfly story is performed in her country, without music and with Thai setting and characters. In the Japanese city of Nagasaki, a statue of Madama Butterfly, one arm outstretched toward the bay and the other holding her young son, is a favorite tourist attraction. I was told that an aria from Puccini's opera was played at the opening ceremony of the 1988 Winter Olympics in Japan, while the female athlete Midori Ito carried the torch, dressed in what Westerners saw as a Butterfly costume. (Thanks to Judith Howard and Amy Singer.)

3 For the genealogy of the Madama Butterfly character, I am indebted to Delpeut 1994. Delpeut, however, reports Loti's real name as Theodore Viaud, instead of Julien Viaud (compare Grand Larousse encyclopédique, 6:857). An Italian commentator of Loti's Madame Chrysanthème states that her real name, as reported by Loti in a letter to his mother, was Okané-san (Catalano 1941, 78). I owe the latter information to Nerina Milletti.
women. But the success of *Madame Chrysantheme* owed more to Western fascination with the Orient and Loti’s descriptions of life in Japan than to its heroine, whom her husband depicted as rather surly, dull, and unresponsive; so much so that when he left her, declaring the marriage failed, she practically rejoiced in the end of an advantageous economic transaction.

This businesslike character of Loti’s Chrysantheme, her lack of shame over selling her body to a Westerner, and her emotional independence from her “husband,” were not acceptable to the authors of her next two incarnations: in 1893 she reappeared as the lead role in an opera by André Messager (libretto by Georges Hartmann and André Alexandre), *Madame Chrysantheme*, that was popular until the beginning of this century; and in 1894, as the author of a “diary,” *Le Cahier Rose de Mme Chrysantheme*, actually written by the French illustrator and Japanologist Félix Régamey, which retells the story of Loti’s marriage to Chrysantheme from her point of view and as if written by her. Already by this (her third) reincarnation, in only seven years, Chrysantheme has become the tragic heroine that will be Butterfly: she’s been seduced and abandoned; she’s love-stricken and contemplating suicide.

She next appears in the United States, four years later, in a short story by John Luther Long published in *Century Magazine*. Although Long acknowledges Loti’s book as his source, her name is now Madame Butterfly (Cho-cho-san) and the cynical “husband” is an American navy officer named Pinkerton. The fantasy is here approaching its final form of melodrama, as we know it from Puccini’s opera, but it still has something of a happy ending in that now Butterfly gives birth to a son and, when Pinkerton returns accompanied by his legal American wife, Butterfly runs away to live together with her child. However, her suicide is fated to come with the next incarnation in David Belasco’s one-act play, written in collaboration with Long and also titled *Madame Butterfly*, which opened in 1900 and which the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini happened to see at its London premiere.

On Belasco’s play, as well as all the previous ones, is based the classic version of the fantasy, Puccini’s opera *Madama Butterfly*. Here Cho-cho-san, cast out by her family for marrying the Westerner, cursed by the high priest, abandoned by Pinkerton, also loses her child, whom she gives up so he can live the good life in America, and kills herself with the dagger of her father. The ritual suicide (*seppuku*) restores her honor.

Those being the early, heady days of cinema, it is not surprising that Butterfly found its way into three silent films as well. In the United States, it served as a Mary Pickford vehicle, a *Madame Butterfly* directed by Sidney Olcott in 1915 and based on Long’s story. In Germany, in 1919, Fritz Lang directed a film known as *Hara Kiri* but whose only surviving copy,
found in the Nederlands Filmmuseum, bears the title *Madame Butterfly* and the subtitle *Naar de Wereldberoemde Opera in zes acten* (after the world-renowned opera in six acts). Again in the United States, in 1922, Chester Franklin directed *The Toll of the Sea*, with Anna May Wong as Lotus Flower rescuing a Pinkerton character (named Allen Carver) washed ashore and nearly drowned. Although set in China—like Cronenberg’s film—the screenplay by Marion Francis follows Long’s *Madame Butterfly* to the point of giving exact quotations from it in the intertitles.

By the mid-1920s the vogue of japonisme, chinoiseries, and so forth, was over, but the sentimental tale of Chrysantheme/Butterfly had taken root in the Western cultural imaginary and could live on by any other name: Japan and China were interchangeable loci, stage sets, or intimations of an orientalist fantasy that, in Cronenberg’s words, has now become “a cultural truism.” It is not a coincidence that the best known version of her story, and the one the film utilizes, is, in fact, the opera *Madama Butterfly*, composed by Puccini, which was first performed at La Scala in Milan in 1904 and has been on every opera company repertoire ever since. (As Gramsci said, opera is “the most pestiferous.”)

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, in these times of multinational finances and information superhighways, Cronenberg’s film *M. Butterfly* refigures in contemporary terms the cosmopolitanism and romantic sensibility that belonged to opera in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. The film displays the features of popular epic noted by Gramsci—cosmopolitan setting and plot, romantic sensibility—but reframes the narrative in the ironic mode of postmodernist aesthetics, articulating it to the cultural issues of gender, race, and sexuality in a postcolonial West.

### M. for trouble

*M. Butterfly* is a film made by a Canadian director, produced in the United States, and in part financed by Japan’s Sony Corporation. The film is based

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4 The names are changed: Cho-cho-san becomes O-Take-san (played by Lil Dagover) and Pinkerton becomes Olaf J. Anderson. Interesting detail: he buys her freedom from a brothel, so the marriage is not a question of lust but a question of honor.

5 *The Toll of the Sea* was a promotion for Technicolor’s new two-color filmstock, blue-green and dark red (according to Delpeut 1994, 22). In a remarkable instance of intertextuality, whether intentional or not, the star of this film, Anna May Wong, appears in *M. Butterfly* on a magazine cover as one of the models of femininity that Song Liling follows in his construction of himself as a modern-day, Chinese Butterfly.

6 The libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa reached its definitive version in 1907.

7 Some of the information given in this paragraph comes from *M. Butterfly*'s press release. I am much indebted to Jim Schwenterley, owner of the Nickelodeon Theatre in Santa Cruz, for facilitating my research on this and many other films.
on a play by a Chinese-American playwright, David Hwang (1988), which is in turn based on a New York Times Magazine story about the treason trial of a French embassy attaché and a Beijing opera singer (Wadler 1993). The title and the storyline refer to an Italian opera about a Japanese geisha and an American navy officer. The setting of the film—China during the 1960s cultural revolution and Paris during the student uprising of May 1968—is as exotically distant from Toronto, Canada (Cronenberg’s hometown and the setting of many of his films) as the Japanese port of Nagasaki, home of the fictional Butterfly, was from the European audiences of Puccini’s opera. Most of the scenes set in Paris were actually filmed in Budapest, except for the brief shot of Jeremy Irons (playing René Gallimard) on a motorcycle riding past Notre Dame. The Red Guard parade in Beijing that culminates in the burning of Peking Opera costumes was filmed with 500 extras from Toronto’s Chinese community dressed in Red Guard uniforms made in France.

So the cosmopolitanism of opera is inscribed in the very production of the film, as well as, of course, its international distribution. But what of the romantic sensibility today, in a world where issues are less international than global, where the relations among peoples and countries are defined by postcoloniality, and aesthetic representation is under the aegis of postmodernism? The title of the film provides the first indication of this different cultural climate: M. Butterfly, where the M. cannot possibly mean Madame or Miss or Mrs.—or even Ms. Even for those who do not know that M. stands for Monsieur in French, there is already something troubling, something off-key in the title. That something, which the film will reveal to be a trouble with gender, is the first of several ways in which the film’s recasting of the Butterfly story will trouble, ironize, deconstruct, and ultimately reappropriate the dominant narrative.

First, “Butterfly” reincarnated in Song Liling (played by John Lone) turns out to have a male body, to be a spy for the People’s Republic, and to be familiar with the opera plot to the point of pretending to have given birth to a child: “I need a baby, a Chinese baby with blond hair,” he sarcastically demands of comrade Chin, the utterly unfeminine woman who is his Party contact. I say “he” because it is precisely in this scene that the spectators are informed, just in case we missed it before, that Song is a man. But the

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8 Credits for M. Butterfly (Geffen Pictures, USA, 1993) include: directed by David Cronenberg, with Jeremy Irons (René Gallimard), John Lone (Song Liling), Barbara Sukowa, and Ian Richardson; produced by Gabriella Martinelli; director of photography, Peter Suschitzky; screenplay by David Henry Hwang, based on his play; music by Howard Shore; edited by Ronald Sanders; production designer, Carol Spier; costume designer, Denise Cronenberg.

9 Speaking of his film in relation to Neil Jordan’s The Crying Game, which was released when M. Butterfly was in production, Cronenberg states: “The Crying Game made that thing
problem of how to refer to Song Liling remains, as we shall see, a constant reminder of the constructedness of gender and its overdetermination by language.

A second troubling of the popular narrative is that Song is perfectly aware that the Butterfly story comes from a Western fantasy of the Orient that is orientalist, in the sense specified by Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978); that is to say, a fantasy of the Orient that is inflected by the political and economic interests of Western imperialism and by its ideology of racial supremacy. Song is quite scornful of it, and so informs Gallimard in their first conversation: "It's your fantasy, isn't it? The submissive Oriental woman and the cruel white man."

And yet — here is a third, more troublesome twist — Song willingly plays the role of Butterfly and risks the labor camp for the sake of his desire and his forbidden homosexual relationship with René. His Butterfly is not a victim of the colonial master, the "white devil," or a passive object of his desire; Song Liling's Butterfly is not guileless and not passive, not an object but indeed the subject — the conscious and willful subject — of a fantasy that sustains the agency of his own desire ("I invented myself just for him," Song says at the trial). In Hwang's play, Song is already a spy before meeting Gallimard; in Cronenberg's film, he becomes one in order to continue their relationship. The four shots of the servant Shu Fang watching their first sexual encounter through the window do not simply signify voyeurism, as we may at first assume, but have a narrative function: they tell us why Song must "spy." For Shu Fang will inform the Party cadre, Comrade Chin, that Song is carrying on a (homo)sexual affair, and Comrade Chin will then pay her visit to Song. Thus, when Song says, "As we embark on the most forbidden of loves, I'm afraid of my destiny," he knows that his destiny is not only that of Butterfly, abandonment and death; in the historical context of the film's setting, China during the Cultural Revolution, embarking on the most forbidden of loves, that is, homosexuality, is most likely to earn him imprisonment in a labor camp. While both the film and the play contain an explicit political critique of the Western orientalist fantasy, for Cronenberg, in particular, "there is no politics without human desire and madness," and that is to say, there is no politics without fantasy (Rodley 1993, 184–85). Fantasy and desire are what move human beings and cannot be separated off from any form of two men having a love affair — where one didn't know that the other one was a man — kind of sweet and innocent and pure and, in a weird way, not threatening. . . . I think it's because she (Jaye Davidson) really is a woman, even though she's got a cock. . . . That's why I wanted John Lone, not the equivalent of Jaye Davidson. I didn't want an unknown who was incredibly female, who was like a wonderful drag queen and almost undetectable. I wanted a man. When Gallimard and Song are kissing I wanted it to be two men. I wanted the audience to feel that" (Rodley 1993, 180).
of human agency, whether it is expressed in art, in daily living, or in political action.

A further, ironic troubling of the popular narrative is that the role or, I should rather say, the soul of Butterfly transmigrates from one character, Song Liling, to the other, crossing gender, cultures, and bodies. In the end, it is Gallimard, formerly the Pinkerton character, whose self-inflicted death we watch as a cheap tape recorder blares the famous aria of Puccini's opera. He, too, becomes Butterfly in an elaborate tragic performance in which we see him putting on costume and makeup as he speaks: he literally becomes Butterfly under our eyes. As we watch his transformation on the prison stage, our look is multiplied by those of the prison inmates who are Gallimard's diegetic audience.

M. for mirror
The film presents the figure Butterfly as a narrative image, an image that sums up and evokes the cultural narrative popularized by Puccini's opera. But M. Butterfly re-presents Madama Butterfly as a mirror construction, a mise-en-abîme: it reframes the opera as a mirror for the film's two male protagonists.10 The story of Butterfly is encased and relayed to the spectator by the story of Song and René, who mediate the spectator's access to the Butterfly fantasy—for thus the film represents the story: as a public fantasy that has acquired a life of its own beyond the opera, but whose power to incite desire is most effective through its formal configuration in the opera. In turn, Song and René mirror the spectator's relation to the film, demonstrating the ways in which a public fantasy (an opera, a film) may elicit spectatorial, subjective desire.

The mirroring is achieved by formal means. For example, the awareness on the part of the characters that Butterfly is a fantasy is relayed back to the spectators by a particular articulation of the looks: looking at the screen, we see René looking at Song during the recital, and later as he performs at the Beijing opera; we see René looking and listening to the opera, and jumping in, as it were, to assume a place in it. The repeated framing of René as spectator of a performance (even as he listens to the French consul, the seating arrangement is formal, theatrical; and even during the brief sequence of the trial, in which we see only Song testify, René

10 "MISE-EN-ABIME refers to the infinite regress of mirror reflections to denote the literary, painterly or filmic process by which a passage, a section or sequence plays out in miniature the processes of the text as a whole" (Stam, Burgoyne, and Flitterman-Lewis 1992, 201).
appears as the spectator of yet another performance, Song’s performance as a male spy) is so insistent throughout the film that we must come to see ourselves, in turn, as spectators of a performance, of a fantasy, and of the film, whether or not we are caught up in its fantasy.

Song Liling as well, after their first encounter, assumes a place in what he knows to be a fantasy, and begins playing the role of Butterfly. His performance is doubly coded as such because he already plays a similar role in his daily work as an actor of the Beijing opera; and in traditional Chinese opera, much as on the Elizabethan stage, only men were allowed to act, some of them trained from childhood to play exclusively female roles. (That a role similar to Butterfly’s was a staple of Chinese opera may be known from another film released coincidentally the same year, Farewell My Concubine, by the Chinese director Chen Kaige.) The framing of Song as Butterfly, as well, constructs a vision of femininity for the spectator that is not the femininity of Puccini’s Butterfly but that of the film’s fantasy: either he’s framed by a door or a curtain, usually at center screen, as if making the diva’s grand entrance (after the recital, emerging from the building and descending the stairs; in the Beijing opera dressing room his face is framed by a white curtain; at the trial the heavy doors swing open as he enters flanked by two guards) or he’s framed in a corner, barely visible, huddled on the stairs with the baby like a mannerist madonna, or hiding on the staircase outside René’s apartment. He’s both a glamorous diva and a demure, self-effacing little woman, the two extremes of the feminine.12 Many of these shots are not subjective or strictly from the point of view of René, who is often included in the frame as a spectator, just as we are. The last shots of the film are only for us: Song sits in the airplane about to fly back to China, dressed as a man, and no longer a prisoner of the French government (his handcuffs are removed). But even here we are addressed as spectators of a performance: when the airplane door is shut, in the very last image of the film, it has the effect of a curtain falling.

11 Incidentally, John Lone was himself trained as an actor by the Beijing Opera in Hong Kong, a repertory company that had fled China during the cultural revolution. In the performance of Song Liling, the “concubine” role he plays is from a 500-year-old opera titled “Drunken Beauty,” in which a woman is driven to drink after being rejected by her Emperor lover. John Lone himself sings the part that we watch, together with René, at the theatre.

12 In addition to his training as an actor of the Beijing opera, which certainly contributes to the queenly elegance of his performance of an opera diva, as well as his rendition of the character of Butterfly, John Lone chose always to appear as a woman during the film’s production, according to the director: “John Lone was a very strong presence on set. There was a lot of interesting stuff going on between John and Jeremy. . . . He was so scrupulous about being a woman on set. He wanted Jeremy to not ever see him as a man. He really was the girl on the set and that was great. If you needed femaleness, he was it” (Rodley 1993, 177).
With the significant individual contributions of actors, their performances and/or star personas, of camera operators, image and sound editors, and so forth, cinema constructs its own scenario of desire in the film. Consider, for example, the soundtrack. The operatic arias and orchestral movements, the Schubert quartet, and the Chinese music associated with Song Liling work as an apparatus of spectatorial interpellation: they call to us, draw us into the passion, the longing, the sadness of Song and René, pulling us into the aural space of a fantasy which is not that of the opera but the film’s own operatic fantasy.

And so, watching the film, anyone must realize that Madama Butterfly is not merely an opera, which one may or may not have seen or heard: it is a Western cultural fantasy based on a stereotype of femininity, a femininity that can be put on as a costume, can be performed as an effective masquerade by anyone, woman or man, who has compelling reasons to do so.

David Hwang notes that, when he got the idea for the play from the New York Times news story, he had never seen the opera:

I didn’t even know the plot of the opera! I knew Butterfly only as a cultural stereotype; speaking of an Asian woman, we would sometimes say, “She’s pulling a Butterfly,” which meant playing the submissive Oriental number. Yet, I felt convinced that the libretto would include yet another lotus blossom pining away for a cruel Caucasian man, and dying for her love. Such a story has become too much of a cliche not to be included in the archetypal East-West romance. . . . Sure enough, when I purchased the record, I discovered it contained a wealth of sexist and racist cliches. (1988, 86)

Cronenberg, in discussing with Hwang the screenplay he was adapting from his own stage play, insisted that Gallimard need not have ever heard of the opera; for the figure of Butterfly, the cliche of the submissive oriental woman, is “a cultural truism”: “technically you could take any man off the street in Western culture and he would believe all of these things. He doesn’t have to ever have seen Madame Butterfly” (Rodley 1993, 173).13

The film explicitly evokes the figure of Butterfly as a cliche, a stereotype set in a threadbare orientalist narrative, which, nevertheless, like many other public fantasies, still has the power of “something deeply felt and experienced.” The work of the film is to analyze that power, to show how the public fantasy translates into a subjective fantasy and is experienced as an erotic fantasy by both René and Song, informing the scenario or mise-

13 Cronenberg himself may have seen it, but he has the title wrong—Madame instead of Madama—which unwittingly proves his point: anyone knows what Butterfly stands for.
en-scène of their desire; in other words, to show how the stereotype becomes a fetish.\textsuperscript{14} For in the figure of Butterfly the performance of femininity actually comes to embody it, for both men, regardless of anatomy; and in this sense Butterfly is a fetish or fantasy object that sustains their different desires.

The power of fantasy to elicit desire is represented cinematically—visually and aurally, by the specific codes of narrative cinema—in a scene, near the beginning, when Gallimard first sees Song Liling on stage during the recital at the embassy. René is sitting next to Frau Baden, the German woman with whom he will have his only extra-extramarital affair, and she’s telling him the bare bones of the opera plot. Song enters singing and René is transfixed.

Song’s entrance is filmed in a very long shot, with the camera positioned behind the seated audience; the music on the soundtrack is from Butterfly’s entrance in Act I of the opera. Then the camera cuts to a medium shot of Gallimard and Frau Baden seated among the audience and talking. Then cut again to the stage with Song in a long shot singing, while the camera pans slowly left to right. This shot/reverse-shot pattern is repeated twice, and each time the camera cuts to the stage, a new aria is being sung (“Vogliatemi bene” on the wedding night in Act I and “Un bel di” from Act II), condensing real time to film time and suggesting the elliptic temporality of fantasy. In the third reverse shot of Gallimard, the camera zooms slowly from a medium distance to a close-up of his face. Then again cut to Song, still in long shot; that is, the focal distance has not changed, the camera is still at the same distance from the stage, giving us the point of view of Gallimard, whose distance from the stage is, of course, fixed. Then, in the next shot of Gallimard, he sits up, moves his body forward as if to see better, and moves into a (profilmic) light that illuminates the upper half of his face; this creates the impression that he is transfixed, for the light that shines on his eyes seems to come from inside him, as if he were suddenly lit up by an internal source—desire. (Note how this formal, rigorous framing of Song in long shot during the entire scene is more effective to convey René’s fascination than a zoom on Song would have been.)\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} As Homi Bhabha has argued in another context, the stereotype works as a fetish that constructs the subject in colonial discourse by both recognizing and disavowing cultural difference (see Bhabha 1994, 66–84).

\textsuperscript{15} A passage in Christian Metz’s theory of cinema as “imaginary signifier” accounts for the effectiveness of such a technical choice. Cinema, he argues, in eliciting the spectator’s desire to see, engages what psychoanalysis calls the scopic drive (scopophilia, pleasure in looking) and the invocatory drive (Lacan’s pulsion invocante, pleasure in hearing). “The ‘perceiving drive’—combining into one the scopic drive and the invocatory drive—concretely represents
What this sequence of shots suggests is that the fantasy is being born before his eyes, reborn in his imagination, even without costumes, sets, or orchestra: something in the story, the music, the white-clad oriental woman on stage resonates with something in René, like an unconscious fantasy suddenly breaking through into preconscious thought. He will fill out the details of plot and mise-en-scène later on, buying the record, going to the opera, and so on, throughout his life; but the desire is born with the slightest sketch of the narrative figure of Butterfly and the epiphanic sight of her embodied in Song Liling on the stage. Thus the public fantasy expressed in the opera becomes René’s private, subjective fantasy; at first inchoate, merely the intimation of another scene, then actively, consciously reconstructed as the compelling and exclusive scene of his desire. For the rest of the film, René and Song will work at restaging the complete scenario of the fantasy in ever fuller, more elaborate details, following the script provided by the opera unto its bitter end. And switching places against their will. Song’s participation in the intersubjective construction of the fantasy that sustains their different desires is as crucial as the opera that gives it formal expression.

Direct references to opera in various forms of cultural circulation are interspersed throughout the film: after the recital at the Swedish Embassy where they meet, René looks at the album in his office; his wife hums a few notes of Madama Butterfly’s most popular aria. René first visits the Beijing opera in its traditional form, where Song performs “Drunken Beauty”; on his second visit, he finds a cheery, Cultural Revolution version of Chinese opera. Song at the labor camp turns when the Butterfly aria suddenly plays on the soundtrack, as if beckoning him—bridging spatial and temporal discontinuity in the manner of the dreamwork; the next shot takes us (with him) to the Paris opera house where René sits watching/listening to Puccini’s opera, crying. At home in his Paris apartment René plays a recorded version of the opera just before Song calls his name and then appears, as if conjured up by the music (which is, in fact, the humming chorus preceding the entrance of Butterfly). Last comes René’s performance of Butterfly in prison.

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the absence of its object in the distance at which it maintains it and which is part of its very definition: distance of the look, distance of listening. . . . If it is true of all desire that it depends on the infinite pursuit of its absent object, voyeuristic desire . . . is the only desire whose principle of distance symbolically and spatially evokes this fundamental rent [the subject’s separation from the desired object]” (Metz 1982, 59–60).

16 The aria played on the cassette tape is “Un bel di,” and not “Addio, piccolo iddio,” which in the opera is the death scene of Butterfly, saying goodbye to her son. Here the substitution is motivated, as the child is irrelevant to Gallimard.
These recurrent references to the opera in its ability to cross cultures and to appeal to multiple sensory registers (visual, aural, and tactile) emphasize the perceptual quality of fantasy as origin and support, prop and mise-en-scène of the subject’s desire. They not only have the function of referring the characters, and the spectator, back to the cultural narrative that shapes the fantasy of René and Song and may fulfill itself in them but further, in three of the sequences mentioned, the operatic music produces for the spectator a special effect of perceptual presence. We know, of course, that when Song at the labor camp turns screen-right, he does not actually hear the aria that we hear recorded on the soundtrack; and that his materializing outside René’s apartment is not an effect of the Dolby sound system. We may also know that it is the narrativity of the operatic music, its linking of musical phrases and motifs to characters and events in the drama, that produces the spectatorial expectation of Song’s appearance while the record plays the humming chorus (just as Butterfly appears in the opera) and joins China to Paris as Butterfly sings her fantasized reunion with Pinkerton. We may know. But we suspend our disbelief because the music’s narrative charge, redoubled by the cinematic narrative construction and conveyed by the “imaginary signifier” of cinema, confers to what we see and hear the perceptual dimension of the real, as in a dream or a hallucination. This effect is also mirrored for us in the final prison scene, when René looks at himself made up as Butterfly in the mirror with which he cuts his throat; he actually sees the Butterfly that his words and the music have conjured up, and he thus experiences her death with all his senses.

In other words, the recurrent references to the opera contribute to represent or make present the fantasy as something perceptually experienced, drawing us into its visual and aural space, and punctuating it with the rhythm of an obsession. They are insistent, even didactic indications of how a public fantasy may take hold in a particular subjectivity or, rather, in two quite distinct subjectivities, and work for them as a private fantasy and all-consuming passion. For if Song is willing to risk the labor camp or worse for the sake of his desire, René jeopardizes his career and eventually

17 See Metz 1982, 44–45: “What is characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, but the imaginary that it is from the start, the imaginary that constitutes it as a signifier. . . . The activity of perception which it involves is real (the cinema is not a fantasy), but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its replica in a new kind of mirror.” And Jean-Louis Baudry: “The cinematographic apparatus is unique in that it offers the subject perceptions ‘of a reality’ whose status seems similar to that of representations experienced as perception. [The wish for cinema] consists in obtaining from reality a position, a condition in which what is perceived would no longer be distinguished from representations” (1976, 120–21).
loses his job as the fantasy becomes his psychic reality, impinging on his judgment and inflecting his reading of political events in the outside world. René misreads China’s attitude toward the United States during the Vietnam War because he projects his own Butterfly fantasy onto the two countries, China being, of course, identified with Song and the United States with himself. The imbrication of the personal in the political and the projection of private fantasies into the public sphere are the flip side of the effects of public fantasy in subjectivity.

**M. for masquerade**

The film re-presents the Butterfly fantasy inscribed in Puccini’s opera (the diegetic fantasy) as pursued and reenacted by Song and René, and at the same time deconstructs it, showing the ideological presumption of hierarchy implicit in the opposite pairs East and West, woman and man, female and male, self and other. In so doing, however, the film stages its own fantasy of Butterfly as an orientalist fantasy that is shared and consciously orchestrated by two men—one Asian and one European, one homosexual and one heterosexual—a fantasy that, for one of them, will mean psychic disintegration, loss of self, and death. But it will be René, the white man, the Pinkerton character, who dies Butterfly’s death in the film. How can we read this reversal?

In narratological terms, the narrative that forms the setting of the fantasy must be played out to its ending, for all stories must end; happily or tragically, an ending is necessary to a story. But the tragic ending of the nineteenth-century Butterfly story need not be repeated in its postmodern replay. Indeed, if we saw the film as Song Liling’s story, its ending would not be tragic, merely unhappy. *M. Butterfly*, however, tells René’s story. In the director’s stated intention, the film is about the inner transformation of a man; and Cronenberg will tell the story of the Western heterosexual man, although he means to cast doubts as to who or what that man really is by looking into the murky areas of his psyche (Rodley 1993).18

The transformation of René into Butterfly, in which the difference of the film’s fantasy from the diegetic fantasy is most apparent, occurs after

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the trial and the revelation that Song is a man. When, on their way to
prison, in the paddy wagon scene, Song, naked at his feet, tries to convince
René to accept the Butterfly fantasy as a gay fantasy ("under the robes,
beneath everything, it was always me... I am your Butterfly"), René re-
jects him, saying: "I'm a man who loved a woman created by a man. Any-
thing else simply falls short." He cannot accept Song's transvestite fantasy
of Butterfly, ostensibly because his fantasy is heterosexual; one could say,
heterosexist. But what is a woman created by a man if not the masquerade
of femininity? Then it is not the revelation of Song's maleness—which
René has obviously disavowed, known and not known, all along—that
causes him to lose his love object, but the end of the masquerade. With it
comes the realization that what he loved was not Song but Butterfly, the
masquerade of femininity; that the object of his desire is a fantasy object,
Butterfly, and that object alone can sustain his desire.

Butterfly, then, is a fetish in the classical, psychic sense defined by Freud:
it is an object which wards off the threat of castration always looming
above the male subject and allays his fear of homosexuality. It is quite
literally an object, the sum of the accoutrements that make up the masquer-
ade of femininity: the oriental woman costume, the long black hair, the
face paint and rouge, the long red fingernails—all the props that René will
barter from the prison guard for his final performance. But the fetish is a
particular object, set in a mise-en-scène and a scenario, a narrative, from
which it acquires its psychic value as object and signifier of desire. This is
Butterfly, a fantasy object which enables René's desire and the very possibil-
ity of existing as a desiring subject, for desire is the condition of psychic

19 On the specific appeal of opera to gay spectators/listeners, their identification with oper-
atic heroines, and the fascination exerted by the figure of the prima donna (Callas above all),
see Koestenbaum 1993; Blackmer and Smith 1995; and Abel 1996.

20 Indeed, the film's representation of women is downright misogynist. As if to set off the
femininity of Song, all the female characters are constructed by similarity and high contrast
to "Butterfly": Gallimard's wife is ludicrous when, sitting in bed with a cold and blowing her
nose, she sings a few notes of "Un bel di" out of tune (and probably because of this soon
disappears altogether from the diegesis); Frau Baden's matter-of-fact attitude toward sex, no
less than her naked female body, only serves to incite Gallimard's desire for the white-robed,
reticent, prepubescent girl's body he imagines in Song; Comrade Chin, whom Gallimard
never sees, epitomizes the unwomanly woman—the masculinized, militarized, "communist,"
policewoman or prison matron—purely for the spectator's edification; and the servant Shu
Fang, unlike Suzuki, her feminine counterpart in Puccini's opera, is genderless and merely
functional to the plot as "servant."

21 See Freud, "Fetishism" (1953–74, 21:152–57). I have attempted to define fetishism in
relation to homosexual/lesbian desire in The Practice of Love (de Lauretis 1994). However, the
classic Freudian definition pertains to Gallimard's heterosexual fetishism, where the fetish is
a substitute for the phallus.
existence. From the moment of this realization, having lost Butterfly in Song, René can only become the object of his desire, or lose it altogether. And he does both. His erotic and narcissistic investment in Butterfly is vital: he cannot let it go. So, first, he introjects the lost object, takes it into himself, identifies with it, and becomes Butterfly. Then, the fantasy fulfills itself in him, for, paradoxically, only her immolation to him will prove that he is the powerful/potent man who can be loved forever by the perfect woman.

Another reading is possible in metapsychological terms. With his last words, he identifies himself as “René Gallimard, also known as Madame Butterfly.” The transformation could be seen as the result of the psychic process that Freud names melancholia, a pathological condition of narcissism in which the ego identifies with the lost object. With the loss of the loved object, Freud writes in “Mourning and Melancholia,” the ego becomes completely impoverished, incapable of love or achievement; it regresses from narcissistic object choice (a love object chosen for its similarity with the subject) to narcissistic identification with the lost object. “The ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object—if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego’s original reaction to objects in the external world. . . . In the two opposed situations of being most intensely in love and of suicide the ego is overwhelmed by the object, though in totally different ways” (1953–74, 13:252).

The way of suicide, Freud clarifies, can occur when the love for the lost object was ambivalent; that is to say, mixed with resentment or hatred toward the one who has abandoned or betrayed us. It is the hatred toward the object, now introjected into the ego, that overwhelms the melancholic subject and produces the tendency to suicide. In “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” he speculates that “the riddle of life” consists in the co-presence of two opposing forces, the life instincts (Eros) and the death instincts, which “were struggling with each other from the very first” (1953–74, 18:61). In this perspective, René’s suicide is both the ultimate realization/consummation of the cultural fantasy (the death of Butterfly) and the representation of death at work in the cinema—the imbrication of the erotic drive in the death drive.

In all of Cronenberg’s films, the death drive is consistently represented in conjunction with the sexual drive, nowhere more explicitly—and indeed literally—than in Crash (1996), where the compulsion to repeat violent and traumatic experiences is intertwined with the sexual drive in the eroticization of traffic accidents. Speaking of his films, Cronenberg insists that death is only a transformation (compare the scene of the dragonfly in M. Butterfly, which was not in the script but was added by the director, on
impulse, during the shooting in Beijing). Here René's death is figured as a transformation that is more properly a transfiguration: what he sees in the mirror is both a death mask and a living legend, the fantasy of Butterfly come alive once more.

Thus the reading of René's suicide as an effect of melancholia does not contradict but rather complicates the interpretation of Gallimard/Butterfly's death scene as a supreme expression of fetishistic desire. For the latter is supported by several considerations. First, he ends his life with an elaborate, well-planned, public performance not suggestive of a melancholic subject but rather of a willful if deluded one. Second, with this performance he reaffirms his narcissism, his existence as subject of desire, his masculine potency: he has been loved by the perfect woman (the fetishist's phallic mother), and he is still loved by her since she is now about to die for him. Third, his restaging of the fetish-Butterfly in all the spectacular accoutrements of the masquerade, complete with the "immortal" music of Puccini's opera, bears witness to the rigid, formal, and compelling nature of the fetishistic fantasy. Finally, in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* the turn to the tragic ending also occurs with a revelation. When Cho-cho-san sees Pinkerton's American wife, who has come with him to take away her child, she realizes that she has been repudiated as wife: she has lost not only the objects of her love, Pinkerton and the child, but also her honor and, thus, the possibility of existence as social subject, which is defined, for a woman, by being a wife and a mother. When Song's maleness is revealed, René loses the possibility of existence as a desiring subject. Hence Cronenberg's brilliant idea to replace the *seppuku* dagger (symbol of social honor), not with its modern Western equivalent but with the mirror (symbol of narcissistic self-love), supports the interpretation of fetishism.

But René's death is not the apotheosis of a hero, does not result in the attainment of a higher order of knowledge, as does the death of Oedipus at Colonus, or in the creation of a new heroic legend of the birth of a nation in the way the legacy of Oedipus is the creation of the Athenian democratic state. René's death is the do-it-yourself replica of a worn cultural cliché on a makeshift institutional stage. In this regard, the manner of death is significant. The shard of mirror with which René kills himself is a densely polyvalent visual signifier, a poetic metaphor by which the film-text knots together multiple associative threads.\(^{22}\) Death by mirror on a

\(^{22}\) In metacinematic terms, the fact that we watch René seeing (himself as) Butterfly in the mirror not only brings home to the viewers the artificial, constructed nature of Butterfly as a figure of performance, a fantasy figure, but also represents in miniature, in an image, the film's construction of the fantasy as a *mise-en-abîme*, i.e., the fantasy of Butterfly within the
prison stage cannot but suggest the function of the psychoanalytic mirror stage defined by Lacan as the first matrix of the ego, an ego constituted by narcissistic, self-aggrandizing impulses and in the misrecognition of its mortality, its division, its death drive.

Western man looks into the mirror and sees the face of his other(s), an orientalist pastiche of Chinese and Japanese costume and makeup. This is the stereotype of the racial, cultural, and gendered other that he himself has constructed for his civilization, his history, his desire; and he is finally consumed like Frankenstein by his own creation, his own will to domination. In René Gallimard’s end — his name is the epitome of Western philosophy and French high culture: René for Descartes and Gallimard for the French publishing company — the discontents of Western civilization have come full circle, and the aggression that it had displaced onto its colonized others now turns around upon itself, upon the colonizer. The once mighty Western man is reduced to a pathetic figure in drag slumped on the prison floor in a heap of colored rags, without even the homage of a majestic panorama paid by Visconti to the protagonist of his Death in Venice.

And yet . . . what lives on through the repeat performance of Butterfly in Cronenberg’s film is the staging of the fantasy, the mise-en-scène of love and death in which the masquerade of femininity, the colonial fetish, Butterfly, sustains Western man’s desire, his capacity to disavow, his narcissistic self-absorption: “I’m a man who loved a woman created by a man. Anything else simply falls short.” Paradoxically, René must die Butterfly’s death so that his desire may live in the consummation of the fantasy, as eros, the vital principle, only ever delays the inexorable movement toward death. Just as Butterfly, time and again reborn with each performance, is the fetish that sustains René’s desire, cinema is a fetish that sustains our belief in the Western subject’s desire in postcolonial times.

The ability to hold two contrary beliefs, which Freud named disavowal (Verleugnung), is the psychic mechanism that sustains fetishistic desire. Cinema, with its lush scenarios, the privileged vision afforded by its close-ups, the mobility of its cameras, its image and sound editing techniques, the ever-renewed wonder of its special effects, endlessly rearticulates popular culture narratives, Shakespeare and the novel, opera and Oedipus, public and private fantasies, engaging the spectator’s identification and desire in what Coleridge, before Freud, named the “willing suspension of disbelief.” Christian Metz observes that the technical, material apparatus of cinema itself works as a fetish for the spectator. As the masquerade of feminin-

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*fantasy that is the film. It is not coincidental, I think, that this technique of visual and narrative construction, which in French is called *mise-en-abîme*, in English is called *mirror construction.*
ity in *M. Butterfly* is the fetish object that constitutes Butterfly as the body of desire, so is "the technical equipment of the cinema with respect to the cinema as a whole. A fetish, the cinema as a technical performance, as prowess, as an exploit, an exploit that underlines and denounces the lack on which the whole arrangement is based (the absence of the object, replaced by its reflection), an exploit which consists at the same time of making this absence forgotten. The cinema fetishist is the person who is enchanted at what the machine is capable of, at the *theater of shadows* as such" (Metz 1982, 74, emphasis in original).

In this sense Cronenberg's film is also a metacinematic meditation on cinematic fetishism, on cinema itself as fetish, fantasy object, spectacular performance, and artifice. *M. Butterfly* 's masquerade of femininity mirrors the masquerade that is cinema, relaying its effect as a fantasy object that sustains the illusion of desire. Perhaps this is what underlies the popularity of cinema and its capacity to entertain (etymologically, hold between), to capture the look and solicit identifications, to position and hold the spectator between its shots, its images and sounds. In the particular fetish objects of cinema's fantasy scenarios, as in the very essence of cinema as fetish, one can find and live the fantasy of existing as a desiring subject.

**Cinema's fantasies**

With the term fantasy I have designated both the activity of fantasizing, whether individual or collective, and its products—an imaginary scene, an imagined scenario, a mise-en-scène, a fictional world. These may be represented mentally, as in subjective fantasies (imagining), expressed in private or semiprivate situations, or may be constructed materially (imaging) in cinema, opera, and other public contexts of performance. Cronenberg's film is at once the public representation of a fantasy and an exploration of the effects of public fantasies on the private fantasies of individuals; it thus lends itself particularly well to an analysis of the different aspects and levels of fantasy in the cinema.

*M. Butterfly* is an ironic re-presentation—a deconstruction and a reapropriation—of the popular, public fantasy inscribed in Puccini's opera. The film ironizes and deconstructs the cultural narrative of femininity contained in the opera libretto by showing that it is an orientalist fantasy based on hierarchies of gender, race, and political domination; but it also appropriates that fantasy to its own ends. The film poses the questions of

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23 This is made explicit in Song's comment to Gallimard about the Japanese experiments on imprisoned Chinese women during the war.
fantasy and desire very directly and explicitly in relation to gender, sexuality, and racial-cultural difference in postcoloniality; these issues are completely imbricated in one another both in the relationship of Song and René and in their respective relations to the Butterfly fantasy. And just as they are caught up in the operatic scenario that sustains their respective desires, so is the spectator moved by the film’s narrative and its scenario of desire. As the opera mediates the relation of Song and René to the fantasy they share, articulating its desiring positions, they in turn mediate the spectator’s relation to the film’s fantasy and the desiring positions it inscribes.

Thus, in *M. Butterfly*, fantasy is not only a thematics but a *mise-en-abîme*, the structuring device of the film’s mirror construction. There are three levels of fantasy at work in the film:

1. **The diegetic fantasy.** — This is the fantasy portrayed in the world of the film, the fantasy of Butterfly as inscribed in Puccini’s opera and pursued, reenacted by the two characters.

2. **The film’s fantasy.** — Even as it deconstructs the diegetic fantasy as an orientalist fantasy, the film restages its own fantasy of Butterfly as an orientalist fantasy that is, nevertheless, shared by two men, one Asian and one European, one homosexual and one heterosexual, and sustains their sexual relationship and respective desires; a fantasy into which the film invites the spectator as a participant voyeur.

3. **The spectator’s fantasy.** — And then there is the fantasizing that the film elicits in its spectator. This is, of course, mental and subjective; moreover, a good deal of our fantasies remain unconscious. Thus spectatorial fantasies can only be glimpsed in the ways spectators respond to the film, in the effects of identification, pleasure and displeasure that the film produces in each viewer, traces of which may be found, for instance, in the reviews or critical readings of the film, including the one I’ve been sketching here.

Critics (who, of course, are first of all spectators) have tended to direct their attention to one or two of these issues in particular, seldom to all three, and have based their interpretations of the characters on the issue(s) emphasized. Thus they may have seen the same film and yet they have not seen the same film, for each reading or review suggests a subjective viewing, a particular take or entry into the film from a certain point of spectatorial identification. But, one may well ask, what does “seeing a film” mean? Insofar as the film is a text, there can be no one meaning, no definitive vision, no single, comprehensive or total view. Moreover, any object seen, be it represented or perceptual, be it image or object of the “real
world,” is an object of vision; that is to say, it is seen by a viewing subject through a purposeful attending and a selective gathering of clues which may cohere into meaningful percepts. While all seeing is selective and dependent on contextual expectations, seeing a film entails particular effects of identification with, as well as identification of, the objects seen (see Cowie 1997). The “willing suspension of disbelief” that marks our complicity in cinema’s fantasies also stimulates and elicits the activity of fantasizing in the spectator. In this sense, viewers may see the same film but produce different fantasies in relation to it.

When Cronenberg, speaking about his casting of Song Liling, says, “I wanted a man. When Gallimard and Song are kissing I wanted it to be two men. I wanted the audience to feel that,” he may be playing his own role of Hollywood’s enfant terrible, shocking the conservatives in the audience. For, when he discusses the film in interviews and states his ideas about characters’ motivations and his directorial choices, he expresses a view of sexuality that is quite conservatively framed by the traditional gender polarity of maleness and femaleness: “Sexuality has become detached from the physiology of reproduction and so it now is almost an abstract force,” a bisexual potential for self-creation and transformation, “an agreed-upon fantasy” between any two lovers, who play out “all the maleness and femaleness” between them (Rodley 1993, 180, 186, 184). For Cronenberg, then, sexuality is propped on gender performance—the qualities, gestures, behavior, masquerade of gender, rather than the bodies of the lovers. As in the science-fiction fantasy of Ursula LeGuin’s The Left Hand of Darkness, any two lovers in Cronenberg’s fantasy will always agree upon a fantasy in which one is the man and the other the girl: someone must be “the girl on the set,” and it will not be Gallimard, with whom Cronenberg identifies, as the pronoun “she” which he most often uses in reference to Song/Lone indicates. “The way I talked to John Lone about [the character] was that Song meets Gallimard, does her routine almost tongue in cheek, sees that he’s actually falling for it, gets him isolated from his embassy staff in case somebody tells him that she’s not a woman and sees how far she can go. She’s flattered, excited and aroused to have him start to fall in love with her and be seduced by her. And then she is caught with him” (Rodley 1993, 185).

The equivocation between gender and sexuality is apparent in the next

24 I have discussed this in “Imaging,” chap. 2 of de Lauretis 1984, 53–69.

25 To the extent that, in this interview, Cronenberg is stating his ideas, intentions, and opinions about the film, these may be considered part of the director’s fantasy, not of the film’s fantasy, which is the result of multiple agents with their own fantasies and desires.
sentence, which identifies Song as homosexual (as a man) and the director’s wish to shock his audience: “I added a shot — Song’s housemaid Shu Fang peeking through the window at them — on the day of shooting. I wanted to suggest that she blows the whistle on Song, who is then forced to spy, or it’s a serious labour camp for being a homosexual” (185).

And yet, in spite of the fact that he takes pains to make Song’s desire explicit in the film, in the climactic scene in the paddy wagon Song is no longer a homosexual but only the foil of Gallimard’s disenchantment: “Song is this creature: male, female, east, west, invented. Song is no longer this thing they created. . . . It’s really very applicable to a lot of normal relationships. A lot of marriages fall apart when that willed suspension of disbelief collapses and suddenly the thing that you’ve created together is not there any more. You see each other plain and you don’t like what you see because it’s not enough” (Rodley 1993, 183–84, emphasis added).

I emphasized the last sentence to point out that while “you see each other” ostensibly refers to both members of the couple, in fact it only refers to one: Song has always seen Gallimard “plain” but that, for him, is “enough.” For the director, then, the emotional point of view, his point of identification in the film’s fantasy, is Gallimard. While he casts two men in the film, still his fantasy is heterosexual: the scenario demands a girl (“the girl on the set”) to cajole and play to the man’s desire — just as in marriage (John Lone “really was the girl on the set and that was great. If you needed femaleness, he was it”).

Similarly, if with contrary emphasis, Richard Corliss, reviewing the film in *Time* magazine, decries Lone’s “5 o’clock shadow [which] gives him away to everyone but the diplomat.” The critic’s displeasure in the failed womanliness of Lone’s Butterfly is the flip side of the director’s pleasure in her “femaleness”: “If you needed femaleness, he was it.” And they do need it, they both see or need to see Song from the point of view of Gallimard — as a woman. Corliss’s fantasy of Butterfly, however, is perfectly embodied in another Chinese actor, “Leslie Cheung, the beautifully androgynous star of *Farewell My Concubine*. . . . He is enough woman for any man to fall for” (Corliss 1993, 85). Which is another way of saying, as Gallimard says: “I am a man who loves a woman created by a man. Anything else simply falls short.” In other words, the Butterfly fantasy also works for Corliss; it’s simply the “5 o’clock shadow” that doesn’t — that falls short, as it were.

Further extolling the charms of Leslie Cheung, Corliss describes the actor’s characterization of “a homosexual star of the Peking opera” in *Farewell My Concubine* as “both steely and vulnerable, with a sexuality that transcends gender — a Mandarin Michael Jackson” (1993, 85). One wonders what sort of sexuality the critic imagines such a character to have (Does
one have a sexuality as one has sex, or as one has, say, black hair?); moreover, what is a sexuality that transcends gender, although it evidently does not transcend race? \(^{26}\) Whatever it may be, clearly there is no possibility for the *Time* reviewer to own or identify with it: such a sexuality pertains to the other, Butterfly or Concubine, the Chinese actor(s), the homosexuals, the Michael Jacksons of various colors, who are “enough woman” for *any man* to fall for.

Many people, nowadays, use the word gender to speak of sexuality. The rhetorical confusion, when it is not equivocation, between two terms or discursive entities that, albeit mutually implicated, have very different histories and cultural locations, is rendered more acute by the media-generated public awareness of practices of transvestism, the choreography of transsexualism, and the growing currency of the term “transgender,” all of which are independent of sexual object-choice (i.e., their subjects or practitioners may desire or engage in heterosexual, same-sex, self-sex, heterogeneous-sex, even no-sex practices). The rhetorical assimilation of gender and sexuality serves many purposes, from euphemism in polite conversation to disrupting the moral status quo, all the way to the conceptual evacuation of the very terms “sexuality” and “gender”; and who stands to gain or to lose from rendering them indistinct is an interesting question that I must leave for another discussion. For the purposes of this discussion of the film *M. Butterfly*, I use the terms in the old-fashioned sense: gender for masculine or feminine identification; sexuality for heterosexual or same-sex desire. I noted earlier that the problem of how to refer to Song Liling by personal pronouns is a constant reminder of the discursive constructedness of gender. Now I will add that it is also a sign of spectatorial identification. For example, Cronenberg’s referring to Song as “she,” which signals his identification of Song as a woman (“Butterfly”), suggests his identification with Gallimard. Another spectator/critic refers to Song Liling as “she” but with a different set of identifications.

Rey Chow’s “The Dream of a Butterfly” (1995) is, to my knowledge, the most theoretically rich and historically contextualized critical reading of the film published to date. In many ways, my reading is in solidarity with hers. I concur with her assessment of the central role of fantasy in the film and with her argument against a simply “political,” didactic reading of the orientalist content of the fantasy. I admire her lucid discussion of Lacan’s

\(^{26}\) In light of this observation, that sexual fantasy is even more strictly bound to “racial” images than it is to gender, it may be pointed out that while *M. Butterfly* deconstructs the cultural narrative of “the oriental woman” Butterfly, it does nothing to deconstruct the equally orientalist stereotype of the feminized Asian man (see Fung 1991).
concept of the gaze in relation to the film. Moreover, Chow's reading of Song's masquerade of femininity is also similar to mine here, with one distinction. Whereas I call the femininity represented in (M.) Butterfly a fetish, Chow calls it the phallus: "Song exists for Gallimard as the phallus in Lacan's sense of the term" (74); thus, in the paddy wagon scene, when he undresses before Gallimard, "Song fails to see that what Gallimard 'wants' is not him, Song, be he in the definitive form of a woman or a man, but, as Gallimard says, 'Butterfly.' Because Gallimard's desire hinges on neither a female nor a male body, but rather on the phallus, the veiled thing that is the 'oriental woman,' Song's candid disclosure of his physical body . . . serves not to arouse but extinguish desire" (77).

The distinction between our two conceptualizations of the Butterfly trope in the film is the distinction between fetish and phallus. By saying that Song's Butterfly is the phallus, which must remain veiled, masqueraded ("the veiled thing that is the 'oriental woman'"), Chow adheres to the Lacanian definition of woman's position in desire: she wants to be the phallus, the signifier of the desire of the Other. But what about Song's desire? Since the Butterfly fantasy is also the scenario of Song's desire, to equate "Butterfly" with the phallus is to assume that Song's homosexual desire is from the position of a woman (woman as phallus). Which is to see homosexuality as sexual and gender inversion, in the old sexological formula that Lacan's theory raises to a higher level of abstraction. Here is where my reading and Chow's part ways or diverge—on the issue of the nature of desire and the conditions of spectatorial identification. Not surprisingly, the film elicits in me a very different fantasy.

Chow uses the feminine personal pronoun "she" to identify the character Song Liling by gender or self-presentation rather than by anatomical sex. While this may indicate respect for one's choice of gender identity, it ignores Song's homosexual desire. In this Chow follows Cronenberg and Hwang, both of whom deny or minimize the significance of Song's homosexual desire for René, although her identification, unlike theirs, is not with Gallimard but with Song; in other words, Chow's referring to Song

27 I have attempted to reformulate the fetish as the general term for the signifier of perverse desire, of which the phallus/penis may be a particular instance, in chaps. 5 and 6 of The Practice of Love (de Lauretis 1994).

28 "To me, this is not a 'gay' subject, because the very labels heterosexual or homosexual become meaningless in the context of this story. Yes, of course this was literally a homosexual affair. Yet because Gallimard perceived it or chose to perceive it as a heterosexual liaison, in his mind it was essentially so. Since I am telling the story from the Frenchman's point of view" (Hwang 1988, cited by Chow 1995, 89–90, n. 14).
as “she” signals her identification of Song as a woman, but also her identification with Song as a woman. However, if one defines Song as a woman solely on account of gender, without consideration of sexuality and desire, the motivation for his actions and his sexual relationship with René can only be a political one: Song is a spy, does what he does for the love of his country, not of René—a characterization the film ironizes (most evidently in the two scenes between Song and Comrade Chin) and openly disallows.29 Alternatively, Song’s motivation is one of anticolonial resistance and revenge: he just plays the role of Butterfly to turn the orientalist fantasy against its colonial, imperialist creator. In my view, the film also belies this reading, especially (but not only) in the paddy wagon scene after the trial, when Song tries in vain to convince René to accept his transvestite fantasy of Butterfly as a gay fantasy. There, when the spying game is all played out, it seems to me beyond doubt that, whatever else he may be, Song is a man who loves a man.

And yet, if one identifies Song as a woman, and with Song as a woman, one sees a different film. Chow, for example, writes: “At no moment in the film M. Butterfly does Song’s subjectivity and desire become lucid to us . . . until in the ‘showdown’ scene in the police van. In that scene, we see for the first time that what she ‘wants’ is a complete overturning of the laws of desire that have structured her relationship with Gallimard. In other words, in spite of her love for the Frenchman, what the ‘oriental woman’ wants is nothing less than the liquidation of his entire sexual ontological being—his death” (1995, 87).

After the paddy wagon scene, in which Song’s homosexual desire can no longer be in doubt, Chow’s interpretation moves to the allegorical level, and Song is read as a figure for the avenging “oriental woman” who, in the end, goes off in her airplane like Pinkerton on his ship, leaving the Western man to his demise, humbled as he had humbled Butterfly, the tables turned. Such an interpretation could be given of the text of the stage play and is, in fact, the interpretation favored by the playwright: “The Frenchman fantasizes that he is Pinkerton and his lover is Butterfly. By the end of the piece, he realizes that it is he who has been Butterfly, in that the Frenchman has been duped by love; the Chinese spy, who exploited

29 In the first of these scenes, Comrade Chin’s surprise visit finds Song reading glossy magazines (“decadent trash”). The one picked out by the camera features on its cover a color photo of the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong (see n. 5 above) who, as the camera seems to comment ironically, was a star in decadent and trashy Hollywood movies. What the camera does not suggest, but some spectators may recall, is that Wong was also known to appear in male drag.
that love, is therefore the real Pinkerton" (Hwang 1988, 86). However, this reversal of the roles of the dominant narrative, by ignoring Song’s desire, denies his subjectivity and turns him into a trope for political liberation, an allegorical figure, a counter-Butterfly, no less ideological than Puccini’s Cho-cho-san who wanted so much to be Mrs. Pinkerton, an American. But this is precisely the didactic interpretation that Chow herself wants to discredit.

The contradiction in Chow’s reading of the film suggests to me the active presence of a spectatorial fantasy: the spectator projects her own wish into the film’s scenario and narrative resolution, sees herself in—identifies with—the character of Song, and invests it with the role that she herself would play in the fantasy scenario; that is, the role of the woman who will not die for love of the imperialist, Western “devil” but wants his death instead, “the liquidation of his entire sexual ontological being.” This, however, is not a fantasy of vengeance or simple role reversal. In the brief coda that includes the last long passage quoted, Chow extends her reading of the film to pose anew the question of cultural and gender difference, making explicit the critical and political nature, as well as the subjective grounds, of her identification with Song as a woman: “By definition, the death of the white man signals the dawn of a fundamentally different way of coming to terms with the East. The film closes with ‘Butterfly’ flying back to China. This ‘oriental woman’ who existed as the white man’s symptom—what will happen to her now that the white man is dead? That is the ultimate question with which we are left” (1995, 87).

It seems to me that John Lone’s performance of the character, in keeping with Cronenbergs’ (re)vision, does not sustain such a reading and that Chow’s concluding question can only emerge as an effect of a compelling, political and personal, spectatorial fantasy. His expression as he sits on the plane, in male clothes, is not one of victory or revenge but one of sadness and loss. Closing as it does on this image of Song, the film reaffirms his presence as the man whom neither Gallimard nor the director (nor some spectators) can or wish to see. Or so it seems to me. For my spectatorial identification is also with Song although, from the beginning of the film, I identified him as a man, and hence have been referring to him by the masculine pronoun throughout this reading.

Concomitant with the necessary, narrative identification with Gallimard as the “hero” of the film, my fantasmatic identification is with Song. As far as I can know (or think I know), my spectatorial fantasy is based on his
politically incorrect desire, which exists in spite of his awareness of its orientalist, colonialist nature and indeed in spite of its impossibility. I identify with the predicament that Song not only exemplifies but also lives with conscious determination, for his desire is the predicament: he can be loved only as a woman created by a man and for a man— the predicament of femininity; he can be loved by a man only as a woman—the predicament of a homosexual in a heteronormative world. In other words, the predicament of desire: to be loved in a scenario in which your part is scripted by the other, and to be loved as a woman when one is not one.

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