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FROM MADAME BUTTERFLY TO MISS SAIGON: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF POPULAR ORIENTALISM

In the last hundred years the story of Madame Butterfly has been endlessly repeated and elaborated. As such, the Madame Butterfly myth has become a key orientalist intertext, beginning with Pierre Loti's Madame Chrysanthème (1887) as the original nineteenth century text and ending provisionally with Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's Miss Saigon (1989) as the most contemporary text of the Madame Butterfly narrative. The first text inspired subsequent texts, right through to today, when its basic premises are mostly being unquestioningly re-performed. Only recently have there been some texts that have seriously challenged and undermined the Madame Butterfly myth, signalling that although representation often depends on repetition, it also reflects change. The most significant of these texts are M. Butterfly (1992) by David Henry Hwang and David Cronenberg's movie of the same name (1993), for which Hwang wrote the screenplay and which he co-produced, and Dennis O'Rourke's film The Good Woman of Bangkok (1991), described by Chris Berry (1994) as "documentary fiction".

My reference to an unspecified 'Madame Butterfly' parallels and demonstrates the generic, or popular, use of the term that has become mythical. Roland Barthes (1973:118) writes that "myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things". He writes that "(i) is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth" (Barthes, 1973: 128). One will see how the Butterfly moves and reverberates, constantly reforming the meaning and the form of the myth. Madame Butterfly circulates, moving between cultures, genres, and genders.

The first Madame Butterfly story Madame Chrysanthème (1887) is a novel by Pierre Loti (pseudonym of Louis-Marie-Julien Viaud). As a naval officer, Loti went to the Middle and Far East, places that provided him with "exotic" adventures and material for his writing. He was a prolific writer who was widely read. Madame Chrysanthème was based on the autobiographical detail of his short stay in Japan as a Naval Officer and his contract marriage in Nagasaki. After the publication of Madame Chrysanthème a story called "Madame Butterfly", by John Luther Long, was published in Century Magazine (1887). From this story the American playwright and producer David Belasco created a one-act play, Madame Butterfly, which opened in New York in 1900. Apparently, Puccini saw the play in London and then wrote the three-act opera, Madame Butterfly, which was first performed on February 17, 1904. The initial reception of the opera was so negative that it became successful only after it had been radically reworked and performed at La Scala in Milan in 1904.

By the middle of the twentieth century the Madame Butterfly myth had gained tremendous popularity and, with the advent of each new mass media technology, the story, the music, the images proliferated. Amongst those productions there was the Hollywood film, The Barbarian and The Geisha (1958), with John Wayne as Townsend Harris, based on the Pierre Loti story. The substitution of an American for the Frenchman made the John Wayne character a synthesis of Pierre Loti, the naval officer and popular travel writer, and Pinkerton, the
American naval officer in Puccini's Madama Butterfly, in the form of Townsend Harris, an actual American naval officer. In 1932 there was Marion Gering's film Madama Butterfly based on the John Luther Long story and the David Belasco play as well as Puccini's opera. In 1954 Carmine Gallone made the film Madama Butterfly that was based on Puccini's opera. There have also been films made of operatic performances of Puccini's opera that circulate through video libraries.

In 1988 there was Ken Russell's Madame Butterfly, again a film of Puccini's opera. This film made use of 'special effects', especially to Cio Cio San dreaming of the attractions of American culture. These special effects were added to the operatic narrative so seamlessly that, with the staging technology that is now available, her dreaming of a CocaCola America is now routinely added to staged versions of the opera. Given this context, the American Dream in Miss Saigon can be seen not just as an updated reproduction of Puccini's opera, but also as an adaptation of Russell's film. After all, orientalism is a discursive system where works and authors cite each other, generating their own authority and distributive currency (Said, 1978:23). The opera and the film have generated an amplified, up-dated version of the Madame Butterfly myth through which we can read Madama Butterfly and Miss Saigon as texts that refer to each other.

The opera Madama Butterfly opens with US Navy Lieutenant B.F. Pinkerton and American consul Sharpless finding a house to live in for the duration of their stay in Nagasaki. Marriage broker Goro procures three servants and a geisha wife known as Madama Butterfly, or Cio Cio San. Pinkerton and Cio Cio San enter a marriage contract for 999 years but subject to monthly renewal. She is rejected by family and friends for having embraced the American's Christian faith and rejecting Buddhism. Pinkerton leaves Japan, and three years later Cio Cio San waits for her husband's return. She rejects her latest suitor, the wealthy Prince Yamadori, insisting that Pinkerton has not deserted her and their son. At last Pinkerton's ship, the "Abraham Lincoln", enters the harbour. Sharpless, Pinkerton, and Kate, his new wife, return to see Cio Cio San. Anguished, Pinkerton leaves the others to sort things out. Cio Cio San agrees to give up her child if his father will return for him. Cio Cio San sends them all away, but her son is pushed back into the room. She blindfolds him, gives him a toy American flag to play with, indicating that he will be going to America with his real father and his American ("real") mother. Then Cio Cio San kills herself with the same dagger with which her father had committed suicide.

The dream of reaching America also features strongly in the musical Miss Saigon. In 1989 Miss Saigon opened at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London. It then opened in New York in 1991 at the Broadway Theatre. From there it quickly spread internationally. The Australian production of the musical opened in Sydney in 1995. The publicity for Miss Saigon describes it as a contemporary version of Madame Chrysanthem/Madame Butterfly, set in Vietnam. It is set in Saigon 1975, Ho Chi Minh City 1978, Atlanta USA 1978, and Bangkok 1978. So Miss Saigon is an interpretation of the fall of Saigon through the Madame Butterfly myth, with the added historical refinement of the orientalist myth of a utopic Europe replaced by America and dystopic Asia embodied by Vietnam.

Miss Saigon begins in Saigon in 1975. It opens with a scene in a bar. The young Vietnamese women working there are bought by American GIs, through "the Engineer", the pimp. Amidst all the drunken shouting and grabbing of women enters Chris, a quiet American who does not really want to be there. Chris is with his equally reserved friend John. There is a new, shy bar girl, Kim, who is crowned "Miss Saigon" in a mock beauty pageant. Chris takes Kim for the night. They fall in love, and get married according to local customs. When Saigon is taken over by the forces of Hanoi, Chris is plucked out of the US embassy with the last soldiers and civilians. In 1978 we see that Chris is married to an American, Helen. John has made it his life's work to find ex-GI's Vietnamese-born children. It is through him that Chris and Helen learn that Kim has had a son by Chris. So they return to Ho Chi Minh City (previously Saigon) to claim Chris's son. They track Kim down through Bangkok, where she works in a bar. Kim thinks that Chris has kept his promise and returned for her.
Instead he is there with his "real" wife. Kim surrenders her young son to them, so that he may live a better life in America. Kim then shoots herself.

The most spectacular visual climax of Miss Saigon occurs in the scene of the fall of Saigon. Chris is plucked out of the American embassy by helicopter, leaving Kim behind. The special (sound) effects used for the helicopter are aggressively loud, accompanied by blinding flashing light. It is as if a 'real' helicopter is in the auditorium, landing and taking off. The helicopter has become metonymic of the war in Vietnam, both anecdotally and in popular texts such as Francis Ford Coppola's film Apocalypse Now (1979). So we see this very strong concatenation of some very influential texts: the nineteenth century story (Madame Chrysantheme) and opera, (Madama Butterfly), the twentieth century novel (Kim), film (Apocalypse Now), and musical (Miss Saigon), and, of course, all the other filmic, theatrical, and musical renditions of the Madame Butterfly story.

There is a segment in Miss Saigon where the Engineer (an updated M. Kangourou from Madame Chrysantheme and Goro from Madama Butterfly dreams of making it to America. The Engineer is a comic, crass character, which does not hide the fact that he profits from the sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women by American soldiers, but the humorous way he is presented somehow makes him 'palatable'. The audience laughs with him[1]. In his American Dream segment, the stage is dominated by a huge convertible car with a Miss Liberty standing on the front seat, lights are flashing everywhere, and the Engineer sings "What's that I smell in the air? The American Dream". Although American culture is parodied in this segment of the musical, in the end America is still represented as the 'logical' or 'natural' place for anyone to desire to be. The Engineer's desire to reach America can only be realized by exploiting Kim (a Vietnamese Madame Butterfly) and her situation: she has a son of an American ex-GI father. Her desire for the American Dream is noble and ultimately self-effacing: she sacrifices her son to a "better life" (how it is going to be "better" is never qualified) in America, and herself to death. Her tragic suicide, that follows the renunciation of her son to his American father and his American wife, clearly articulates the sentiment central to the Madame Butterfly myth. She is such a 'good' mother that she put her child's well-being before her own, and has even gone to the extent of killing herself because life without her son or husband would not be worth living.

Naming the main female 'Asian' character 'Kim' alludes to Rudyard Kipling's novel Kim (1901). Just as Kipling's Kim is orphaned and lived like a vagabond, Miss Saigon's Kim is orphaned by the Vietnam War and lives as a bar-girl (prostitute). Through the story of the 'Indian' Kim we see a vivid picture of India at the turn of the century. Through the story of the Vietnamese Kim we see a Western picture of the role of America on the world stage at a particular historical time when French colonial power in Vietnam ended and American power climaxed and then diminished as the demise of the Cold War began.

Miss Saigon moves effortlessly from depicting American soldiers drinking and whoring at the height of the war in Saigon in 1975 through to 1978 with the U.S.A. compassionately wanting to help all the children that were born as a consequence of such encounters during the war. At the start of the musical, Chris briefly grapples with his conscience over the morality of being in a bar and picking up a prostitute, but then pays for and goes off with her anyway. This scene is very much like an early one in Madame Chrysantheme where Loti, after briefly moralising about the extreme youth of these girls who are being offered to him by their own families, agrees to pay $20 per month for Chrysantheme anyway.

The women in these texts are sought, bought, used, and then abandoned. Loti never returned to Madame Chrysantheme, so we do not know what happened to her. But when the story was re-worked as Madame Butterfly, she was re-constructed so as to fulfil a sado-masochistic fantasy of dying for love. Madame Butterfly surrenders her son to his American father and then kills herself because she will never be able to be with the father and the son. Once the narrative reaches that point, we recognise that an economy of 'needs' has been established. The Asian woman needs the Westerner's money. He needs the kind of sexuality he cannot get in his own social environment. Then he sees that the offspring from that union needs to be saved from the very
same circumstances (colonial war, prostitution, poverty) that led to that whole sequence of events. Although these 'needs' are different to and separate from each other, they are run together in the same narrative, so that the outcome seems so 'natural' or 'logical' that the Asian woman's final gesture, suicide, is seen as being a beautifully heroic response to the situation. Thus the narrative is depoliticised and highly romanticised.

This romanticised encounter is repoliticised in M. Butterfly. In a dialogue between Song Liling and Rene Gallimard after Gallimard has just seen Liling perform "un bel di" from Puccini's Madama Butterfly, he praises the beauty of the Madame Butterfly story of tragic love. Liling replies:

Consider it this way. What would you say if a blonde cheer-leader fell in love with a short Japanese businessman. He marries her and then goes home for three years. During which time she prays to his picture and turns down marriage from a young Kennedy. Then when she learns her husband has remarried, she kills herself. Now, I believe you would consider this girl to be a deranged idiot. But because it's an oriental girl who kills herself for a westerner you find it beautiful.

This conversation marks the beginning of Gallimard's education. Song Liling teaches him about orientalism and also, unbeknown to him, about a different kind of eroticism; or, rather, a kind of eroticism that revolves around more differences and similarities than he is prepared to admit, even to himself. Thus Song Liling functions more like an anti-Madame Butterfly.

In all the different versions of Madame Butterfly, the Western man has the sovereignty to enter Asia, a pun borrowed from Chris Berry (1994) which I will take up below, and to take a sexual partner. In The Good Woman of Bangkok the Westerner wants to 'save' his Asian woman from her circumstances, but finally leaves her. In M. Butterfly the Westerner is only interested in his Asian woman and their son when he believes that she is a woman, but when he finds out that she is a man and that they do not have a son, he leaves him. Whereas in Madama Butterfly and Miss Saigon he leaves her but then wants to 'save' his Eurasian/Amerasian son.

These different versions of how a cash/sex-coloniser/colonised relationship works is very closely tied into the ideology of wanting to 'save' the 'needy'. Salvation of the Asian-woman-as-victim by the Westerner can be seen as a disavowal of his complicity in her situation (Berry 1994:27-27). This disavowal stands silently behind the white saviour myth. In order for a saviour to see himself as such he must first of all see himself as having sovereign power over those he feels it is his duty to save. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1984:89) writes that "The invention of needs always goes hand in hand with the compulsion to help the needy, a noble and self-gratifying task that also renders the helper's service indispensable".

Neither Aio (The Good Woman of Bangkok) nor Song Liling (M. Butterfly) needed salvation. Nevertheless, Dennis O' Rourke and Rene Gallimard saw themselves as white saviours whose duty it was to save these Asian women. Similarly, neither Cio Cio San (Madama Butterfly) nor Kim (Miss Saigon) wanted their husbands to desert them and return to take their sons away. Nevertheless, they have been scripted to perform the ultimate act of heroism, self-sacrifice.

While colonial ideology sees Asian women as attractive and desirable, they are also loathed and feared. They are there to be used. One of the greatest fears is of the 'mixed' offspring. These hybrid children occupy an unclear, murky, dirty category (described as "dust" in Miss Saigon). Their very presence threatens the distinction between the West and the East. Ann Laura Stoler (1991:53) writes that "mixed" children were a testament to the sexual interface in the colonial encounter and they also threatened to blur the colonial divide (1991:60). As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes (1989:98), "what is at stake (when the unity of imaginary First and Third Worlds is challenged) is not only the hegemony of Western cultures, but also their identities as unified cultures". In Miss Saigon the mission of 'saving' children in need is headed by John, a noble black American, who sings "they're called bùi đi, the dust of life, conceived in hell and born in strife". "Hell" and "strife" do not
simply describe the war, they also allude to Vietnam. On stage John (the latest Sharpless) leads a choir, all dressed in long purple robes, the singing resembling the style of charismatic 'spirituals' (a 'safe' trope of blackness), wanting to get back to Vietnam to save the children. The 1995 Sydney program for Miss Saigon explains that "the term (bui do) is used today to refer to the Amerasian children who live on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City". Just as America wanted to 'save' South Vietnam from communism, it now wants to 'save' the children that were fathered and then abandoned by Americans. The 1989 London program includes an advertisement for financial donations for four organizations in the United Kingdom that look after the "Bui Doi" refugees.

The 1995 (Sydney) program has a full page of excerpts from Larry Englemann's oral history of the fall of South Vietnam, Tears Before The Rain (1990), which has stories told by "the Amerasian children who live on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City". The children are all quoted as saying that life in Vietnam is hard and when they get to America, life with an American father and family will be "better". These so-called 'Amerasian' children are being sought out by their 'real' American fathers. Ann Laura Stoler (1991) examines this apparent need to save these malheureux from their fate. Stoler looks at how French colonial women in Indochina in the early twentieth century wanted to 'save' the metis from their mothers. They ran campaigns for la recherche de paternite and sought out girls in moral danger and made them into 'worthy women'. Metisse girls were instructed away from promiscuity and metis boys away from militancy. They were all to be made French. While Chris, like Pinkerton, returned to Asia to claim his son after he had taken an American wife, Gallimard wanted to marry Lilling and live with her and their son in Paris and be a French family.

Miss Saigon does not deploy any irony in describing the encounter between Chris and Kim as 'love'. It dismisses Chris's lack of responsibility to the nation he entered militarily and the woman he used sexually and impregnated as something vague, like 'cultural misunderstanding'. In this way the myth of America as the land of goodness, freedom and democracy is perpetuated through the way war in general, and the Vietnam War in particular, is represented.

Thus while the specifics of the Madame Butterfly story have become 'moderniser' to suit postcolonial times, the underlying orientalism remains as fictional characters map onto each other through an impressive series of intertextual referencing. But the popularity of the Madame Butterfly myth goes further than this. So deeply ingrained is it in the Western cultural unconscious that it influences how factual people have characterised, or fictionalised, themselves back onto its recurring (but also always changing) motifs. For example, in the 1995 program for Miss Saigon, Claude-Michel Schonberg, the composer of the score for the musical, describes how he was inspired by a photograph he saw by chance in a magazine[2]. The photograph is of a Vietnamese mother and child being separated so that the child could go to America to live with the ex-GI father it had never seen. Schonberg asks "was that not the most moving, the most staggering example of 'The Ultimate Sacrifice', as undergone by Cio Cio San in Madame Butterfly, giving her life for the child?". When Schonberg saw the photograph by chance, leafing through a magazine, he immediately invested it with the myths that he recognizes. Schonberg, working within dominant meaning-making systems, 'naturally' interpreted the photograph through the masochistic Madame Butterfly myth. That myth is one that forgets the circumstances that put this Asian woman in such a predicament. The repetition of this myth reproduces, yet again, 'Asian woman' as the pitiful Other[3]. The inspiration behind Schonberg's whole production, all the music that drives Miss Saigon, is based on a photograph of a woman and child who, as is usual in many grand, sweeping, sentimentalist gestures, have no name. We have only Schonberg's name.

If, as Barthes writes, the photograph is pure contingency, its details represent a raw material, an empirical denotative 'reality', then Schonberg's interpretation avoids what Barthes calls the infra-knowledge, or extratextual knowledge that the separation of this particular Vietnamese mother (not The Mother [Barthes 1984:74-75]) and this particular Vietnamese child (not The Child [Barthes, 1984: 74-75]) is being forced by.
Vietnamese officials. Is the child hand-cuffed to someone? To whom? This mother's pain and this child's pain are mediated by a central square of arms. But we cannot see any hands completely. In this photograph of pain and arms and faces, the most complete figure is the mother. The decorations on her clothes catch the light and seem to sparkle and mock the tragedy. Another thing about this photograph is that no-one is looking at the spectator, in the eye. This gives the spectator the scope to fictionalise.

Barthes explains that because photographs are so contingent they cannot signify a generality except by assuming a mask. It is the mask that makes a face into the product of a society and its history (Barthes 1984:34). The mask is theatrical, and theatre, as Barthes points out, originated in the cult of the dead: "the painted face in the Chinese theatre, the rice-paste makeup of the Indian Katha-Kali, the Japanese No mask" (Barthes 1984:31). So photography is usually interpreted in terms of "what we romantically call love and death" (Barthes 1981:73). That which is photographed is not alive, it is not animated, and yet it animates the spectator (Barthes 1984:20). Barthes connects photography, "the pangs of love" it evokes, together with pity. It was pity that provoked the first shock that pricked Schonberg, the spectator. It is the same pity that moved Schonberg to imagine that this particular mother and child somehow represented the Madame Butterfly myth of Mother and Child. It is also the same pity that moves John, in Miss Saigon, to plea for help for the bui doi.

So it was a photographic document that was first of all found by chance, interpreted mythically, then reinterpreted through the opera, that inspired the musical and ended up perpetuating a Western perception of the Vietnam War. What we see is an un-self-reflexive elaboration of the fantasy of Western supremacy, coupled with the masochistic orientalist fantasy of self-sacrificing Eastern femininity, being played out repeatedly as a form of entertainment. In Miss Saigon we see the Madame Butterfly story repeated, altered, but certainly not challenged. Nevertheless, as I have already noted, there have been significant challenges to the Madame Butterfly myth as a cliched way of imagining East-West relations. One challenge to the orientalist myth of self-sacrificing femininity and masculine sovereignty can be found in O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok. It shows how O'Rourke, as a sympathetic, though always sovereign, Westerner, goes to Bangkok to film his experiences with Aoi, the prostitute he hired for the making of the film. O'Rourke flies into Bangkok, uses Aoi for his film, filming even what she does not want filmed (sleeping, eating). Once he has finished with her services (sexual and professional), he tries to 'save' her by buying her a rice farm. The disruption of the myth occurs when Aoi certainly does not see O'Rourke as her saviour. She sells the rice farm and keeps her job. Chris Berry (1994:18) reads The Good Woman of Bangkok "as a cautionary metaphor about the bankruptcy of the white saviour myth". The tragedy was O'Rourke's, not Aoi's.

Finally the most significant disruption of the Madame Butterfly story has been David Henry Hwang's play M. Butterfly (1988), and David Cronenberg's film (1993) of the same name[4]. M. Butterfly is based on the spy/sex scandal that appeared in the French newspapers in 1986. The newspapers reported that there had been a twenty-year relationship between Bernard Boursicot, a French diplomat sent to China in 1964, and Shi Pei Pu, an opera singer. The scandal was not so much over the espionage, as it was very petty, but more over the claims by Boursicot that he did not know that Shi Pei Pu was a man. In M. Butterfly Boursicot is fictionalised as Rene Gallimard and Shi Pei Pu as Song Liling.

As mentioned earlier, Gallimard met Liling after he had seen her perform the ada that has become metonymic for Madame Butterfly, "un bel di" from Madama Butterfly. The film ends with Gallimard in a Pads prison, dressed as a Japanese geisha, committing suicide to a recording of "un bel di ". Both Cio Cio San and Gallimard die when they realise what they have lost. But the difference is that in M. Butterfly Song Liling performs Puccini's music, consciously eschewing the story, and Gallimard performs Cio Cio San's fate melodramatically. Throughout the narrative of the film, orientalism is explained and heterosexism is exposed. Song Liling merely has to perform the Western fantasy of oriental femininity, even to the extent of providing him with a son, to seduce Gallimard. Song Liling explains Gallimard back to himself.
In classical orientalist texts a strong, enlightened Europe constructs a weak, ignorant Asia (Said 1978). But in the case of M. Butterfly the colonial European man ends up looking ignorant and weak, while his other, with full knowledge of orientalism and sexism constructs himself as the perfect Asian woman, a Butterfly. Chris Berry writes that Gallimard felt betrayed by Song Liling because he believed in the mythical narrative that he assumed they shared. Gallimard could not accept that what he thought of as a 'real' relationship was not heterosexual. He was faced with transgressing his hitherto Eurocentred heterosexist scripts.

Trinh T. Minh-ha writes that as cultural knowledge moves around the world, it reverberates and influences others. She adds that such movement rehashes stereotypes but also subverts them. Repetition always carries the possibilities of transformation. She explains that when repetition calls attention to itself as repetition it doubles back, exerting power, then thwarting its own power, repeatedly inflating it only to deflate it better. "Repetition outplays itself as repetition, and each repetition is never the same as the former. In it there is circulation, there is intensity, and there is innovation" (Trinh 1991:190).

M. Butterfly shows not only the effects of the long history of European thought on its colonial other, but it also shows how the West is now analysing and reassessing its relationships with its colonial others. Madame Butterfly is a hundred-year-old story that is repeated frequently under different circumstances, and with each repetition there is a change. Although Puccini's music has stayed the same over the years, the dramatic interpretation has changed and the changes that have taken place reflect changing cultural formations.

Notes
1. In the 1995 Sydney program, Alain Boubil writes that the Engineer was modelled on Goro from Madame Butterfly and that he was a "half-French, half-Vietnamese wheeler-dealer, an actual Vietnamese type" Thus the Engineer, a hybrid, represents what innocent little Amerasian children would be doomed to become if they are not "saved".

2. Just as Roland Barthes was in Mythologies (1973): "I am at the barber's and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me.... " (Barthes 1973: 125). Then he goes into the now well-known semiological analysis of a "young Negro in a French uniform ... saluting".

3. For a fuller discussion of the Western orientalist construction of Asian/Third World woman, see Trinh Min-Ha (1989).

4. The names of the characters in the film are the same as the play. I will refer to the film.

References


Filmography


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