

## Transcr(é)ation



“If you wish to see some great theatre...”

Liminality in David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*

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La liminalité dans *M. Butterfly* de David Cronenberg

Polina Rybina

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David Cronenberg, Adaptateur

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Article abstract

David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* (1988), reworked by David Cronenberg into a film (1993), is well-known for its suspension of disbelief (which resulted in some rewriting for the 2017 Broadway revival). While the play and its film adaptation have been extensively discussed in terms of gender and race, performing femininity and masculinity, East and West (Chow, de Lauretis, Levin), I will look at the trope of theatricality in film (Bazin, Sontag, Knopf, Loiseau) and the effects of liminality that it mediates. *M. Butterfly* ascribes the “betwixt and between,” liminal quality to all complex issues of human existence, including art and politics. The essay illuminates four aspects of the liminal experience: its ability to blur spatial boundaries, to disorient temporarily, to intensify perceptions, and to transform the observers into participants (Turner, Schechner, Fischer-Lichte). *M. Butterfly* is the story of a French diplomat René Gallimard’s (Jeremy Irons) love for a Peking opera diva Song Liling—a spy and a man in disguise (John Lone). Hwang’s play elaborates on the spatio-temporal aspects of the liminal: the blurred boundaries between the past and the present, the inside and the outside, or the ego versus alter ego. The film places emphasis on the intensifying and transformational potential of the liminal space, relying upon intermedial effects of the theatre within a film. Theatricality flows over into the cinematic reality and creates—through intermedial contact—an alternative reality, self-conscious, disorienting, and hallucinatory. Condensing various liminality effects, the play and its adaptation foster liminal sensibilities in the audiences.

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# “If you wish to see some great theatre...”: Liminality in David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*David Henry Hwang’s play M. Butterfly (1988), reworked by David Cronenberg into a film (1993), is well-known for its suspension of disbelief (which resulted in some rewriting for the 2017 Broadway revival). While the play and its film adaptation have been extensively discussed in terms of gender and race, performing femininity and masculinity, East and West (Chow, de Lauretis, Levin), I will look at the trope of theatricality in film (Bazin, Sontag, Knopf, Loisel), and the effects of liminality that it mediates. M. Butterfly ascribes the “betwixt and between,” liminal quality to all complex issues of human existence, including art and politics. The essay illuminates four aspects of the liminal experience: its ability to blur spatial boundaries, to disorient temporarily, to intensify perceptions, and to transform the observers into participants (Turner, Schechner, Fischer-Lichte). M. Butterfly is the story of a French diplomat René Gallimard’s (Jeremy Irons) love for a Peking opera diva Song Liling—a spy and a man in disguise (John Lone). Hwang’s play elaborates on the spatio-temporal aspects of the liminal: the blurred boundaries between the past and the present, the inside and the outside, or the ego versus alter ego. The film places emphasis on the intensifying and transformational potential of the liminal space, relying upon intermedial effects of the theatre within a film. Theatricality flows over into the cinematic reality and creates—through intermedial contact—an alternative reality, self-conscious, disorienting, and hallucinatory. Condensing various liminality effects, the play and its adaptation foster liminal sensibilities in the audiences.*

**Keywords:** *liminality · film adaptation · theatre · David Cronenberg · David Henry Hwang · M. Butterfly*

## Introduction

Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* implies theatre from the start: the opening credits appear against an elaborate background of "Japanese" screens with masks, fans, butterflies, parasols, and utensils moving around to the music of Howard Shore. The objects remind the viewer of the props from Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904): Cio-Cio-San might have worn these kimonos, carried the parasol and served tea in these cups. Puccini's opera was an adaptation—it "quoted" David Belasco's one-act play *Madame Butterfly: A Tragedy of Japan* (1900) that reworked John Luther Long's short story (1898) that made use of other sources<sup>1</sup>.

The promise of the theatre is kept all through the film, although we do not get a reenactment of the mentioned Italian opera. What we get instead is a film adaptation of David Henry Hwang's 1988 play that takes its inspiration from a *New York Times Magazine* story about the treason trial. The first scenes of the play incorporate the episodes from Puccini's opera, while the rest of the drama subverts the issues at the centre of the operatic conflict, and erases "Madama" leaving only a mysterious "M." that results in gender fluidity.

*M. Butterfly* incorporates theatre and makes extensive use of the theatre within a film trope. According to anthropologists (Victor Turner) and performance theorists (Richard Schechner) a theatrical performance is a "liminoid ritual," effecting a temporary change in actors, audiences, and environments. As Schechner reminds us, it is "sometimes nothing more than a brief *communitas* experience or a several-hours-long playing of a role" (2013, p. 72). Liminoid<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Teresa de Lauretis traces "the birth" of this fantasy in her article "Popular Culture, Public and Private Fantasies: Femininity and Fetishism in David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*": from Pierre Loti's (pseudonym of Julien Viaud) 1887 travel book *Madame Chrysanthème* to André Messager 1893 opera, and then to the French illustrator and Japanologist Félix Régamey's 1894 "diary" *Le Cahier Rose de Mme Chrysanthème*, as if written by the lady herself—"seduced and abandoned" (1999, p. 310), "love-stricken and contemplating suicide" (p. 310). John Luther Long's reworking comes next.

<sup>2</sup> The term "liminoid" is Victor Turner's coinage for "symbolic actions or leisure activities" (Schechner 2013, p. 67) in postmodern societies that are similar to rituals in traditional societies. In his book *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, he elaborates on the links between liminal and liminoid situations emphasizing their importance for creative processes: "What interests me most about Sutton-Smith's formulations is that he sees liminal and liminoid situations as the settings in which new models, symbols, paradigms, etc., arise—as the seedbeds of cultural creativity in fact. These new symbols and constructions then feed back into the "central" economic and politico-legal domains and arenas, supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, structural models and *raison d'être*" (1982, p. 28). Turner continues to see liminoid activities as particularly significant for creativity in *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience* (1985)

cultural rituals (shows, concerts, and sports events) are contemporary simulations of more profound liminal experiences—transient and disorienting human conditions (“rites of passage”) that presuppose final transformations. These practices are discussed by Turner when he writes, in *The Ritual Process*,

liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. [...] Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon (1969, p. 95).

The theatre within a film implies intermedial tensions, and the oscillation between the performance world and the “ordinary” world, that is, the filmic environment of the embedded theatrical performance. The perceiving subject is transferred, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, into “a state of betwixt and between” (2008, p. 89), which makes him particularly sensitive to other disorienting, ambiguous aspects of this story—gendered, cultural, and political. The film ascribes liminal quality to all complex issues, demonstrating how the effect of blurred boundaries illuminates their mediation. *M. Butterfly*’s oscillation between cinematic and theatrical conventions is mirrored by the main characters who waver between gender roles and cultural stereotypes. The states they live in—China and France—go through transformations and function “betwixt” old and new political regimes, representing different dimensions of crisis<sup>3</sup>. The atmosphere of total in-betweenness<sup>4</sup> creates the setting for an unusual love story that leads to partners exchanging roles and the cultures they belong to—symbolically swapping power. The title *M. Butterfly*, being a variation on the

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where he writes in the essay “Body, Brain, and Culture”: “You may have guessed that play is, for me, a liminal or liminoid mode, essentially interstitial, betwixt-and-between all standard taxonomic nodes, essentially ‘elusive’ – a term derived from the Latin *ex* for ‘away’ plus *ludere*, ‘to play’...” (1985, p. 263)

<sup>3</sup> For more on liminality and transformations in social and political environments see: *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. by Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015; Thomassen, Bjørn, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between*, London: Routledge, 2014. For more on liminality in arts and literature see: Szokolczai, Arpad, *Permanent Liminality and Modernity*, London: Routledge, 2017; *Passages: Moving Beyond Liminality in the Study of Literature and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Kovach, Jens Kugele and Ansgar Nünning, London: UCL Press, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> For more on in-betweenness as the effect of intermediality see, for instance: *Caught In-Between: Intermediality in Contemporary Eastern European and Russian Cinema*, ed. by Ágnes Pethö, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020; Pethö, Ágnes, “Tacita Dean’s Affective Intermediality: Precarious Visions in-between the Visual Arts, Cinema, and the Gallery Film”, *Arts*, Vol. 12, n°4, 2023, p. 168.

original opera title, opens up a liminal space between a reference to and a distance from *Madame Butterfly*. The very image of a butterfly linked to an iconically transitional experience (from caterpillar to butterfly) enhances liminality effects that suggest both vulnerability and openness to the most creative situations.

This essay will look at how the in-betweenness is performed, how the filmic medium investigates and questions boundaries, and what happens not on the one or the other side, but in the place of the boundary itself. Four ideas will be highlighted. First, the fact that in performances (both theatrical and cinematic) instead of remaining a thin limen, the in-between space is expanded and becomes a complex site of the action (to be compared with Peter Brook's idea of a stage as an "empty space"<sup>5</sup>), not "a passageway between places rather than a place in itself"<sup>6</sup> (2013, p. 67). Secondly, a liminal action is transient and not lasting, but it tends to extend itself not only spatially but also temporarily. Paradoxically, a temporary state gives way to other non-permanent states, thus enlarging in time. Thirdly, the liminal space becomes an intensified space, "emphasized" both literally and figuratively. For instance, Schechner focuses on the architecture of both theatrical and residential buildings, where "the empty space of a limen is bridged at the top by a lintel, usually made of lumber or stone. This provides reinforcement" (2013, p. 67). The image of reinforcement leads to an idea that what happens within liminal time and space is emphasized. Fourthly, this essay will look back on Turner's distinction between transportations and transformations during liminal practices. What happens to people who experience the intensified transitions? Turner ascribes transformational potential to liminal practices proper (ritualized social and cultural transitions—births, marriages, and deaths); as Schechner puts it, these are "decisive life-changing experiences" (2013, p. 72), permanent changes. Unlike liminal practices, the liminoid ones—those that occur through contemporary art—are transportational (happenings, performances, or sports contests): they change performers and audiences for a couple of hours and then let them return to the ordinary world.

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<sup>5</sup> To quote Schechner, "... most of the world's stages are empty spaces, to use Peter Brook's phrase. An empty theatre space is liminal, open to all kinds of possibilities: a space that by means of performing could become anywhere" (2013, p. 67).

<sup>6</sup> To quote Schechner, "a limen is a threshold or sill, a thin strip neither inside nor outside a building or room linking one space to another, a passageway between places rather than a place in itself. In ritual and aesthetic performances, the thin space of the limen is expanded into a wide space both actually and conceptually. What usually is just a "go-between" becomes the site of the action. And yet this action remains, to use Turner's phrase, "betwixt and between." It is enlarged in time and space yet retains its peculiar quality of passageway or temporariness" (*Idem.*).

Looking at the film and the play which condense several kinds of liminality, this essay will demonstrate how the four aspects of in-betweenness are illuminated in *M. Butterfly* to foster liminal sensibilities in the audiences that, according to Fischer-Lichte, go through “liminal experience capable of transforming the experiencing subject” (2008, p. 174).

The first part of the essay focuses on spatio-temporal aspects and the potential of transient situations to extend themselves in space and time. With the emphasis on the play, this part shows how *M. Butterfly* elaborates on the profound liminality of the stage chronotope. The liminal techniques include: montage in one stage space of several different places (“real” and imaginary), different temporal layers (the past and the present), several points of view (two characters as contradictory narrators), and blurring the boundary between the play’s diegesis and its metadiegesis through positioning of the main character (inside and outside the story). The second part shows how, changing the play’s structure, the film develops two other aspects of liminality—its intensifying and transformational potential. The focus is on the intermedial contacts between filmic and theatrical modes that result in two effects. First, the intensification of the theatrical by the cinematic: audiovisual excess in *mise-en-scène*, the role of close-ups in presenting the actors’ “concrete gazes” (Barba; Savarese, 2006, p. 126) and the viewers’ strong emotions, the function of shot/reverse shot patterns in shaping the spectators’ fascinated responses, and the use of “live” or recorded sound in presenting a growing feeling. Secondly, the essay moves on to discuss the transformation of the cinematic by the theatrical: intermedial contacts imply the potential “spilling out” of the theatre into the filmic reality showing how media reshape their surroundings. Here I look at off-stage minor performances which blur the boundaries between the two media. *M. Butterfly* becomes a logical addition to Cronenberg’s universe (*Videodrome*, 1983; *eXistenZ*, 1999; *Crimes of the Future*, 2022) with its focus on media infiltrating each other’s realities.

## **Spatio-temporal Liminality: Everywhere and Forever**

Like many plays that made it to the screen, Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* let go of several structural characteristics which are effective on the stage and less effective on the screen. *M. Butterfly* is a story of the French diplomat René Gallimard (Jeremy Irons) who in 1960 Beijing (or 1964 Beijing—in the film) falls in love with a Peking opera diva Song Liling, who he thinks is a woman and not a female impersonator (John Lone). Staying in the turbulent relationship for twenty years, Gallimard finally learns the truth when he is arrested in Paris for espionage

together with Song—a spy for the Chinese government<sup>7</sup>. Cronenberg mentions in an interview that in his films “there’s a commercial element” and “a sort of European art movie element<sup>8</sup>”, which is reflected in *M. Butterfly* that embraces seemingly mainstream experiences – later erased and subverted. Hwang comments on the erasure of the mainstream aspects of the text when he recounts the story of the play’s title: initially *Monsieur Butterfly*, it has been abbreviated “in the French fashion” producing a result “far more mysterious and ambiguous” (1989, p. 96).

Set in the confined space of a prison cell at “present,” the play – through the central character’s memories and fantasies – expands into different decades and locations, actualizing the limen’s potential to create extended, yet transient, time and space. The narrative takes us first to Gallimard’s mind: in the opening stage directions, Song (a beautiful woman in a Chinese garb) “dances a traditional piece from the Peking Opera” (1989, p. 1) which dissolves into a Western opera (the “Love Duet” from Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*). Song occupies upstage space that later will be a place for a pin-up girl – to accompany the story of “these magazines” (1989, p. 10), and still later – for a stage at the German ambassador’s house, where Gallimard first sees Song.

The migration between imaginary spaces, which is reminiscent both of the Peking Opera and Brechtian theatre (and also Brechtian reworkings of the Chinese theatre techniques), is created through the use of light: lights go up and down on particular scenes, for instance, a chic Parisian parlor, where elegant guests laugh at Gallimard, while he in his cell witnesses the disgrace. Another type of the liminal technique does not distinguish between places but brings into existence an ambiguous in-betweenness: Gallimard’s cell is transformed into a performance space where he and his childhood friend Marc reenact episodes from *Madame Butterfly*, or their school years at École Nationale in Aix-en-Provence. The transformation is never complete: the cell remains the cell from which the character addresses his audience and comments on the scenes just performed. His commentary is especially striking when during Song’s first performance he takes

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<sup>7</sup> David Henry Hwang introduced changes into the plot of the original play for Julie Taymor’s 2017 Broadway revival of *M. Butterfly*. See, Brantley, Ben, “*M. Butterfly* Returns to Broadway on Heavier Wings”, *The New York Times*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/theater/review-m-butterfly-david-hwang-julie-taymor-broadway.html> (accessed 13 February 2024).

<sup>8</sup> “Cronenberg on Cronenberg – *Shivers*”, Cinema Interview and Commentaries, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObWjbM6rbSw> (accessed 11 December 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Hwang, David Henry, *M. Butterfly*, New York: Plume, 1989.

his place in the on-stage theatre but turns to the actual audience and continues to address it.

Starting from scene 6 of the first act (Song's performance) and up to the end of it (scene 13), we relocate almost completely to Beijing, "forgetting" about the profound liminality of the stage space. The plot develops with Song and René falling in love, and René being promoted. Only twice is this sequence interrupted by a liminal technique: first, with Gallimard's dream (scene 9) in which Marc comes "across time and space" to congratulate him on meeting the right girl. Second, in scene 11 when Marc, "dressed as a bureaucrat," reminds Gallimard of his first sexual experience with Isabelle. The scene is split in two: the first part covers Gallimard and Marc's grotesque reminiscences of Isabelle's sexual tastes: "screaming, and breaking off the branches all around me, and pounding my butt up and down into the dirt"; "huffing and puffing like a locomotive" (1989, p. 33). In contrast to this, the second part of the scene contains quotations from Song's letters. Although they remain unanswered and are part of the "experiment" ("She was turning on my needle," p. 36), lines from four letters are read by Song who appears upstage; Gallimard comments on them and on his dissatisfaction. She appears to make a concession, "but much too dignified" (1989, p. 35); he does not like the way she calls him "friend"; finally, the lines "I have already given you my shame" (*Idem.*) stir Gallimard, but his victory feels "hollow" (1989, p. 36) to him.

A new liminal technique (erased from the screen version) comes into play when Song reveals her interest in politics and Gallimard's professional life, disclosing an ability to be a co-author of this play. In scene 2, Song is shown upstage, watching Gallimard and Toulon's discussion of the situation in Vietnam. In scene 3, she persuades Gallimard that Comrade Chin's entrance is necessary for the viewers to understand the play: "René, be sensible. How can they understand the story without her?" (1989, p. 47). Although Gallimard is the on-stage narrator, his storytelling strategies are questioned and challenged by his central character – Song, whose spatial and temporal position in the narrative becomes more complex. Song, like Gallimard, emerges as character / narrator. She transgresses the narrative boundary between two distinct diegetic worlds, as in Gérard Genette's metalepsis "taking hold of (telling) by changing level" (1980, p. 235). Gallimard's power gives way to the more subtle, dangerous, and transgressive powers of Song. Scene 4 reveals the disturbing fact that Gallimard has dealt not with a woman but with a man, working as a spy. Song's independence demonstrates who the real author is: "René, I've never done what you've said"

(1989, p. 78). The exchange of power (“mythical”, according to Chow<sup>10</sup>) is justified narratively through blurring of the spatio-temporal boundaries that helps Song emerge as author / director.

As a result, in act three, Song transforms into the narrator and – having removed the cocoon of his wig and a kimono—becomes a real “butterfly,” a powerful and complex character, wearing, to Gallimard’s dismay, “a well-cut suit” (at some point René nostalgically crawls towards Song’s wig and kimono, left on the floor). Starting in the courtroom, the action relocates into an imaginary theatre. It is in this theatre (and not in the police van moving through Paris streets, as in Cronenberg’s version) that the two characters exchange their final misunderstandings. When Song says “Tell me, why did it take you so long? To come back to this place?” (1989, p. 85), he means the theatre where Gallimard first encountered the opera diva. The two are metaphorically transported back, to this theatre of theatres, while the loud music from Puccini’s opera mixes with Chinese gongs, resulting in unprecedented cacophony. Gallimard, who calls himself “pure imagination” makes his choice—to see “some great theatre,” to prefer fantasy to reality, and to be seeing it all the time. He stubbornly sticks to his intense illusion, unable and unwilling to move on.

The spatio-temporal transitions, which represent the narrative space as ever-changing and fluid, give a hallucinatory effect to Gallimard’s memories. Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* opens up when read through the lens of classic American dramas that engage in spatio-temporal montage of memory plays<sup>11</sup>—Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938), Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Screen versions of these plays often take into account the need to represent the montage of dreams and visions (as in Volker Schlöndorff’s 1985 adaptation of Miller’s play, or Paul Newman’s 1987 revisitation of Williams’ drama).

Cronenberg’s take on *M. Butterfly* does not adapt several subplots from the first act, erasing the storyline of Gallimard’s sexual formation and his fantasies, and avoiding to represent *Madame Butterfly* as his favorite opera predestined to become the lens for his visions of the Orient. Cronenberg’s Gallimard does not

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<sup>10</sup> To quote Rey Chow: “Precisely because of its stereotypical structure, the relationship between Gallimard and Song allows us to approach it as a kind of myth. In this myth, Gallimard occupies the role of the supposedly active and dominant white male, and Song, the role of the supposedly passive and submissive oriental female” (2010, p. 128).

<sup>11</sup> The term was initially used by Tennessee Williams for *The Glass Menagerie* as a play “with unusual freedom of convention” (2000, p. 395). It emphasizes the blurring of boundaries between the past and the present through scenography and music.

have an alter ego—Marc—a childhood friend and an adolescent version of his self, responsible for his bravura masculine side. Putting aside the play's structural liminality, rooted in the theatre, the film maintains tensions between the past and the present, the inner and the outer, and the ego *versus* alter ego through intermedial encounters between the theatre and the film. While doing this, the screen version of *M. Butterfly* places emphasis on different aspects of representing the liminal—the intensity and the transformational potential of the intermedial space. Cronenberg's approach is very subtle and media-conscious: the screen, implying the theatre and mixing it with "reality," intensifies Gallimard's experience and demonstrates how liminality effects transformations.

## Liminality: Intensified and Transformed

Films made in the 1990s sometimes look back upon the theatre and incorporate theatrical performances into the narratives (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, 1990; Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, 1993; Gérard Corbiau's *Farinelli*, 1994; Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street*, 1994; John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love*, 1998), not to mention earlier and later examples which are legion<sup>12</sup>. While implying theatre, directors develop and promote interests in special artistic communities with their own rules and conventions. In *M. Butterfly*, Cronenberg's curiosity about the Peking Opera is supported by the actor's persona. John Lone, the star of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987) and an impeccable impersonator of Song Liling, grew up in Hong Kong and was trained in the Peking Opera school. He embodies the traditional knowledge of "physical training in acrobatics, martial arts, and juggling, and miming, and then singing, and dancing, and movement, which is separate from dancing. It's a gesture to indicate drama, and comedy, it is such a total concept of theatre..."<sup>13</sup>

The aim of this part of my essay is twofold. First, I wish to demonstrate how the embedded theatrical performance is intensified by cinematic techniques proving that the liminal space functions as the locus of intense experience enhanced by mediation. Secondly, I mean to show how theatrical signs flow over into the cinematic reality and transform it. Two media come into contact, and the

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<sup>12</sup> For different functions of the theatre on the screen see: *Stages of Reality: Theatricality in Cinema*, ed. by André Loiselle and Jeremy Maron, Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012; Gunning, Tom, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde", *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, ed. by Robert Knopf, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 37-45; Loiselle, André, *Theatricality in the Horror Film*, London, New York: Anthem Press, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> "John Lone: Interview for The Last Emperor (1987)", John C. Tibbetts Interviews, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYd9GGyGFrQ> (accessed 11 December 2023).

film implies that its transparent reality is invaded by a liminoid practice par excellence—the theatre.

Following the play, the film has several scenes set on the stage. I will look at five episodes: two performances of Puccini's opera, two of the Peking opera, and one final "theatre of cruelty" scene, when Gallimard commits suicide. The theatre within the theatre in Hwang's play influences the viewers' understanding of the story as profoundly illusory, hallucinatory, and deeply personal. The theatre within the film implies a more complex environment with several degrees of artificiality ("stages of reality," to use André Loïsele's coined phrase). Starting as a transparent window onto the reality of 1964 China, Cronenberg's film only later starts to incorporate theatrical shows to create within the film an alternative space—unnatural, self-conscious, and disorienting.

During the performance of Puccini's opera by Beijing singers Gallimard sees a Chinese opera diva do the classic "Un bel dì, vedremo" from the second act—the most intense moment for him. In contrast with the play, where he listens to the final "Con onor muore" and sees the death scene, on the screen we get a *potpourri* of the main "hits" from the famous opera—almost "pop songs" that nonetheless carry the protagonist away. After the performance, theatricality starts flowing over into the cinematic "reality." Song explains to Gallimard the complexities of her situation – she has convincingly performed a Japanese woman while for a Chinese it amounts to performing the role of the enemy: "The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war..." (1989, p. 17). Song shifts her discussion with Gallimard to cultural and war issues while concealing the fact that in a Japanese woman everything is foreign to her / him – culture as well as gender. She ends their first conversation with a bit of advice: "The point is it's the music not the story. ... If you wish to see some great theatre, come to the Beijing opera sometime. Further your education" (00h09'36"). Such advice calls for the curtain and applause—and Song gets them. Gallimard remains silent and watches Song walk slowly away from him into the garden, sees her open the fan (the demonstration of the fan skill is very important for the Peking opera actor) and hears the applause from the distance (they sound simultaneously with her gesture). The episode places emphasis on this fact: together with the theatre within the film, there will be theatre "spilled" all over the film. Song's off-stage minor performance (with its audiovisual excess) establishes an important convention within the film. *M. Butterfly* focuses on the blurred media boundaries and situations when media unfold into other media, creating the intermedial fluidity and making the viewer hallucinate about seeing the theatre everywhere. Cronenberg is intrigued by fluid media contacts and in *M. Butterfly* he continues

to investigate the effects of reality turned into a dream or hallucination, the theatre within the film mediating the presence of alternative reality.

After Gallimard's encounter with the diva, theatricality starts contaminating his family life: his wife Helga reacts to Gallimard's story about the opera by mocking Butterfly's performance with a glossy magazine held like a fan. Although this is not one of the major performances discussed in this essay, it is a minor spectacle which supports the idea that, once theatricality infiltrates the filmic world, it contaminates it, which is especially evident in the episodes immediately following the theatrical event. To complicate our response to Helga's mock performance after Song's sophisticated artistry, she is shown in a mirror, as a frame within the frame, which instead of making her a multi-dimensional spectacle intensifies our irritation with the Western mockery. To support and endorse this irritation, the film abruptly cuts the scene with the wife to the scene in the office, where Gallimard kills a fly with a swatter, hitting right into the screen where his wife's face has been just a shot ago. Theatricality and its effects flow over not only into the *mise-en-scène* but also into the cuts (editing becomes part of the visual excess).

The second performance Gallimard attends—both in the play and in the film—takes place at the Chinese opera house. Laconically described in the stage directions, the scene in the film is a memorable episode in which several ways of intensifying the theatrical performance condense: the audiovisual excess, Gallimard's emotional investment (close-ups), his unease growing into fascination (shot/reverse shot patterns, "hidden" ellipses that cut from his initial superficial impression to complete immersion). Having first appeared as a geisha reimagined for Italian opera, Song enters for the second time wearing the typical make-up (a whitened face with rouge around the eyes) in the role of a young woman—concubine Yang Guifei from *The Drunken Beauty*. The plot of this famous piece mirrors Puccini's, centering on a neglected woman, left to deal with her disgrace<sup>14</sup>. Invited to the Pavilion of One Hundred Flowers by the emperor, Yang enters with

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<sup>14</sup> It has been mentioned by Teresa de Lauretis that there is a similarity between the roles of Butterfly and the Drunken Beauty / Concubine, "the staple of Chinese opera" (199, p. 315). Both in the film and in the play, Song implicitly plays the part of the Drunken Concubine again when Gallimard leaves her for several weeks (in the play he has an affair with a girl called Renee, and Song performs a drunken dance and shatters the vase). Song is capable of two roles—one (Puccini's opera) is obvious for Gallimard, the other (the Peking Opera) is not; she juggles different stories about neglected women without an intention to act out the ending of any of them. Gallimard, as if desiring to become Song, reenacts the final of Puccini's opera. He responds to a familiar story created in the West; Song's play with *The Drunken Concubine*—and an alternative, "Eastern" way to live through the neglect and disappointment—seems to be lost on him.

her maids and waits for the emperor who fails to appear because, as she finds out, he has gone to see another concubine. Yang is disappointed and cheerless; she drinks alone and then returns to her quarters. One of the legendary roles of Mei Lanfang, Peking opera star of the 1930s and later of the 1950s, Yang Guifei in *The Drunken Beauty* appears in at least two onscreen adaptations in 1993 – apart from Cronenberg’s film, in Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (1993). When Chen Kaige later made a film about Mei Lanfang, a quotation from *The Drunken Beauty* was used to illustrate the degradation of the stage during the Cultural Revolution.

The fact that it is a female part played in 1960s China makes it possible for both a man and a woman to impersonate women onstage (which earlier was only feasible for men). The irony is lost on Gallimard, but it structures one of this story’s contingencies: Gallimard could have met a modern Chinese actress, but he met a traditional dan<sup>15</sup>, only impersonating a woman.

Several aspects of Song’s performance imply the idea of liminality and develop it in a complex way. According to Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese’s *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (2006), different methods of Eastern actors working with the gaze create an unusual effect of in-betweenness in the theatre. The actors look intensely at something and prompt the viewer to follow the trajectory of their gazes, but they perform a trick—look at a certain point of nothingness. Their “concrete gazes” are very intense, but the objects of the gazes do not exist, they are created by the intensity. Song in the scene is looking either below the audience or above the audience creating the described liminal space, the construction of the invisible with the “concrete gaze”. However, when she looks at Gallimard and acknowledges his presence, she makes him part of the liminal, the empty space in a constant process of becoming. The “concrete gaze” designates the intensified liminal space: Gallimard is affected by an extremely forceful look at nothingness.

After the Peking opera performance, Song teases Gallimard offstage with her remarks about East and West. She remains unseen for him, only a “Platonic” shadow behind the curtains. But finally—with her characteristic theatrical skill—she emerges into the frame to ask him to light her cigarette. This is her private performance for him, the lingering charm of the stage show when yet another minor performance invades cinematic “reality”. The diva’s face framed by a white curtain reminds us how significant framing is in *M. Butterfly*. Framing becomes the filmic mode of signaling the presence of theatricality in an off-stage (or amateur) minor performance: a mirror frames Helga’s parody of Song, the

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<sup>15</sup> Dan – the name for female lead roles in Peking opera.

doorway frames Song's appearance in the courtroom as a man, and, finally, another mirror frames Madame Butterfly performed by Gallimard in prison.

Every interaction between Song and Gallimard (first tea at Song's place, first sex, the picnic with the view of the Great Wall, and the scene in which the girl announces her false pregnancy) is overshadowed by theatre, while Song's performance of femininity is enriched also by the Japanese kabuki and the onnagata conventions<sup>16</sup>. The actor asks her superior from the party, Comrade Chin, why in Peking opera women's roles are traditionally played by men. When Chin comes up with "most probably a remnant of patriarchal social structure" (00h59'20"), Song, dissatisfied with this answer, explains: "it's because only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act" (00h59'24"). "To act" here is both to perform certain actions and to perform on the stage, and the boundary between the two is completely blurred.

Political changes are mediated through the situation in the theatre: the film presents two scenes following immediately one another. After "pregnant" Song goes away for several months to the countryside, Gallimard is shown passing through a street late in the evening and witnessing the changes brought about by the Cultural Revolution. Young people dressed in Mao suits and caps make a gigantic fire out of Peking opera costumes and props. The only European in the crowd, Gallimard witnesses how the heap of colorful costumes and objects is being destroyed by the fire while the Red Guards dance in an agitprop fashion. The ritualized political purging brings about the "birth" of new theatrical forms. Gallimard goes to the same theatre to see a completely different performance—a revolutionary opera, newborn mass theatrical entertainment<sup>17</sup>.

The theatre space itself goes through an obvious change: the audience, previously made of casually dressed people mostly wearing light colors (with occasional fans held both by men and women), has turned into a dark crowd in

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<sup>16</sup> Onnagata—men playing women's roles in kabuki theatre – were supposed not only to express femininity on stage but, for the sake of better expression, to "become" women through living outside the theatre as women (looks, clothing, occupations). See: Morozova, Ekaterina, "The Theatre of Japan. History, Ritual, and Tradition", *Theatre and Theatrical Forms of the East: From Ritual to Performance*, Moscow: GITIS, 2012, pp. 87-128, (In Russ); Gunji, Masakatsu, *Kabuki*, N.Y.: Kodansha America, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> In the first chapter of Brook's *The Empty Space* we read about the importance of transitions to theatre as art. One of Brook's examples is linked to the Peking opera and its substitution for the model opera during the Cultural Revolution: "Of course, it is tragic that this miraculous heritage has been destroyed—and yet I feel that the ruthless Chinese attitude to one of their proudest possessions goes to the heart of the meaning of living theatre—theatre is always a self-destructive art, and it is always written on the wind" (1996, p. 15).

military-green and navy-blue Mao suits. The laconic scenography and costumes imply less difference between the off-stage and on-stage anti-elitist space. Richly embroidered brilliant costumes are substituted by clothes very much similar to those worn by the audience. Gender fluidity and its magic is gone: Gallimard sees the performance of an actress in a female part. Her vibe – an active, self-confident woman, busy with a project—is very different from what Song emanated. The camera replays for the viewers a track-in shot that was used to bring intensity to Gallimard’s close-ups during theatrical experiences. What previously was absolute fascination with Song’s performance has turned into the lack of any emotion at seeing the actress in a revolutionary piece.

Viewing the theatrical space as liminal emphasizes its ability to transport the actor or the audience temporarily, and – hypothetically – to transform them in a more permanent way. The distinction between transportation and transformation, initially introduced by Turner, is pertinent for the discussion of the theatre within the film in *M. Butterfly*. The scenes that incorporate theatre gradually shape the protagonist’s change – from the observer to the participant, and from the survivor to the victim.

In 1968 Paris, Gallimard goes to see *Madame Butterfly* (filmed in the Budapest Opera House) with the purpose of re-living his previous experiences and, as the viewer understands, the ultimate experience of seeing Song in the role. The shot/reverse shot sequence lets us see how emotional he gets, and at the same time the viewer realizes that the performance “simply falls short<sup>18</sup>,” to quote Gallimard. Unlike Song’s performance of the opera, this one does not fascinate and carry away, it brings back the memories and temporarily transports Gallimard to the most intense period of his life. The film implies that Gallimard keeps coming back to the performance of *Madame Butterfly* with the secret hope of feeling as deeply as he previously has felt. When after the opera he witnesses the students’ demonstrations in the streets<sup>19</sup>, the film condenses in one evening everything he misses about China – the intermedial and political liminality.

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<sup>18</sup> “How could you who understood me so well make such a mistake? You show me your true self when what I love was the lie, perfect lie? It’s been destroyed. [...] I’m a man who loved a woman created by a man. Anything else simply falls short” (01h27’29” – 01h28’16”).

<sup>19</sup> One of the recurring motifs of the film is the transition through which familiar places are going: the opera theatre in Beijing – before and after the Cultural Revolution, Song’s bourgeois house newly inhabited by the poor, city streets teeming with demonstrators – in Beijing and in Paris. Due to the memories of the past certain places become liminal because Gallimard does not know how to categorize them, they have to remain “betwixt and between”.

The final episode of *M. Butterfly* is a solo performance written, directed and acted by Gallimard in prison. He appropriates the story of *Madame Butterfly* after the trial, conviction, and complete disillusionment that leads him to suicide. The in-prison performance is particularly multi-layered: Gallimard plays the role of a geisha to the recorded music of Puccini's opera, implying both Song's first performance and all other performances of *Madame Butterfly* he has seen. Unlike Song's understated make-up and costume, Gallimard's stage outfit suggests a geisha in drag. Since the film previously associated bright make-up and costume not with Puccini's opera but with the Peking opera, Gallimard's painted face looks back on this tradition, while the close-ups of his painted nails remind the viewer of Song's hands, and the blending of onnagata and dan traditions that she has reenacted.

"The concrete gaze" and the "action of seeing" (Barba; Savarese, 2006, p. 129), as constituent parts of an "Eastern" performance, are also present. Gallimard starts with accentuating his brows with a piece of chalk while saying: "There is a vision of the Orient that I have. Slender women in chong sams and kimonos who die for the love of unworthy foreign devils" (01h31'50"). At the end of this cue, Gallimard is positioned in a medium close-up, his hands touching his brows, thus bringing attention to the eyes. His gaze is directed somewhere, at some "nothingness," implying that he is seeing something but in reality, creating the object—his vision of the Orient. Not only his costume and make-up, but also the gaze, able to create a liminal space, turn him into yet another version of M. Butterfly—the "master" of the liminal (figure 1).



Figure 1. Jeremy Irons in David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*.

The scene focuses on the gradual transformation of Gallimard into M. Butterfly resulting in theatrical death come true. The transformation is shown through changes in dialogue, distance (from medium close-ups to extreme close-ups) and editing. When Gallimard starts applying rouge, he accompanies the action with the line about “Eastern” women: “Who take whatever punishment we give them, and spring back, strengthened by love, unconditionally” (01h32’09”). Verbally he continues to play a male part (“we” as men and “them” as women), but visually he is being transformed into an actor, performing the role of a Japanese woman. At this moment, Gallimard’s performance intercuts to Song on the plane being released (handcuffs are taken off). Song’s job is over, his transportation was temporary though extended in time, and the performer is back to his “ordinary” self. Gallimard uses the liminal theatrical space differently: he turns it into the ritualized place of transformation that cannot be undone. The close-up on Gallimard’s eyes shows a new stage in the alteration process which is accompanied by changes in what he says – “the man I loved was not worthy” (01h32’45”). Acknowledging his transformation into M. Butterfly verbally, Gallimard puts on a wig: “Love warped my judgement, blinded my eyes, so that now when I look into the mirror, I see nothing but...” (01h33’42”). He takes a pause, throws away the mirror and does not finish the sentence, though in the play he does, saying “nothing but... a woman” (1989, p. 92). In the film, after this unfinished “nothing but” we see two shots with prisoners—Gallimard’s audience. Seeing nothing but his audience, the performer recognizes his own self-consciousness, his being-looked-at situation and thus a responsibility to create “some great theatre”: “Death with honor is better than life with dishonor. At last, in a prison, far from China, I have found her. My name is René Gallimard—also known as Madame Butterfly” (01h35’36”). Since Gallimard has turned into a celebrity, like Song, his performance mirrors her first performance but, instead of staging an elevated operatic dimension, it borders on parody.

The performer, well aware of the inherent liminality of the theatrical space, achieves disorienting ambiguity even in his last words. While what he does is unambiguous, tragic, and transformational, what he says leaves his audience with questions: the phrase “also known as” from his cue blurs the boundary between the actor and his role at the very moment when the audience wants an answer about Gallimard’s “true” identity. The multi-layered final performance—after which the actor exits forever—transmits the liminal anxieties from the performer to the viewers who are left partly deceived. The absence of answers is especially disturbing at the moment when the audience is ready to be transported from the world of performance back to the ordinary world. Refusing to give answers, theatre extends itself, lingers in the minds of the viewers, and demonstrates that

some performances—although in a utopian way—are aimed at quasi-transformations of their audiences.

## Conclusion

This essay has inquired into how theatrical and cinematic versions of the same text approach a popular trope—the theatre within a theatre, and its liminal effects. Seen as a powerful tool of the play used to disorient the audience spatially and temporarily, the trope has been discussed further in its enhanced power—in Cronenberg’s adaptation. The popular trope turns into a device of experience intensification via media contacts: the “real” film meets the “artificial” theatre. Theatre is not only incorporated into the film but also flows over into cinematic reality thus providing the intensity of experience. Representing the audience on the screen, the film also inquires into the boundary between temporary transportations and permanent transformations.

Films that incorporate theatre often focus on the theme of performing well or on what it is like to perform well. One of the values promoted by such films is the ability to deal with the real “acting challenges” (“You were my greatest acting challenge,” Song says to Gallimard). Cronenberg continues this discussion by showing what it is like to be a good audience, or at least to be a really invested spectator, on the edge of becoming a participant. Theatre is depicted as a challenging place where we open up to vulnerable and creative experiences that promote sensitivity to the liminal. Using an age-old medium, Cronenberg demonstrates its power to impact the human psyche. Theatre in *M. Butterfly* gives rise to alternative versions of reality, much in the same way as advanced technologies and biotechnologies in Cronenberg’s other films.

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