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Navigating Gender Fluidity Amidst the Male Gaze:

An Analysis of David Cronenberg's M. Butterfly

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Abstract:

David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* (1993) tells the story of René Gallimard, a French diplomat, and Song Liling, a Peking opera performer who is later revealed to be a spy. Their 20-year affair unfolds with Gallimard unaware of Song's true identity as a man. This essay will explore the view of gender through Gallimard's expectations of eastern women. It will also examine how Song's "gender change" challenges the traditional gender concepts at the time. Additionally, the essay will analyze the criticism from the director of Gallimard's "male gaze", and how the director, as a man, unavoidably has some extent of "male gaze" in narration. Finally, the essay will compare *M. Butterfly* with the other film about gender fluidity in the Chinese context - *Farewell My Concubine*.

Keywords: gender, David Cronenberg, *M. Butterfly* (1993), male gaze

Introduction

Adapted from David Henry Hwang's famous play, the movie *M. Butterfly* (1993) was directed by Canadian film director David Cronenberg.[1] It discusses the complex interplay of gender, power, and cultural expectation through the romance between Gallimard, a French diplomat, and Song, a Peking opera performer. Gallimard, during their 20-year affair, remains unaware that Song is not only a man but also a spy. Song uses his western fantasies of eastern femininity to his advantage to gather political secrets.

This essay also analyzes how *M. Butterfly* challenges the conventional views of gender. It will also investigate the idealized and exoticized expectations of eastern women. Additionally, the essay will examine the influence of the male gaze on the film's portrayal of women. By comparing M. Butterfly with another film that discusses gender fluidity and feminine sacrifice - *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), this essay will show how gender fluidity has historically existed in China amidst biases and difficulties.

Although "they" has become an increasingly common gender pronoun for unknown gender or nonbinary gender, this essay tends to use such pronouns only when the person or character self-identifies in that way. However, due to the lack of psychological portrayal of Song in *M. Butterfly*, the character's self gender identity is hard to define. For consistency, the pronoun 'he' will be used to refer to Song, based on his biological sex. It is hoped that this pronoun usago also reflects how a man can both show feminine and masculine qualities.

Views of Gender in M. Butterfly and in post-war China

The story is set in the 1960s-1970s, a time of dramatic global changes. During this period, many Asian countries were going through important political shifts. For instance, in China, the Cultural Revolution just started, with the Red Guards targeting intellectuals and controlling the country. Meanwhile, France, where our main character Gallimard is from, still maintained a few minor colonies in Asia, but its influence was steadily declining. [2]

At the time, Mao Zedong aimed to eliminate Confucian influence by promoting ideas like "Iron Women" and the belief that "women can hold up half the sky".[3] More women were joining the workforce. Monogamy was gradually replacing polygamy, though it wasn't fully written into law. At least, extramarital affairs without a wife's consent were considered adultery.[4] Still, wage inequality remained due to gender-based job divisions. Men were often assigned higher-paying jobs, while women were given lower-paying ones. [5]

However, despite entering the workforce, women were

1 "M. Butterfly," IMDb, October 1, 1993, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107468/.

2 Bhagwan Sahai Bunkar, "Sino-French Diplomatic Relations: 1964-81." China Report 20#1 (1984), 44.

3 Xin Huang, *The Gender Legacy of the Mao Era: Women's Life Stories in Contemporary China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018), 11.

4 Lisa Tran, "Marriage and Family in China: Ideology and Practice." *Marriage and Family in Asia 13, no.1 (2008).*

5 John Bauer, Wang Feng, Nancy E. Riley, and Xiaohua Zhao, "Gender Inequality in Urban China: Education and Employment," *Modern China* 18, no. 3 (1992): 333–70.

still expected to take care of their homes and families. Traditional values, like the "Four Virtues of Women" continued to stress the importance of women's obedience and proper behavior:[6]

Display serenity (you 幽 [/ qing 清]), calm poise (xian 閒 / 閑), purity (zhen 貞), and quietness (jing 靜). Protect the integrity (jie 節) of rules. Maintain order in all matters. Act with a sense of propriety and modesty. In both movement and stillness, everything should be done with balance. This defines a woman's virtue. [7]

In the movie, Gallimard and Song first met when Song performed *Madame Butterfly* - the Italian opera written by Giacomo Puccini. The opera tells a story of a Japanese woman who committed suicide after being abandoned by her American lover. Gallimard, deeply moved by the show, tells Song how "her" performance deeply fascinated him. Song Liling responds by saying that of course he would love the story, because, in the eyes of westerners, eastern women are always quiet, submissive, and willingly obedient to their husbands, like "butterflies." The word "butterfly" itself evokes feminine qualities such as gentleness and fragility, making *Madame Butterfly* the ideal model of an eastern woman, strongly fueling western men's desire to conquer.

The movie further reveals the stereotypes Gallimard holds about eastern women which are simplistic and exoticized views:

Virginity as a Precious Trait: Gallimard believes eastern women highly value their virginity, which makes them more desirable to him. When Song Liling rejects his advances by saying, "I've never invited men to my home," this only excites him more, and he tries to kiss Song. This stereotype suggests that eastern women are seen as exceptionally pure and chaste, which increases their perceived worth.

Physical Innocence and Weakness: Gallimard's perceptions of eastern and western women are deeply tied to his sense of masculinity. He views eastern women, like Song Liling, as delicate, modest, and submissive, which allows him to feel powerful and dominant. The perceived innocence and fragility of eastern women feed into his belief that they need protection and guidance from men, reinforcing his sense of control and masculine authority. This is evident when Song asks to keep his clothes on, invoking a modesty that aligns with Gallimard's fantasy of the pure, submissive eastern woman, further boosting his ego.

In contrast, Gallimard finds western women, like Frau Baden, Gallimard's other lover, too bold, assertive, and sexually confident. When Frau is naked and self-assured in bed, it threatens Gallimard's masculinity because her confidence removes his feeling of control. He doesn't feel the same power over her as he does with eastern women, which diminishes his excitement and sense of dominance. In this way, Gallimard's attraction to eastern women is closely linked to his need to assert his masculinity, while his discomfort with western women's assertiveness reveals his fragile sense of masculine identity.

Maternal and Sacrificial Nature: Gallimard also sees eastern women as naturally nurturing, self-sacrificing, and willing to endure hardship. He assumes they can always accept whatever he, an ordinary white man, offers, even though he is married, works as a minor diplomat, and doesn't give any financial support to Song. For example, in the movie, Song Liling is willing to give up his acting career to have Gallimard's child, thinking it's his fault they haven't had children. Song also never asks him to divorce his wife, willing to be the lover that will never be admitted. Song plays into this fantasy of the gentle and self-sacrificing eastern woman to manipulate Gallimard. His fantasy blinds him from seeing who Song Liling truly is.

At the end of the film, Gallimard's monologue in prison before his suicide provides a powerful reflection. Gallimard reflects on his eastern fantasy of a graceful lady in traditional Chinese dresses, who would sacrifice herself for an ordinary foreigner. He admits that this idealized vision blinds him to see the truth. In this tragic monologue, Gallimard finally refers to Song Liling as "the man," clearly indicating the collapse of his eastern fantasy. In his view, his former lover, Song Liling, represents the deceitful western man who cruelly exploited his devotion.

Gender Performance and Fluidity in M. Butterfly

Judith Butler, in his novel *Gender Trouble*, argues that gender is not a natural trait but a result of repeated performative acts.[8] Similarly, French feminist, De Beauvoir, also famously writes: "one is not born a woman, but becomes one."[9] This perspective on gender as a performative act is illustrated in traditional Chinese opera, where cross-dressing is a common practice. Since the Qing Dynasty, in traditional Chinese opera, it's common for male actors to play female roles - which are called "nandan (男旦)" and

6 Mark Cartwright, "Women in Ancient China," World History Encyclopedia, September 11, 2024.

7 Ban Zhao, "Lessons for Women," quoted in *Book of Later Han*, vol. 84, "Biographies of Exemplary Women – Ban Zhao."

8 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 337.

9 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 2015).

"nüxiaosheng (女 小 生)".[10] With completely feminine costumes on the stage, these male actors were not only expected to look like women, but also expected to act and think like a women. [11]

In the film, Song Liling did an impeccable performance of his gender. This performance is shaped by cultural fantasies, using symbols from Beijing opera, tea ceremonies, long hair, and traditional clothing to match with Gallimard's stereotypical imagination.

Song both embraces and disguises his feminine identity. He acts "like a woman" in private, with Gallimard, and on stage. However, in situations like discussing plans with Communist party members, or confronting the judge in the courtroom, he talked and dressed "like a man". Song Liling reflects this when he tells Comrade Qin that men are better suited to perform female roles because they understand how women should react. In his interactions with Gallimard, he continually refines his feminine traits while also experiencing the real challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society.

Song Liling's ambiguous gender identity brought both advantages and challenges. On one hand, it facilitated smooth interactions with western men, allowing him to navigate relationships effectively. There is evidence from the movie that shows that Liling was not ashamed by his female appearance. When he reveals his true gender to Gallimard, shattering his long-held fantasy and asserting, "I am not just a man". This revelation underscores his desire for an authentic identity, rejecting superficial labels that obscure his true self.

On the other hand, it led to criticism and lack of acceptance from his own cultural community. The real-life inspiration for the character Song Liling, Shi Pei Pu, was neither accepted in his writer community, nor recognized by the Chinese government.[12] When he was sentenced in Paris, the Chinese government denied any involvement with him, abandoned him, and never allowed him to return to his homeland.[13] He became a distorted hybrid identity that felt disconnected from mainstream society.

This role not only subverts traditional gender norms but also illustrates gender fluidity. Song's true identity is concealed beneath his gender performance, revealing both the fluidity of gender identity and the vulnerability of gender perception. By hiding and then revealing his gender, the film challenges the rigid gender roles and shows that gender is not just a biological fact but also shaped by social and cultural performance.

Male Gaze: Subversion and Reflection

When Gallimard first meets Song Liling, mirrors are often used to show his facial expressions. These reflections in the mirror imply that Liling's image is not real, revealing the artificiality of his look and Gallimard's false perceptions. At the film's end, Gallimard looks into the mirror, calls himself the true "Madame Butterfly," and uses the shattered mirror pieces to commit suicide. This scene illustrates the tragic nature of Gallimard's fantasies and emphasizes the film's critical portrayal of the false imagery of women. The mirror symbolizes his inability to see the truth of Song's identity and a reflection of his sexist and orientalist views. This shows how women are often seen through the lens of male fantasies and expectations.

Cronenberg's direction critically examines and subverts the male gaze throughout *M. Butterfly*. In his book *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, Cronenberg emphasizes "only men know how to play women," a line from the film that captures the essence of his message.[14] He suggests that the idea of femininity is constructed by men and men often create imageries of women that are not true. In fact, the director did emphasize this aspect strongly, as discussed by the sections above.

However, bias seems unavoidable. The film is predominantly seen through Gallimard's perspective, focusing on his desires, fantasies, and the eventual failure. This narrative structure centers on his emotional journey, highlighting the effects of his illusions and self-deception. As a result, the film prioritizes Gallimard's viewpoint, offering little insight into Song Liling's internal experiences or motivations, leaving Song's thoughts and emotions largely unexplored.

Song Liling is primarily depicted as the object of Gallimard's romantic fantasies and cultural projections. Rather than being portrayed as an independent character with his own emotions and struggles, he is shown as a fulfillment of Gallimard's idealized vision of asian femininity. The film provides close to nothing into the true thoughts of "Liling".

In *M. Butterfly*, the male gaze goes beyond simply objectifying women's bodies. Instead, it simplifies and marginalizes non-male roles. The film doesn't feature any deep or

10 Guanda Wu, "Should Nandan Be Abolished? The Debate over Female Impersonation in Early Republican China and Its Underlying Cultural Logic," *Asian Theatre Journal* 30, no. 1 (2013): 189–206.

11 Siu Leung Li, *Cross-Dressing in Chinese Opera* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003).

12 Laramie Mok, "Who Was Shi Peipu, a Chinese Spy and Opera Star Who Cross-Dressed as a Woman and Had a Long-Term Sexual Relationship with a French Diplomat?" *South China Morning Post*, June 30, 2019.

13 Mok

14 David Crononberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

authentic portrayals of women. The Chinese women, apart from Song Liling, whose gender is ambiguous, are either overlooked or depicted in shallow, stereotypical ways. Comrade Chin, for example, is reduced to a representative of the Communist Party and is played by a Japanese actress, despite being Chinese. The other women, such as Song's maids, are shown only in dark scenes, speaking in Cantonese (despite the Shanghai setting), with their roles diminished to background noise. Gallimard repeatedly ignores them, highlighting the film's focus on stereotypes, much like other Hollywood films that depict Chinatown as a place filled with small, busy, and tense Asians speaking an incomprehensible language.

For western women, the male gaze is more blatant. Jeanne Gallimard, Gallimard's wife, and Frau are seen only in contexts like fancy dinners or in bed. Frau, played by Annabel Leventon, appears fully naked in a scene where the camera lingers on her topless body for nearly a minute. The camera's focus on Frau's body clearly serves no purpose other than to objectify her, reinforcing Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze"—a term she popularized in her 1973 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", where she described how the male gaze projects its fantasies onto women, shaping them to fit male desires.[15]

Compare M. Butterfly with Farewell My Concubine

M. Butterfly is not the only film that explores Beijing opera and gender fluidity; the 1993 release *Farewell My Concubine*, directed by Kaige Chen, also addresses these themes.

Farewell My Concubine tells the story of two Peking opera actors, Cheng Dieyi and Duan Xiaolou, spanning from the 1920s to the 1970s during a period of great social upheaval in China. The film intertwines their personal fates with the famous opera *Farewell My Concubine*, in which Dieyi plays the role of Concubine Yu, a female character who commits suicide out of loyalty. Dieyi becomes unable to separate his operatic persona from his real-life identity, while Duan is used to experiencing the secular parts of life, following the social rules. At the end, Dieyi commits suicide out of disappointment with his relationship with Duan and the social rules of the time.

Both *Farewell My Concubine* and *M. Butterfly* explore themes of gender fluidity and suicide. Released in the same year, 1993, both works drew international attention for their bold illustration of these queer themes, making it interesting to compare how two files approached similar issues during the same period.

In *Farewell My Concubine*, the motif of suicide is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture's view of women. The film portrays the character of Concubine Yu, played by the male opera actor Dieyi, committing suicide to demonstrate loyalty. This act reflects traditional values of feminine sacrifice and honor, which is also highlighted in *M. Butterfly.*

However, while both works engage with gender fluidity, the sources of this fluidity and their implications are different in two films. In *Farewell My Concubine*, Dieyi's gender performance seems to stem from both his inability to separate his onstage role from his real-life identity, and his love towards Duan Xiaolou since childhood. In *M. Butterfly*, gender fluidity stems from a political act, but the motivation and history behind Song's actions are not shown. Both films offer complex depictions of gender and identity, but while *Farewell My Concubine* focuses on the personal tragedy, *M. Butterfly* criticizes the global power dynamics and the exoticization of gender roles.

Having two films, *M. Butterfly* and *Farewell My Concubine*, discussing gender fluidity in the early 1990s, both set in China, reflects a growing interest in exploring untraditional gender norms. These films highlight how Chinese culture, particularly through Beijing opera, provides a historical lens for understanding fluid gender roles. The fact that both films were released around the same time shows a shift in cinematic storytelling, where issues of gender, identity, and cultural representation were being brought to the forefront, challenging audiences to reconsider the masculinity and femininity binaries.

Conclusion

M. Butterfly unravels the complexities of gender fluidity, cultural stereotypes, and the male gaze. Through Gallimard's relationship with Song Liling, the film exposes the historical misconceptions about eastern femininity and the toxicity of western masculinity. The film reveals how genders are shaped more by cultural performance than biological fact.

Yet, while *M. Butterfly* critiques the western male gaze, the director Cronenberg is unable to jump out of his bias. The limitations of the narrative's critique are reinforced by Song Liling's character, who is mostly an object of Gallimard's projections and whose own identity and problems are not fully explored. This reflects the difficulty of addressing gender fluidity and dismantling gendered power dynamics within the constraints of cinema, especially under the lens of male-directed storytelling.

The comparison between *M. Butterfly* and *Farewell My Concubine* draws attention to the fluid gender performance and shows how, despite significant social obstacles, gender fluidity has long existed in Chinese culture. The expected feminine qualities of sacrifice and commitment

15 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

are explored in both movies, which have made women the targets of patriarchal social norms.

In conclusion, *M. Butterfly* provides a poignant analysis of how cultural and personal illusions influence gender stereotypes and how tragedy results from these illusions. The stories of Gallimard and Song Liling reminds us that gender is socially constructed and gender is flexible.

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