“David Cronenberg’s *M.Butterfly*” by Brian McIlroy

[Delivered as an Introduction to the Vancouver Opera Society Special event screening, Vancity Theatre, Vancouver, May 6, 2010.]

It’s important to draw a distinction between *Madama Butterfly* – the opera – and Madame Butterfly, a theme that has been revisited periodically throughout the last 125 years and on which the film *M.Butterfly* depends. Some years ago, I was a member of a research teams that explored this theme in depth, resulting in the book *A Vision of the Orient: Texts, Intertexts and Contexts of Madame Butterfly* eds. Jonathan Wisenthal, Sherill Grace, Melinda Boyd, Brian McIlroy, and Vera Micznik (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). Cronenberg is often a controversial figure in cultural conversations as his films pose a challenge to easy mainstream consumption, so it is no surprise that this work has attracted bemused comment.

The essential story of Madame Butterfly is a Western male in the East marrying an Asian woman and then abandoning her. Here are some historical highlights on that theme:

1885: French Lieutenant Julien Viaud (pen name Pierre Loti) marred a Japanese woman in Nagasaki (for a summer).
1887: Loti published his travel memoir: *Madame Chrysanthème*

1898: John Luther Long’s short story “Madam Butterfly” is published

1900: David Belasco’s play *Madam Butterfly*

1904: Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*

1915: Canadian Sidney Olcott’s film *Madame Butterfly*, starring Mary Pickford.

1922: The first colour film of note is Chester Franklin’s *Toll of the Sea*. This film is an adaptation of a Madame Butterfly story and stars Anna May Wong.

1954: James Michener’s novel *Sayonara*

1957: Joshua Logan’s film *Sayonara* starring Marlon Brando.

1988: David Henry Hwang’s play *M.Butterfly*

1993: Cronenberg’s film *M.Butterfly* with Hwang as screenwriter.

In simplistic terms, in these narratives, up to Hwang’s play, the West is a macho male and the East is a passive, submissive female. [Pinkerton and Cio-Cio San in the opera]. Hwang seeks to upend this narrative.

The play ran for over 750 performances and won numerous awards. Hwang based his play on a true story of one Bernard Bouriscot, a French Diplomat who passed secrets to the Chinese and was later imprisoned. It came out in court that his Chinese secret agent lover was not a woman but, in fact, a man. Hwang has
written about the preconditions of writing the play via the opera but mainly through well-known cultural stereotypes:

“The Idea of doing a deconstructivist *Madama Butterfly* immediately appealed to me. This, despite the fact that I didn’t even know the plot of the opera! I knew Butterfly only as a cultural stereotype: speaking of an Asian woman, we would sometimes say, “She’s pulling a Butterfly,” “which meant playing the submissive Oriental number. Yet, I felt convinced that the libretto would include yet another lotus blossom pining away for a cruel Caucasian man, and dying for her love. Such a story has become too much of a cliché not to be included in the archetypal East-West romance that started it all. Sure enough, when I purchased the record, I discovered it contained a wealth of sexist and racist clichés, reaffirming my faith in Western culture.” (David Henry Hwang, *M.Butterfly* (New York: Dramatist Play Service Inc., 1988, p. 86.)

One can understand why an Asian-American like Hwang would be interested in this material as a critique of continuing orientalism. But why Cronenberg?
The labels attached to Cronenberg have included “Baron of Blood”, “Sci-Fi”, “Weird”, “Cult Horror,” “Bad sex obsessed”, “cold”, “clinical”. His early films included scenes of an exploding head, and a protagonist eager to get his hands on pornographic snuff films. His main female characters in Dead Ringers take drugs in order to have “sex like Nagasaki” and Japanese pornography is found at the beginning of Cronenberg’s film Videodrome. But there are connections to Cronenberg’s major previous themes:

1) His fascination with the transformation of the body

2) His pessimism about human communication—one is fascinated by but can never really know the other

3) Sexuality is invariably a trap—it moves like a moth to a flame

4) Continuing the insect metaphor, his protagonists are like flies caught in an invisible spider web. They spiral downward, slow to realize what is really happening.

The film was made for $20 million in China, Eastern Europe, Paris and Toronto. It was a commercial failure, although it was released on DVD in 2009. Why did it fail to capture a large audience? It’s a homosexual love story that unavoidably romanticizes the exoticization of the East by the Western male. It’s also unapologetically cerebral. It ends in a macabre suicide. It’s hard for the Western viewer not to feel complicit in some way, a strategy that ultimately makes the
audience uneasy. For Hwang, this approach is a historical and cultural corrective; for Cronenberg, it comes across as self-loathing of Western civilization’s actions without any redemption. In this month of May, Asian heritage month, it’s appropriate to consider a work dealing directly with myths of East and West, Men and Women, however uncomfortable the experience.