

DAVID HENRY HWANG'S *M. BUTTERFLY*: A PLAYWRIGHT IN THE POSITION OF A PHILOSOPHER

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RESUMO: O presente texto analisa em que medida a peça mais emblemática do autor teatral David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly*, de 1987, pode ser utilizada para exemplificar a afirmativa do filósofo francês Jean-François Lyotard de que todo artista ou escritor pós-moderno se encontra na posição de um filósofo. As considerações da teórica canadense Linda Hutcheon sobre as principais características do pós-modernismo são utilizadas no presente texto como ponto de partida para a definição não só do pós-modernismo como um todo, como também do artista pós-moderno em si.

Palavras-chave: pós-modernismo, teatro, apropriação.

The French philosopher and literary critic Jean-François Lyotard states in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* that a “postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher” (LYOTARD, 1984, p. 81). Lyotard supports his idea with the argument that the works produced by such kind of artist and/or writer “are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work” (p. 81). Still according

to the literary critic, “those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for” (p. 81). Lyotard’s point of view leaves room for the questioning of at least two concepts used by him when comparing a postmodern artist to a philosopher: who exactly may be considered a postmodern artist/writer and/or a philosopher?

The present study aims at outlining the main features of what came to be known as postmodernism, and, consequently, unveiling the traits which would characterize a postmodern artist/writer and a postmodern work of art. Taking into consideration Lyotard’s ideas, the study also aims at examining in what sense(s) the comparison between a postmodern artist and a philosopher can be effectively established.

In order to achieve the aforementioned aims, Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon’s texts “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism” is going to be used as a source which provides some of the main features of postmodernism, as well as of postmodern artists and works of art. Such features are going to be traced in and exemplified by Asian-American playwright David Henry Hwang’s most emblematic piece, *M. Butterfly*. In addition, the present study also aims at investigating whether or not David Henry Hwang can be seen as someone who is “in the position of a philosopher” (LYOTARD, 1984, p. 81).

According to Linda Hutcheon, one of the most important features of postmodernism is the one which says it is “a contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 243), and also that “it always works within conventions in order to subvert them” (p. 246). Still according to Hutcheon, postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political” (p. 244).

Nonetheless, Hutcheon reminds us that “postmodernism cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary” (p. 244). She also states that it is mainly a “European and American (North and South)” (p. 244) phenomenon. That is to say that although postmodernism may be defined as “a cultural activity that can be discerned in most art forms and many currents of thought today” (p. 244), a precise historical and geographical characteristic needs to be attached to it.

In Hutcheon’s viewpoint, another remarkable trait of postmodernism is what she calls ‘the presence of the past’, “a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (p. 244). The Canadian theorist argues that this past, “its aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection” (p. 245) in postmodernism. This critical reflection is often made through what Hutcheon calls ‘the perfect postmodernist form’: parody. The author of *The Poetics of Postmodernism* argues that parody “paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (p. 251).

It is through parody as well that another prominent feature of postmodernism may be noticed: an “inquiry into the nature of subjectivity (or of self)” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 252). Hutcheon argues that once artists rely on parody in order to produce their works, the ideas of authenticity and originality are undermined. Hutcheon quotes American critic Douglas Crimp: “The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images” (p. 251).

Hutcheon states that the concept of subjectivity that is questioned by postmodernism brings along with it “an entire set of ideas that have been dominant in our culture until now

[...], linked to this contesting of the unified and coherent self is a more general questioning of any totalizing or homogenizing system” (p. 252).

Postmodernism, states Hutcheon, “argues that such systems are indeed attractive, perhaps even necessary; but this does not make them any less illusory” (p. 247).

Taking into consideration all the aforementioned features related to postmodernism outlined by Linda Hutcheon, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* may be considered a postmodern work of art. From the ‘presence of the past’, to the use of parody and the debasing of the concept of the self, all the attributes of postmodernism itemized by the Canadian critic may be found in the Asian-American playwright’s most emblematic piece.

M. Butterfly is a 1989 play written by Hwang after having read a story in *The New York Times* in 1986. This was no ordinary story: Bernard Bouriscot, a French diplomat, was accused of passing classified information to the Chinese government through a spy. According to the story, Bouriscot had been in love with and had kept a clandestine romantic relationship to this particular spy for twenty years without knowing that the spy, who was also an opera singer, was not an extremely modest Chinese woman, as Bouriscot claimed to believe, but a biological man.

After giving lots of thought on how he should develop the play he could see coming out of this extraordinary story, Hwang asked himself: “What did Bouriscot think he was getting in this Chinese actress?” (HWANG, 1989, p. 95). The answer Hwang came up with was filled with cultural resonances and aesthetic implications: “He probably thought he had found Madame Butterfly” (p. 95).

Madame Butterfly, originally in Italian *Madama Butterfly*, is a widely known opera written by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini, which premiered in 1904 and “is now

beloved throughout the Western world” (p. 5). Puccini’s opera is thought to be based on two previous works: American lawyer and writer John Luther Long’s 1898 short story “Madame Butterfly” and French novelist Pierre Loti’s 1887 novel *Madame Chrysanthèm*. These two late nineteenth century works tell the stories of tormented love relationships between Western naval officers and supposedly submissive young Japanese women.

Puccini’s opera is set in 1904 and tells the story of Benjamin Franklin Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San, “a feminine ideal, beautiful and brave” (p. 5). Pinkerton is an American naval officer who buys a house in Nagasaki, Japan to live with his newly ‘acquired’ 15-year-old Japanese wife, Cio-Cio-San, who is part of the deal through which Pinkerton had bought the house. Cio-Cio-San has left all her parents, relatives and friends to live with Pinkerton. Although she has been ‘acquired’ by her husband alongside with their house, she is happy to live with him. On the other hand, Pinkerton does not seem to take their marriage seriously. Pinkerton calls his wife Madame Butterfly due to what he sees as her delicate gestures, which he believes to be similar to the movements of a butterfly.

In the second act of the opera, Cio-Cio-San is in their house holding a baby, her son with Pinkerton, waiting for her husband, who has returned to the USA and has not been back for the last three years. Despite all the pieces of evidence, Cio-Cio-San believes Pinkerton will come back to her: she receives a letter through which she learns that Pinkerton has gotten married once more to an American woman.

Ultimately, the American naval officer does return to Japan, but this time accompanied by his American wife, who visits Cio-Cio-San in order to take Pinkerton’s son. Cio-Cio-San refuses to hand her baby in and tells Pinkerton’s American wife that only

Pinkerton himself can take the baby. By the time Pinkerton arrives, Cio-Cio-San lies dying after having attempted suicide.

It is Hwang himself who states that when he came up with the answer to what might Bouriscot get in that particular Chinese actress, i.e. that he “probably thought he had found Madame Butterfly” (HWANG, 1989, p. 95), he did not thoroughly know the plot of Puccini’s opera. Nonetheless, he was fully aware of the cultural resonances implied in it: “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” (p. 95). In order to built his play Hwang had to recur not only to an in-depth research of Puccini’s play, but also on means of creating his own “deconstructivist *Madame Butterfly*” (p. 95), that is *M. Butterfly*.

Like Puccini’s opera, Hwang’s play, also tells the love story of a Western man and an Oriental female character, this time not a Japanese teenager, but a young Chinese. However, if in Puccini’s opera the female character was a young biological woman, in Hwang’s play the female figure is in fact a biological man who expresses his gender via a female figure. The Western white man, the French diplomat Rene Gallimard, falls in love with Song Liling, a Chinese actor who Gallimard sees playing the role of Puccini’s Cio-cio-san/Butterfly. The basis for the relationship between Gallimard and Song Liling is a blending of the plot of Puccini’s opera and the story Hwang read in *The New York Times*. The result is a work of art that is postmodern to its core.

Taking into consideration Linda Hutcheon’s ideas on the main features of postmodernism, a postmodern work of art would be that which “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 243). Among

many other possible examples present in the play, *M. Butterfly*'s very title is an extremely rich source for those who would like to explore how it deals with 'the very concepts it challenges'.

The title of Hwang's play immediately evokes Puccini's opera and all the cultural resonances related to it, especially those related to (Western) men and (Oriental) women: the submissive oriental woman who kills herself for love; the merciless white Western man who cruelly does as he pleases with women, especially Oriental ones. Nonetheless, by naming his own play as an altered form of the title of Puccini's opera, Hwang let us know that his play is closely connected to Puccini's but also that it is not the same work of art.

The substitution of 'Madame' by 'M.' also has tremendous implications especially in a play that "works within conventions in order to subvert them" (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 246). The title 'Madame' immediately evokes a woman, whereas 'M.', the abbreviation of the French 'Monsieur', became, in Hwang's own words, "far more mysterious and ambiguous" (HWANG, 1989, p. 96). Therefore, the installation of an easily-recognizable intertextuality filled with cultural resonances between Puccini's and Hwang's pieces in the very title of *M. Butterfly* is subverted into a source for ongoing speculation and doubts, like the whole of the play itself. Those speculations go from aspects related to sexuality (male or female) to those connected to originality and artistic genres ('Is/Wasn't it Puccini's opera?'; 'Is/Wasn't it an opera?'; 'Is it a version?').

The fact that *M. Butterfly* was written by an Asian-American playwright leaves room for the establishment of another connection between this play and Linda Hutcheon's arguments on postmodernism: the Canadian critic states that postmodernism is basically a "European and American (North and South)" (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 244) phenomenon.

The choice of Gallimard as a French, European, character may also be seen as a reinforcement to this assertion.

Hutcheon also argues that postmodernism is “fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political” (p. 244). *M. Butterfly* has all these characteristics. It is contradictory from its very core: it tells the tormented love story of a man who dies claiming to be the woman he loved for a biological man disguised as a submissive woman. The play is undoubtedly ‘resolutely historical and inescapably political’: the political situation of the world in the 1960s is basilar to the structure and development of the plot of the play, especially the conflictive relationship between the Capitalist Western nations and the communist Eastern countries.

‘The presence of the past’, another important feature of postmodernism may also be clearly associated with *M. Butterfly*. Linda Hutcheon argues that this particular feature is “a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 244) and that “its aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection” (p. 245). If we consider that Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* is a work of art that not only is built through the using of a certain set of stereotypes that have pervaded the Western thought for quite a long time, but also that it helps propagating these stereotypes, once it is ‘beloved throughout the Western World’, the use Hwang makes of Puccini’s opera is unambiguously ‘a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue’ with the past Puccini’s opera stands for. Hwang’s 1989 play does not reinforce the stereotypes propagated by *Madama Butterfly*. Quite on the contrary, in *M. Butterfly*, *Madama Butterfly*, “its aesthetic forms and its social formations are problematized by critical reflection” (p. 245).

All the aforementioned connections established between *M. Butterfly* and the features Linda Hutcheon sees as inherent to postmodernism may be easily associated with what the Canadian critic calls ‘the perfect postmodernist form’, i.e. parody. In his book entitled *Parody*, literary critic Simon Dentith defines parody as “the generic term for a range of related cultural practices, all of which are imitative of other cultural forms, with varying degrees of mockery or humor” (DENTITH, 2000, p. 193). Dentith also states that “parody creates new utterances out of the utterances that it seeks to mock” (p. 189). Although one can not really precise which is the degree of ‘mockery and humor’ present in Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, it is possible to say that, as previously mentioned, the Asian-American playwright tries to debase the very concepts of the main intertext he used to build his piece, at the same time that he ‘creates new utterances’ out of these very concepts. *M. Butterfly* undermines the assumptions Puccini used to create his own *Madama Butterfly*. These wide-ranging assumptions go from what it is to be a (Western) man and a (Oriental) woman, to ideas related to the nature of subjectivity. The latter ideas are closely related to parody, for this ‘perfect postmodernist form’ brings along with it the questioning of originality, creativity and, consequently, of the self.

Dentith argues in relation to the questioning of originality that “there is no unsullied point of origin, in which the hypotext existed without the contaminating presence of parody or the parodic forms” (DENTITH, 2000, p. 189). Taking into consideration that Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* itself is believed to be based on at least two previous works, John Luther Long’s “Madame Butterfly” and Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthèm*, and that there is at least one more remarkably important intertext in Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, the story from *The New York Times*, Dentith argument seems quite appropriate. Moreover, if the play

has several different intertexts that together still do not make what it ultimately is, the same might be said of the supposed ‘selves’ of its main characters. Is Gallimard another Pinkerton, another Bouriscot, another Madame Butterfly, all of them combined or none of them at all? The same type of question may be applied to Song Liling. Are there consistent selves underlying these two characters?

By allowing the reader/playgoer to be taken aback by such questionings related to the nature of subjectivity, Hwang’s play, in fact, goes even further, it puts to the test “an entire set of ideas that have been dominant in our culture until now [...], linked to this contesting of the unified and coherent self” (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 252). It is possible to argue that this “is a more general questioning of any totalizing or homogenizing system” (p. 252).

After having associated the main features of postmodernism itemized by Linda Hutcheon with *M. Butterfly* it is possible to infer that it is in fact a postmodern work of art, and its creator David Henry Hwang may be indeed considered a postmodern artist/writer. Moreover, according to the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, a “postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher” (LYOTARD, 1984, p. 81). The kind of questioning aroused by Hwang’s play could be sufficient to establish a connection between the Asian-American playwright, who is a postmodern writer, and philosophers in general. However, it seems relevant to question whether or not Hwang may be in fact seen as someone ‘in the position of a philosopher’.

Brazilian professor and literary critic Evando Nascimento (2004) argues that Lyotard is associated with a generation of French intellectuals who have become more and more well-known since the 1960s, the French post-structuralists. Alongside with Lyotard,

Nascimento places other prominent philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Roland Barthes. A common trait in the works of such philosophers is pointed out by literary critic Ann Brooks: “In Lyotard’s work – and in the work of Derrida [...] and in Barthes – meaning was shown to be indeterminate, all texts implicated in an endless intertextuality” (BROOKS, 1998, p. 93). Writing more specifically about Lyotard, Brooks states that “central to Lyotard’s ‘postmodern condition’ is a recognition and an account of the way in which the ‘grand narratives’ of Western history [...] have broken down” (BROOKS, 1998, p. 92-93). From Brooks’ viewpoint, Lyotard believes that “postmodernism tends to claim the abandonment of all metanarratives which could provide legitimate foundations for truth” (p. 93).

If we consider Lyotard to be philosopher, as Evando Nascimento does, and if we take into consideration what Ann Brooks writes about Lyotard, it is then possible to consider David Henry Hwang as a postmodern writer, and consequently as someone who ‘is in the position of a philosopher’. As this study tried to show, Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* arouses a whole set of queries that may go from its very title to the questioning of the nature of the self. Moreover, these questioning may clearly be associated with the features itemized by Linda Hutcheon, as well as with Lyotard’s thought.

When we take into consideration what Ann Brooks argues about Lyotard’s work, i.e. that in it “meaning was shown to be indeterminate” (p. 93) it is possible to associate such assertion with the various sorts of indeterminacies detectable in *M. Butterfly*. For instance, in Hwang’s piece the main characters’ selves may be seen as indeterminate: is it possible to say who Gallimard really is?; in term of intertextuality and parody, the “unsullied point of origin, in which the hypotext existed” (DENDITH, 2000, p. 189) is

unobtainable, i.e. the original text which ultimately led to Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is also indeterminate.

These and many other indeterminacies of the play, like Lyotard's 'grand narratives', cannot and do not "provide legitimate foundations for truth" (BROOKS, 1998, p. 93). In fact, similarly to the way poststructuralists would understand the meaning of anything else, in Hwang's play, the meaning of 'truth' is "shown to be indeterminate" (BROOKS, 1998, p. 93).

The indeterminacy of any kind of meaning/truth present both in Lyotard's conception of the way a postmodern writer proceeds and in Hwang's *M. Butterfly* allows us to connect them once more. *M. Butterfly* may be seen as a kind of work of art that is not "in principle governed by preestablished rules" (LYOTARD, 1984, p. 81), a piece that "cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work" (p. 81). Like the ideal Gallimard seeks to death, "those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for" (p. 81).

ABSTRACT: This text aims at analyzing to what extent can the David Henry Hwang's most emblematic play, *M. Butterfly*, from 1987, be used to exemplify French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's assertion on every postmodern artist or writer being in the position of a philosopher. Canadian theoritician Linda Hutcheon's considerations on the main characteristics of postmodernism are used as touchstones for the definition not only of postmodernism itself, but also of the postmodern artist.

Key-words: postmodernism, theatre, appropriation.

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