

Chapter 2: A real American wife, a Japanese object: Critical Puppetry and the construction of the Orient in Anthony Minghella's *Madam Butterfly*

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Introduction

In Anthony Minghella and English National Opera's (ENO) celebrated production of *Madam¹ Butterfly²*, three men manipulate the small, fragile bodies of Cio-Cio-San (also known as Madam Butterfly) and her child, Sorrow. Both characters are Japanese or part-Japanese, and both are portrayed, at least in part, by puppets, with white American characters all portrayed by human beings. These puppets were built and originally manipulated by the British company Blind Summit, who drew on the traditional Japanese form of *ningyō jōruri* (commonly and hereafter referred to as bunraku³). In this chapter, I argue that the use of bunraku-inspired puppetry, while lending Minghella's production a notional sense of cultural authenticity, may also function to reinforce and reify the exoticizing and imperialist gaze present in the original source material. Conversely, I assert that even as the use of puppetry functions to further perpetuate Orientalist constructions of East-Asia, it simultaneously destabilizes and makes visible these constructions in fruitful and interesting ways.

The purpose of this analysis is not to theorize on how one might stage a «less-Orientalist» version of *Madam Butterfly*. Rather, I wish to explore how the use of puppetry within the performance might both reinforce and critique the orientalizing gaze, and the mechanics by which this happens. In doing so I hope to better understand how puppetry might elsewhere function as a tool to actively interrogate and deconstruct various gazes that minoritized subjects commonly find themselves subjected to in mainstream cultural production.

Critical Puppetry

This chapter introduces a concept I term *critical puppetry*, a practical and theoretical framework wherein the form and mechanics of puppetry are used as a lens to critique and resist politically constructed identities and hierarchies of value. In this chapter I outline a particular analytical approach to puppetry and demonstrate the necessity for such an approach through a case study. I contend that scholarship on puppetry generally operates primarily from an advocacy viewpoint and for this reason, critical approaches to puppetry performance remain underexplored. I am advocating for an explicitly critical approach both to the analysis and practice of puppetry. Throughout this chapter, critical puppetry is deployed as an analytical tool, suggesting a particular method for reading puppet performance that draws attention to the mechanics of representation, in order to read the potential offered by the form that principally manifests in two ways. First, the relationship between the puppeteer and puppet offers, intentionally or otherwise, an embodied expression of the power dynamics which exist within both the narrative and the creation of a theatrical work. Second, the use of puppetry destabilizes representation, while also drawing attention to the constructed nature of theatrical representation, and by extension, socially constructed identities. The latter is perhaps a bold claim to make for puppetry, since any form of theatrical representation might contain cues to its own artificiality, which can be said to destabilize representation. However, I assert that, in using a visibly non-human form to represent character, and in both hiding and acknowledging the puppet's lack of autonomy, puppetry is uniquely troubling to any sense of truthful representation.

Core to a critical puppetry analysis is the attempt to document and view the process of representation in detail, rather than taking for granted the presumed representational intent.

To this end, I will demonstrate a method of double reading wherein a descriptive reading of a performance which attends to the narrative and dramatic functions of the characters (both human and puppet) is followed by a descriptive reading of the same performance which focuses on the production of the dramatic narrative, naming the mechanics by which the puppet moves, and attending to the roles of the puppeteers in this. The function of the second reading is to demonstrate the ways in which the use of a puppet, as opposed to a human performer, might communicate meaning through form.

The advocacy approach to puppetry scholarship that critical puppetry responds to can be seen in Roland Barthes' and Susan Sontag's seminal essays on bunraku, as well as an earlier speculative account by Heinrich von Kleist. All three essays are by non-puppeteers, and theorize puppetry as an idealized representational form — which compromises the possibility of a full appraisal of the possibilities and limitations of puppetry. In his 1810 essay 'On the Marionette Theatre,' Kleist ventriloquizes the character of a fictional dancer, Herr C., who claims that "a marionette constructed by a craftsman according to his requirements could perform a dance that neither he nor any other outstanding dancer of his time [...] could equal" (1972: 23). Through C., Kleist suggests that puppets, lacking in self-consciousness and guided only by the simplest movements of the puppeteer and the laws of gravity, can achieve a grace of movement impossible for human dancers. Kleist's real object of study here is perhaps not puppetry but rather consciousness — particularly self-consciousness — and it is likely that the puppets function more metaphorically than literally, so to query the technical assumptions Kleist makes about puppetry may be beside the point. However, in suggesting an idealized marionette that is entirely devoid of any "trace of the intellect" (1972: 23), Kleist fails to perceive the necessary labor of the puppeteer that underpins non-fictionalized puppet performance.

Unlike Kleist's essay, Roland Barthes' 1971 'On Bunraku' is based on observation of a specific form of puppetry. Like Kleist, Barthes suggests that puppets — in this case specifically bunraku puppets — achieve a nuance, clarity, and beauty of physical performance that surpasses the performances of both human actors and Western puppets, here epitomized by the figure of Punch. Barthes contrasts what he sees Western theatre's need "to hide the very artifice of the show" (1971: 79) with bunraku's revelation of "the action necessary to the production of the spectacle" (1971: 80), suggesting that bunraku, by acknowledging the division between puppeteer and puppet, and between representation and that which is represented, fully realizes Brecht's concept of the *verfremdungseffekt*.

In her 1984 essay 'A Note on Bunraku', Susan Sontag, while acknowledging Kleist's account of string puppets as "speculative fantasy" (1984: 16), suggests that this fantasy is in fact "incarnated and fulfilled" (1984: 16) in bunraku. In a reading of the form which occupies a similarly laudatory register to Barthes' essay, Sontag refers to the preeminent "emotional and gestural potency" (1984: 16) of the bunraku puppet, celebrating what she sees as the unique precision and elegance of the puppets, "unmatched in any other puppet tradition" (1984: 16). Sontag's primary interest, however, is the relationship between the puppet and puppeteers, which she describes as "the cruel mystery at the heart of the bunraku drama" (1984: 16). Sontag views this relationship as central to the dramaturgy of bunraku, though I wonder if this dramaturgical understanding of the relationship depends on an unfamiliarity with the formal conventions of bunraku. Like Barthes, Sontag contrasts what she characterizes as a Western requirement to look "'beyond' (or 'through')" (1984: 16) the means by which art is produced, with bunraku's acknowledgement of the presence of the puppeteers.

It is interesting that both of these later texts suggest that bunraku is a uniquely graceful form of puppet theatre. In both cases, they follow Kleist in proposing that puppetry is a superior representational tool to human performance, and both suggest that the Japanese form of bunraku can realize ambitions laid out by Western theorists but unachievable by Western performance technologies. Both texts hinge on an unfamiliarity with the form of bunraku and establish an oppositional dichotomy between bunraku and Western performance practices. I suggest that by filtering the practice through the lens of European theatre and theory, Barthes and Sontag may be engaging in a romanticization and mystification of the form and failing to properly apprehend the dramatic and affective qualities of bunraku due to a lack of cultural context. It seems emblematic of this approach that both writers suggest that bunraku achieves the aims of European practitioners whose writings were predated by the form of bunraku. Not only does this betray an inability to see non-Western forms as existing outside of a European frame of reference, it also suggests a conception of Japan as existing outside of the linear progression of time, as opposed to the linear and dynamically shifting sense of European history. At the same time, while both Barthes and Sontag do break down and elucidate the mechanics of representation to some degree, in doing so they frame bunraku as a form of effortless beauty in contrast to the laborious and naïve performances of human actors and dancers.

Jeremy Bidgood has asserted that Barthes' account of bunraku is not only reductionist, but also factually incorrect with regards to the actual mechanics of bunraku, arguing that "it is clear from Barthes' writings that he did not have a developed understanding of ningyo joruri" (2015: 176). Bidgood, who is a puppeteer, asserts that Barthes' misreading of bunraku has contributed significantly to an essentialized understanding of the form in the West, which fixates the visual aspects of bunraku while downplaying other key elements of the

performance. Indeed, Ethan Wu regards Barthes' celebration of bunraku as "a subtle but dangerous form of othering" (2021: 13), which replicates Orientalist constructs of an East/West dichotomy and perpetuates misconceptions of non-Western cultural forms. Through their exoticized reading of the form, both Barthes and Sontag may be failing to recognize the labor, imprecisions, and imperfections within a form which is essentially unfamiliar to them. This implicit othering is compounded perhaps by certain stereotypes of post-Meiji Japan as a land of precision, purity, and refinement (which abound throughout Barthes' *Empire of Signs* (1983) — though he does acknowledge his vision of Japan as partly fictive).

While these qualifications are important, both writings have been significant in the development of a critical framework with which to analyze puppet performance. Barthes registers something fundamental about puppetry both in his recognition that puppetry inevitably draws attention to the act of representation, and in his highlighting the corporeal separation of puppet and puppeteer, suggesting that this "separates act from gesture [and] art from work" (1971: 77). To Barthes, "work" (1971: 77) is the domain of the puppeteer, whose role is transitive, causing action in the puppet. "Art" (1971: 77), on the other hand, is the domain of the puppet, who performs the gesture and thus has an emotional effect on the audience. Sontag's reflections on the visibility of bunraku puppeteers adds a dramaturgical layer to the revelation of the puppeteers. Focusing on the spatial and scale relationship between the two, Sontag (1984) reads the puppeteers as shadowy characters within the drama, sharing space with the puppets and alternately appearing to be in charge of, and subservient to them.

Critical puppetry seeks to shed light on issues around the practice and ethics of

representation, particularly representations of racialized and otherwise minoritized characters. Critical puppetry therefore demands a particular attention to not only the representations themselves, but, crucially, to the means by which representations are produced. Drawing on Barthes, I suggest that puppetry is particularly suited to this mode of analysis. To describe the process of representation precisely forces a particular degree of attention on the detailed mechanics of creation and staging — who sculpts what, which particular movements create what effect, how a body is manipulated, etc. Where the everyday quality of the human body might encourage us to overlook the many choices that are made in representing a person or events onstage, the defamiliarization effect of puppetry might uniquely allow us to examine these specific choices. At the same time, I also suggest that there is an ethical imperative in paying particular attention to the mechanics of representation when representing cultural and racial others. Puppetry might, therefore, lead us to particular modes of analysis that are not simply useful in examining puppetry, but rather might allow us to make further discoveries about the ethics of representation more broadly. The dual descriptions I employ in this chapter are an attempt to demonstrate a layered approach to reading puppetry that foregrounds onstage mechanics of representation, set against a more narrative reading of the same moment. In juxtaposing these readings, I invite the reader to consider the same moment from multiple points of view and explicitly consider the political ramifications of the decisions by which representations are made.

Madam Butterfly

In Puccini's 1904 opera, a US naval officer named Pinkerton temporarily marries a fifteen-year-old Japanese geisha named Cio-Cio-San/Butterfly, planning to leave her when he finds an American wife. Pinkerton leaves Cio-Cio-San soon after the wedding, having promised to return, and shortly after she gives birth to their child, Sorrow. When Pinkerton returns with

his American wife in order to bring Sorrow to the US, Cio-Cio-San commits ritualized suicide.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many contemporary academic accounts of the text present it as a quintessentially exoticized and imperialistic view of Japan. Jonathon Wisenthal suggests that *Madam Butterfly*'s image of "'the Orient' is entirely a cultural construct of white, Western nations that were vigorously engaged in the attempted conquest of other parts of the world during the period" (2006: 3). Marie Ng describes the opera as offering "a condensed example of European exoticization of the Far East, specifically Japan" (2006: 175), a reading in which, as Mari Yoshihara summarizes, "Pinkerton symbolizes the dominant, masculine America, while the fragile, exotic beauty Cho-Cho-San stands for the subordinated, feminized Asia" (2002: 4). This view is perhaps asserted most strongly and influentially by Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang in both the text and afterword of his reworking of the Butterfly myth, *M Butterfly* (1993). In the latter, Hwang asserts that the "wealth of sexist and racist clichés" (1993: 86) of the opera are indicative of a gendered view of East-West relations that are so archetypal and pernicious that both East Asian women and men are assumed to be feminine and submissive.

Puppetry and authenticity in Minghella's staging

Minghella's 2005 production of *Madam Butterfly* has been described by Dorothy Max Prior as "a pivotal moment for UK Puppetry" (Blind Summit Theatre, 2020), one which, along with Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris' *War Horse*, has done much to prompt a reassessment of the form in the UK. Indeed, like *War Horse*, Minghella's staging continues to be influential, having been remounted consistently across a number of countries since its premiere, and continuing to enjoy both popular and critical acclaim, much of which focuses

on the use of puppets. Throughout its long performance history, the press and marketing around the show has made much of the Japanese cultural authenticity supposedly conferred by use of bunraku-inspired puppetry. This is typified by a 2016 review which asserts that “[Carolyn] Choa’s⁴ choreography and the intricate work of the puppeteers of Blind Summit Theatre offer authentic Japanese counterpoints to the opera’s Western elements” (Hall). This is an interesting claim to make about the work of a Hong-Kong Chinese choreographer and a white British company who describe themselves as being only loosely influenced by Japanese bunraku, but the claim has been made repeatedly — Andrew Clarke of the *Financial Times* described the puppet versions of Cio-Cio-San and Sorrow as “easily the most authentic characters on stage” (Blind Summit Theatre, 2020). It is interesting to consider how and why the other characters might be understood to be «less authentic.» For one possible answer, we can turn to Minghella, who had originally hoped to cast a teenage Japanese soprano in the title role — a performer whose age and ethnicity would mirror that of the character. In fact, the role was played in the original ENO production by white British soprano Mary Plazas and in the original Met production by white American soprano Patricia Racette.

Here it is worth noting that in both the UK and the US, the cross-racial casting of Southeast and East Asian characters, often referred to as «yellowface,» has been largely discontinued in commercial theatre, in line with both scholarly and popular understandings of yellowface as a damaging and offensive historical practice. Krystyn R. Moon (2005) situates yellowface as a key strategy in the production and maintenance of white Western identities and the presumed superiority of whiteness, marking the Asian body as both distinct and inferior from the white body. Josephine Lee suggests the practice can be understood as both an expression of American fear of racial contamination and a “moral justification of overseas imperialism” (1998: 13). The last major UK production to employ large-scale East-Asian racial mimicry,

the Royal Shakespeare Company's (RSC) 2012 *The Orphan of Zhao*, was the subject of significant controversy⁵. In the US, similar controversy had already erupted in the 1990s when *Miss Saigon* transferred to New York, as dramatized in David Henry Hwang's *Yellow Face* (2008). By contrast, cross-racial casting and racial mimicry remain fairly common in Opera.⁶

Interestingly, while both reviewers and Minghella have commented on the inauthenticity of the casting of Butterfly and other Japanese characters, those same people have not questioned the Japanese identity of Sorrow and Cio-Cio-San as played by puppets. If we acknowledge Cio-Cio-San's human casting as racial mimicry, then how do we understand the relationship between non-Japanese puppeteers and the Japanese and mixed-race characters they portray? Steve Tillis argues that it is the puppeteer, not the puppet, who should be understood as the actor within a puppet performance, asserting that we should understand an actor as the "producer of the signs that communicate a dramatic character, rather than as, necessarily, the producer and the site of those signs" (1996: 109). Tillis goes on to suggest that by physically separating the puppet (the site of signification), from the performer (the producer of signs), puppetry gives us a core insight into the nature of acting in general — that the tension between producer and site of signs is not a tension that is unique to puppetry, but, rather, that puppetry makes visible a split and tension between producer and site of signs that nevertheless exists even when both are held within the same human body (1996: 116-117).

However, this split takes on a new significance within the context of cross-racial mimicry. If the puppeteer is indeed the actor, then the actor is engaging in racial mimicry. However, the physical separation seems to render this racial mimicry less legible than when performed by human performers. I suggest that either the act of puppetry is effectively occluding the race of

the performers, or that they are not understood as «performing» the characters in the same manner that the singers are. While Tillis's assertions are convincing, they are not necessarily reflected in the phenomenological experience of the viewer, who might on some level understand a wooden puppet endowed with racializing signifiers to be racially appropriate casting.

Sorrow's entrance

To explore the significance of Sorrow's casting as a puppet, I will conduct two readings of a particular moment from the performance, recorded from the 2005 staging at The Metropolitan Opera. This double reading will allow for a critical puppetry analysis of the performance by contrasting the narrative content of the scene with the additional meanings embedded within the form of puppetry itself, paying particular attention to how the representation of racialized characters is impacted by these formal choices. The first reading, straightforwardly interpreting the characters and narratives presented by human and puppet alike, might read as follows:

Cio-Cio-San, in great distress, runs to the back of the stage and throws back three paper screens, revealing a small child. The child reaches up to her and she lifts him into an embrace. "And our son?" (Puccini: Madama Butterfly 2011) she asks, as he looks at her adoringly. She puts the child down and takes his hand. "Can a Japanese boy have blue eyes? ... This fair complexion?" (Puccini: Madama Butterfly 2011). She gestures towards her child.

This is one way to read the scene, by focusing on the child and ignoring the presence of the puppeteers. However, Broderick Chow suggests that to best understand the representation of race in theatre, we must consider not only the content of a work but also "the aesthetic

mechanism of theatricality.” (2014: 515) In other words, that choices around the mechanics of representation are of equal import to choices of what is represented. How does Sorrow’s status as a puppet, animated by three human beings, interact with the content of Puccini’s work? Where the quotidian qualities of the human body might encourage us to overlook the many choices that are made in onstage representation, the visible labor of the puppeteers, as well as the puppet’s status as a crafted object, might allow us to examine these choices. The level of control exerted by a creative team in producing a puppet representation of Sorrow, and the legibility of these within the puppet’s performance, offer the possibility of a deep and sustained engagement with not only the politics of his representation, but also the systems of power and thought that produce and undergird this. I will approach the scene again, this time focusing on the mechanics of representation:

Patricia Racette runs upstage and throws back three paper screens, revealing a small humanoid puppet with a bald head, large ears, black eyes, and tan skin considerably darker than that of Racette, who appears to be white. It is dark at the back of the stage but after a second, we can make out three veiled figures operating the puppet. One of them lifts the puppet’s left hand towards Racette, who stoops as the three puppeteers lift the puppet into her arms. One puppeteer directs the puppet’s face towards Racette. “And our son?” (Puccini: Madama Butterfly 2011) *she asks. As Racette and the puppeteers lower the puppet to the floor, the lighting allows us to see their veiled faces, particularly that of lead puppeteer, Marc Petrosino, who also appears to be white. Petrosino’s gaze remains fixed on the head of the puppet, and when Racette takes the puppet’s hand, Petrosino’s expression becomes one of excitable delight. “Can a Japanese boy have blue eyes? ... This fair complexion?”* (Puccini: Madama Butterfly 2011) *asks Racette, gesturing towards the puppet, which fits none of these descriptions.*

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: Sorrow in ENO's 2020 revival of *Madam Butterfly*. Photo: Jane Hobson.

This reading of Sorrow's entrance, which focuses on the mechanics of Sorrow's animation, is distinct from the previous and more character-oriented reading in that it draws our attention to the design of the puppet, and the presence and manipulations of the puppeteers. The puppet's face (see figure 1) displays exaggerated East-Asian features, particularly for a mixed-race child, and is striking in its proximity to Yellow Peril⁷ iconography and the stage makeup employed by white actors to mimic East-Asians. The design recalls Daniel York-Loh's assertion that such was the ubiquity and cultural currency of yellowface and other stereotypical depictions of East-Asians in latter 20th century Western culture, that many industry figures retain a warped and inaccurate idea of how East-Asian people actually look (Lee, E; Casting Fu Manchu, 2000). The puppet is dressed in a costume usually worn by young girls. The costuming of male characters in traditionally female clothing is a trope present in Hollywood yellowface portrayals (Lee, E; Casting Fu Manchu, 2000), where it likely emerged from a combination of ignorance and a conscious attempt to present East-Asian men, and by inference East-Asia itself, as feminine. Crucially, the puppet — as distinct from its costume — was not originally designed as a Japanese-American child, but rather, was a repurposed puppet which had originally been designed to represent a Chinese child⁸. This substitution brings to mind Western perceptions of the interchangeability of Asian identities as typified by the racially-motivated murder of Chinese-American Vincent Chin in supposed retaliation against the Japanese auto industry or, more recently, post-pandemic Sinophobic attacks on non-Chinese Asians. We might also consider, from the press narrative

around the production, the idea that Choa's Hong-Kong Chinese cultural heritage gave her a particular insight into the aesthetics of Japan. Given that Sorrow's white American parentage is key to the narrative, and that the libretto contains descriptions which are explicitly contradicted by the appearance of the puppet, the use of this particular puppet can be understood to heighten Sorrow's alterity beyond what might be indicated by the source material. It's interesting to consider this in light of Diana Yeh's (2018) observation that mixed white-Asian performers in the UK often find themselves excluded not only from non-Asian roles, but also from Asian roles, for which they are not considered to possess the required exotic alterity. We can see here that even a mixed-race Asian character has been «cast,» in puppet terms, with visible and exaggerated alterity in mind.

At this point it is necessary to identify certain key distinctions between different ways in which a puppeteer might appear onstage. Firstly, and most straightforwardly, puppeteers tend to be either visible or invisible. Invisible puppeteers may be obscured by the set itself, either below the puppet as in the case of glove puppets and muppet-style rod puppets, or by costumes and veils that seek to make them either actually or conceptually invisible. I say conceptually because where black costuming and/or veils are used against a non-black backdrop, these costumes signal the idea of invisibility rather than producing the effect of invisibility. Secondly, visible puppeteers can either function simultaneously as puppeteers and distinct characters within the drama, or rather as visible but uncharacterized presences onstage. Further, these uncharacterized puppeteers might then mirror the emotions of their puppet, coding themselves perhaps as an extension of the puppet character. Alternatively, the puppeteer's relationship to the character might read as neutral or sympathetic, both of which might code them as a separate (albeit uncharacterized) presence in the drama. Yvette Coetzee argues that audiences will always read intent and significance into a visible puppeteer, even

where their actions are driven by practical and logistical concerns, suggesting that this can lead to the generation of unintended yet centrally important meanings within a drama (1998: 39-48). In the case of *Madam Butterfly*, it is useful to read meanings generated not simply by conscious choices, but also by the practical realities of puppet performance. Looking at the puppeteers in this sequence, in Petrosino's mirroring of Sorrow's emotional state we can see that the puppet at least in part functions as what Jane Taylor (2015) refers to as an "emotional prosthesis" of the lead puppeteer, wherein the puppet is understood as a prosthesis through which the lead puppeteer enacts their interpretation of the character. This would seem to point to the idea that Petrosino is engaging in a kind of yellowface, albeit with one level of physical distancing. Returning to Steve Tillis's observation that puppetry physically separates the puppet (the site of signification), from the performer (the producer of signs) (1996: 116), I contend that this physical separation nullifies a dissonance produced by the act of human casting, wherein the clear distinction between the identity of the performer and that of the character draws attention to the imposture. In other words, the spectacle of yellow or tan makeup and taped eyelids makes clear that the audience is not witnessing a performance by an actual Asian. Conversely, by occluding the spectacle of cross-racial performance, puppetry may give free rein to the reproduction of stereotypes that would be more clearly signaled and problematized by the use of a human performer in stage makeup.

What stereotypes, other than those present in the design, might also be reproduced within the performance? Interestingly, Mark Down, Artistic Director of Blind Summit, suggested that casting a Japanese or mixed-rChinese puppeteer to perform a role he originated might not necessarily change the nature of the performance as the performer would essentially be replicating his original characterization (2020, pers. comm., December 11). This would suggest that any possible cultural inaccuracies are at this point integral to the performance.

However, I am inclined to suggest that individual puppeteers do indeed leave their own stamp on the characterization — it's hard to imagine, after all, the originator of a human role assuming responsibility for all subsequent interpretations. In a behind the scenes video from the 2016 revival, lead puppeteer Tom Espiner describes the character as “so eager to please, this little boy. He's living with this really, really very histrionic mother and he doesn't want her to get too upset” (Meet Sorrow - Madam Butterfly 2016). We can see that in this account, Sorrow's primary characteristic (as animated by Espiner) appears to be compliance, a key feature of Orientalist narratives about Japan. Further to this, we can see how a potentially dismissive attitude towards the central character in the drama — one perhaps rooted in gendered and racialized cultural narratives that minimize the distress of women of color — may be naturalized and encoded within the performance through the mechanism of emotional prosthesis. There is nothing to indicate that this attitude reflects a larger directorial vision for the character of Cio-Cio-San, and yet this perception of the character may nevertheless make itself present on stage, as expressed through Sorrow. The fact that an oversight like this can occur in Mingella's painstakingly detailed production points to a diffusion of responsibility precisely because of the ambiguities inherent to the puppet/puppeteer relationship.

It is only by turning our focus to the various practical elements that co-constitute a puppet representation that it becomes possible to read the socio-political narratives embedded within the performance in this way. By shifting attention from *what* is being represented by puppetry to *how* the mechanics of puppet representation function, it becomes possible to make legible the politics and power dynamics that underpin any act of theatrical representation. This mode of analysis allows for a sustained engagement with the ontological questions raised by a performance in which different characters are presented by human or non-human performers.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2: Puppet Cio-Cio-San in ENO's 2020 revival of *Madam Butterfly*. Photo: Jane Hobson.

Cio-Cio-San as puppet

In a dream-ballet choreographed by Carolyn Choa, Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San play out a condensed narrative of love, abandonment, and death. Both Pinkerton and Cio-Cio-San are portrayed by surrogates in this scene. Pinkerton is represented by an athletic male dancer who appears to be white, whereas Cio-Cio-San is represented by a tiny, delicate puppet (see figure 2). In the following reading of puppet Cio-Cio-San's entrance, I again employ a double reading approach as part of a critical puppetry framework. However, where previously I juxtaposed two readings of the same moment, here I have combined the double readings in a single account, shifting perspectives between a character-based reading and one which attends to the mechanics of puppet representation. Again, the purpose of this double reading is to unearth the critical potential within the form of puppetry itself, and how this might relate to the source narrative of Puccini's opera, by capturing the perceptually destabilizing qualities of puppetry:

A cluster of paper lanterns parts, revealing a small, humanoid puppet. The puppet has a small head atop a long, slender neck, and wears a long white kimono fastened at the waist with a red obi; the puppet's face is painted white, with bright red lips and glossy black hair worn in a long plait. Cio-Cio-San/the puppet is kneeling. Two veiled puppeteers spread the puppet's hands, their movements animating her movements, which animate the movement of the lanterns, though these too are animated by veiled puppeteers. Focus on the puppeteers.

There are two of them, a man and a woman. The lead puppeteer, Kevin Augustine, who appears to be white, has an expression — just visible behind his veil — which evokes both horror and sadness. As Pinkerton approaches, Augustine jerks the puppet's head to the side. Focus on Cio-Cio-San, who looks away shyly. Pinkerton, who towers over her, reaches down with his folded fan, placing it beneath her chin. He/Augustine/Cio-Cio-San lifts her face towards him. She looks — the two men make the puppet look — at Pinkerton adoringly. He lifts her up. Augustine and Pinkerton dance together, the puppet's body suspended in space between them; Cio-Cio-San flies through the air as if weightless. Pinkerton steps away, still holding the tiny puppet's hand. Augustine makes her swoon back against his own body. As Pinkerton reaches to brush Cio-Cio-San's face, Augustine's face is visible just above her shoulder, though it is unclear if his expression is ecstatic or despairing. Augustine pushes the puppet into Pinkerton's arms. She embraces him. She slides down his body to the floor until she stands beneath them. Pinkerton kneels and takes Cio-Cio-San's arm. Augustine turns the puppet's face away as she giggles into the fan which she and Augustine hold.

Bearing in mind that both characters are surrogates, and that unlike operatic sopranos, there is little shortage of younger dancers, I am curious as to why Minghella did not use this moment to realize his initial desire to have Cio-Cio-San represented by a 15-year-old Japanese performer. One possibility is that the production instead uses puppetry to materialize Puccini's imaginary construction of a young Japanese girl. The puppet, with its high cheekbones and impossibly slender neck and wrists, presents a far more exaggerated image of exoticized femininity than any human performer could. Here, puppetry might offer the opportunity not simply to perform a character in a stereotypical manner, but also to embody racialized physical stereotypes to a degree that an actual human body would be incapable of. In addition to allowing for a heightened depiction of physical stereotypes, the puppet — as a

performing object without articulated facial features — allows for a particular facial passivity and serenity in the face of grand emotion (an interesting counterpoint to Espiner's perception of the human Cio-Cio-San as "histrionic". Sianne Ngai has written of the Western stereotype of East-Asians as "silent, inexpressive, and [...] emotionally inscrutable" (2004: 93), contrasting this with the stereotypes of "hyperexpressivity" and emotion often used to racialize other non-white subjects. Ngai goes on to argue that animation, whether in the service of excessive or suppressed emotionality, is central to a production of race in which a racially appropriate level of *animatedness* functions to confer the authenticity to the raced subject. If, as Ngai asserts, animatedness functions as a key epistemological tool by which bodies are disciplined into racial categories (2004: 95), then the fact itself of Cio-Cio-San as puppet serves to reproduce affective regimes of racialization.

What to make of the spectacle of Cio-Cio-San, portrayed by a tiny, exoticized object, being flung around the stage by a white man as she is manipulated by another white man to react to him with timid adoration? As with Sorrow, any troubling representational issues are compounded by the framing of the puppetry as culturally authentic. Watching Puccini's opera, we are likely under no illusions that the work itself is authentically Japanese, yet by mobilizing the concept of authentically Japanese bunraku puppetry the production seeks to convey an idea of authenticity that does not in fact involve any Japanese authorship. In turn, a possible lack of cultural literacy means that these puppet performances reinforce Orientalist stereotypes while simultaneously misdirecting attention away from the whiteness of those who have produced these stereotypes. Thus, an audience is confronted with a performance that is both notionally authentic and simultaneously misrepresentative. Cio-Cio-San is not a Japanese woman, but rather a puppet crafted with assumed signifiers of Japanese femininity and animated by non-Japanese puppeteers according to a particular Western construction of

Orientalized submissiveness.

The staging can certainly be read simply as a regurgitation of the racist tropes of Japanese femininity found within the original source text. However, by making a deliberate choice to read the aesthetic mechanisms of the puppet — a perceptual shift which this staging does not necessarily invite — we can also read a potential thread of self-reflexive critique within the production. Interpreting the scene through a critical puppetry lens, the spectacle of a clearly artificial Cio-Cio-San being manipulated by Pinkerton and another white man might frame *this* Cio-Cio-San as an imaginary construct of Pinkerton's. This might further imply that the image of Japan the opera presents us with is entirely a construct of Western-imperialist culture. In this reading, in contrast to the «real American wife» that Pinkerton eventually marries, Cio-Cio-San is in her various incarnations ersatz Japanese, ersatz woman, and ersatz human. This could be read as an acknowledgement that categories such as Oriental, or Woman, do not express essential identities, but rather, as Dorinne Kondo suggests, “a named location in a changing matrix of power relations” (1997: 41), which are defined in opposition to, in this instance, that which is Western, and that which is male. In this respect, the artificiality and visibly constructed nature of this puppet performance might be understood to allude to the social construction of race and gender as a means to solidify white Western male subjectivity.

Watching the tender, helpless despair that Puccini has choreographed for his constructed Cio-Cio-San displaced onto Augustine's apparently white and male features, we might also read a further subversion of *Madam Butterfly*'s raced and gendered narratives. Viewing this sequence with a focus on Augustine somewhat recalls the denouement of Henry-Hwang's *M. Butterfly* (1988), in which the white, male Gallimard (in some senses the play's Pinkerton

figure) assumes, via make-up and costume, the character of Cio-Cio-San. While in both cases the transgressive potential of a role reversal which relies on using the figure of Cio-Cio-San as a reference for subservient victimhood is debatable, a focus on Augustine's performance nevertheless adds a layer of complexity to the sequence which cannot be read simply by focusing on the puppet. By displacing Cio-Cio-San's raced and gendered pain onto a non-Japanese, non-female body, the production gestures towards its own potential — albeit not fully realized — to subvert a racist and misogynistic narrative which understands Cio-Cio-San's suffering to be innately connected to her race and gender.

These resistant readings were not necessarily intended by Minghella himself — indeed there are indicators that suggest otherwise. The puppeteers are veiled, which gestures towards conceptual invisibility. The scene is also framed explicitly as Cio-Cio-San's dream, rather than Pinkerton's, which does not support the idea that the scene alludes to Pinkerton's fantasy of Japan. Furthermore, Minghella was explicit in rejecting the idea that his production was in any way political or anti-imperialist, arguing that the love-story rather speaks universally to the human condition (Wolf, 2006). However, to suggest that this layer of meaning was not intentional is not to dismiss its power, or its potential for resistance. That this layer of meaning is clearly legible within the performance, perhaps in spite of the intentions of the creative team, points to a powerful potential for puppetry to destabilize the act of theatrical representation. The obvious artificiality of puppetry perhaps inevitably leaves open a possibility for critique; the challenge for a critical puppetry is not to invent this possibility, but rather to theorize and harness the transgressive potential of the puppet. If puppetry necessarily demands the kind of viewer — and puppeteer — projections that recur throughout this chapter, then following Mike Chin (2021, pers. comm., May 21), I suggest that a truly critical puppetry must invite audiences to examine and problematize these projections.

Towards a Critical Puppetry

This latter reading of *Madam Butterfly* offers one possible example of how puppetry might function as a critical tool in performance to contest the socio-political processes of racialization and resist stable narratives of the Other. If, as Ngai asserts, processes of racialization have long relied on constructing certain bodies as more or less animated than others, then puppetry, a form which literally constructs and animates bodies, may provide an embodied means to explore and expose some of the shaky foundations on which such assumptions and stereotypes depend.

I have suggested elsewhere that a critical puppetry might also “make visible the authorial hand” (Poster-Su, 2021) by revealing the puppeteer’s positionality in relation to the material and characters that they represent. We can see in this chapter how puppetry might function to do so even against the intentions of the creative team, particularly if one peers behind the puppeteers’ veils. Building on this, I propose an approach in which puppetry deliberately explores the positionality of the puppeteer as well as the material conditions and ideological underpinnings of theatrical representation. Elsewhere, I have explored how puppetry might deliberately function to trouble the authority of the author and destabilize any appearance of objective truth (Poster-Su, 2021), but I think it is likely that puppets always carry this transgressive potential into any performance in which they are used.

As stated earlier, my intention here is not to forward the production’s use of puppetry as good or bad representational practice, but rather, by examining the mechanics of representation of race in the performance, to theorize how puppetry might function as a mode of critique and resistance, even in ways which might subvert the intended function of puppetry. In *Madam*

Butterfly, we might understand one function of the puppet to be a marker of racial and cultural authenticity — by functioning as a purportedly culturally authentic stand-in for Japanese presence or authorship. However, the puppet can also be understood to transcend this function and simultaneously reveal the cultural narratives and structures of power which have produced it.

In suggesting that a critical puppetry offers the disruptive potential to make visible the ways in which identities are constructed and manipulated, I endorse Alex Istudor's (Istudor and Healey, 2021) assertion that the politics of a theatrical work may reside most strongly not in the content of the work, but rather in its form. In physically separating the site and production of meaning onstage, and demanding an attention to the mechanics of representation, I suggest that puppetry invites us to consider both the complex nature of authorship and the material conditions in which theatrical work is created. The puppet's reliance on its puppeteer serves as a reminder that the representation we are watching is not simply created by the puppet itself, but rather by a complex web of producers: puppeteer, puppet-maker, materials, director, writer. In this way puppetry forces us to look beyond the immediate site of representation and examine the complex power structures that guide representation itself. Zooming out, we might then consider the institutional and financial conditions in which representations are made, and ultimately, the cultural and political narratives that shape artistic representation. Ultimately, whatever veils, masks, or misdirection are used to conceal the forces which activate it, the puppet will always find a way to reveal the physical mechanics and ideological structures by which it lives.

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¹ ENO’s production uses the English spelling «Madam». For consistency, except where variants appear in quotations or book/chapter titles, I have used this spelling in lieu of the original «Madama» in all discussion of Puccini’s opera.

² The production premiered in 2005 but my source material for analysis is a video of the 2011 production.

³ Bunraku originally referred specifically to the Bunraku Theatre of Osaka but has come to be used more generally for the Japanese puppet form *ningyō jōruri*, of which the Bunraku Theatre are the most internationally renowned practitioners.

⁴ While initially credited solely as choreographer, Choa had a significant role in the overall direction and aesthetic of the work and, since Minghella’s death, has directed revivals of the work.

⁵ For more on these controversies see: Rogers, A. and Thorpe, A., 2014. A Controversial Company: Debating the Casting of the RSC’s *The Orphan of Zhao*. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (4), 428–435.

⁶ Analyzing performances of Verdi’s *Otello* at the Metropolitan Opera (New York) between 2007–2017, Kaeli Groenert (2019) found that 100% of performances of *Otello* had featured a non-black singer in the title role, with skin-darkening makeup, or blackface, used as recently as 2015. Paris Opera discontinued the practice of racial mimicry in 2021, while Arena di Verona received significant criticism for the practice in 2022.

⁷ This refers to racist depictions of East and South-East Asians from the 19th century onwards, that reflect and engender a racialized fear of East and South-East Asia as a military and economic power, as well as a source of labor and immigration

⁸ Mark Down, Artistic Director of Blind Summit, recalled that Choa had requested a puppet originally built by Nick Barnes for the Blind Summit production *Mr China's Son* (2020, pers. comm., December 11).

⁹ I am grateful to Puppet Objections, an informal working group on puppetry and minoritized bodies convened by Paulette Richards, Mike Chin, Hazel Rickard, and myself. I have learned a great deal from our ongoing conversations.