

## Intimacy or Cruel Love: Displacing the Other by Self Assertion

Kent Neely

Georges Bataille, the author of *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, tells us that eroticism is the desire to reconcile the discontinuity of existence. Eroticism is the awareness that one's identity is multidimensional as evidenced in sexual relationships wherein sex allows self-consciousness to coalesce with and within the other during the physical joining of the bodies. However, this seeming continuity present in the act of coalescence, that is in sexual union, is brief and imperfect. As Bataille predicts, recognition of that transiency will lead one into either of two behaviors: accepting a limited sense of continuity and developing relationships marked by tenderness and intimacy: that is, love; or constructing a sense of continuity based upon a play of subjugation between the Self and the Other for the Self to be exalted over the Other: that is, cruelty.

This paper will explore eroticism as depicted within three theatrical productions: David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, Alberto Felix Alberto's *Tango Varsoviano* and Nina Weiner's *Fierce Attachments*. It discusses how the desire to reconcile the discontinuity of existence leads to or from sexual liaisons into acts of intimacy or cruelty. Finally, the paper proposes that the notion of eroticism displayed in these three productions not only advances Bataille's discourse, but also enhances it within the dynamic temporal and spatial boundaries of the theatre.

*M. Butterfly* was inspired by the celebrated Bouriscot/Shi espionage case in which a French diplomat became infatuated with a Peking opera star, then maintained a clandestine love affair for twenty years. After being convicted for giving classified information to his lover, a Chinese operative, Bouriscot professed that he never knew that s/he was a transvestite.

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Hwang uses the Puccini opera *Madame Butterfly* as a metaphor in his dramatization. His play and the opera portray relationships between Western white men and idealized Eastern women. Hwang's French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, falls in love with the opera star, Song Liling, after seeing her perform the role of Cio-Cio-San. She personifies his fantasy of the perfect woman, subservient and utterly committed in selfless devotion, a realization of his pornographic fantasy. In fact, he nicknames her Butterfly in an obvious reference to the Puccini opera character.

In *Tango Varsoviano*, Alberto Felix Alberto offers a play with "almost no words." It is about a lonely woman, Amanda, a tango couple and a melancholy Pole. *Tango Varsoviano* is distinguished by the physical configuration of the stage. It is split along one side by a wall containing five framed openings, each scrimmed to reveal scenes when light is brought up behind them. Through the translucent portals we see vignettes of the tango couple, El Magnifico and la Diva.

Alberto's play is distinguished by another unusual performance device: it lacks clear time and place configurations. In the first scene Amanda is ironing in her apartment, listening to a plaintive song. The scene ends in an abrupt blackout. The next scene, one of El Magnifico and La Diva, is played behind the scrim. It too ends in an abrupt blackout. We then return to Amanda's apartment but little has changed. Another blackout occurs. Are the scenes behind the scrim her fantasy? Are the scenes another narrative in another time and place configuration? Are the scenes her memory? All these possibilities exist.

Alberto complicates the performance further by involving the Pole in a short-lived love tryst with Amanda. The relationship is doomed by his boredom--a boredom broken by his sexual liaison with El Magnifico.

After this second intrigue is introduced, the dividing wall opens, rupturing the space that had been Amanda's. Now all the plot elements collide simultaneously in Amanda's consciousness and she can only reconcile her anger and her identity by destroying both the object of her affection and her male counterpart. She murders the Pole and El Magnifico.

Nina Weiner's dance theatre creation *Fierce Attachments* is an affair re-enacted. It allows the creator to participate through a representation of her self performed by the character called the Woman in Green. The Woman in Green watches the memory of the affair played out by other performers. She watches from beyond a door, from the images of mirrors or as she enters the action to replay events of her life. She wants to reconcile the affair but that is never achieved since the reunion of lover with loved one never occurs.

The three performances listed here all deal with intense desire and ruptured sexual relationships. The shifts occur because, to follow Bataille's contention, the characters in the presentations cannot reconcile the duplicity of their nature. For example, Hwang's French diplomat, Rene Gallimard, does not seek to merge his self-consciousness with his lover, Song Liling. He

desires a relationship that subordinates her and empowers him. Likewise, the Pole is disinterested in a mutually interactive relationship. Once Amanda has satisfied his carnal needs, he is ready to discard her. Their erotic desires are fulfilled within a representation that does not allow the coincidental being of the Other. It is a perception of reality that is both fantastic and pornographic. As Klaus Theweleit describes in his book, *Male Fantasies*, such a perception of reality constructs a "relationship trapped in . . . self representation, existing only to reflect back his image of reality." Sex becomes part of a hierarchal structure that affirms a pornographic sense of eroticism. The physical coupling is characterized by the subordination of the Other's will and identity to the level of object. This object only has meaning inscribed and identity imposed as it fits within a subjective framework, namely the fantasy of the empowered Self.

A socio-historical hierarchy is at work as well. Generally speaking, the subject can only perpetuate a superior position, and hence identity, through events which confirm the subject/object association. Past acts of subservience confirm the hierarchy and then become referents for the maintenance of power. The possibility of bodies existing coincidentally and relating to one another simultaneously is impossible. Indeed, a unilinear relationship exists in which the subject precedes the object in temporal and spatial consciousness. The objects acquire identity only in relation to preceding events in time and space. Theirs becomes an historical consciousness that depends upon past episodes as the means of defining present being. A chronology with self superseding the other is imposed and the pornographic projection controls it. The relationship becomes trapped by the hierarchy in a corporeal reality that is contained and unchanging, that is to say, constructed and cultural. Both *M. Butterfly* and *Tango Varsoviano* demonstrate the results of such pornographic constructions.

Hwang's character, Song Liling, fulfills Gallimard's erotic fantasy two ways. First, s/he establishes gender through actions, Song Liling, who is biologically male, is fully aware that Gallimard is not interested in a reciprocal relationship with a person of the opposite sex. He is interested in fulfilling his fantasy of having an affair with the subservient Woman. It is unimportant that Song Liling be biologically female, only that s/he validate the perception of gender through performance. S/he completes the fantasy in a second way. S/he makes the ultimate gesture of surrender when s/he says that s/he has given Gallimard her/his "shame." In a rendition of a classic pornographic myth, the virgin has become a whore while retaining the exterior representation of the virgin. It is the penultimate objectification of Gallimard's perfect Woman.

Song Liling is playing the pornographic game as well since she allows herself to be perceived as the object of Gallimard's projection. Her motive is to steal classified information about French involvement in Viet Nam. Gallimard is unwittingly subservient to Song Liling's machinations. He

becomes the subject of his object. He surrenders to the fantasy that Song Liling represents and enslaves himself to it. Song Liling's participation in the sexual relation is perverted as well, not because s/he is a transvestite but because s/he uses deceit and cunning to build another and imperious hierarchy to that of Gallimard.

After Gallimard is imprisoned for passing the classified information, his Chinese lover visits him to destroy the last vestige of Gallimard's subject/object fantasy of the perfect woman. S/he strips naked. Standing there without the trappings of gender, Song Liling reasserts her/his autonomous identity and coincidentally destroys Gallimard's. In Song Liling's nudity the fantasy is completely destroyed. Gallimard's self representation through the projection can no longer exist. His self-consciousness was inextricably tied to his fantasy of the perfect Woman and only as that fantasy exists does he have identity. In a desperate search and hope for self-consciousness, he must destroy the projection even if it destroys his physical being. His final act is to assume the identity of Butterfly and commit seppuku, thus ending the perverted self-reflection and his discontinuous existence.

A similar circumstance exists with *Tango Varsoviano* but seen through a woman's perspective, that of Amanda. Her life is filled with loneliness and desire, a fact accentuated by the song she hears on a radio through repeated scenes. It is entitled *Pero Yo Se (But I Know)*. It is a sorrowful ballad which laments the wanderings of an attractive and affluent person following an unrequited love affair. In the brief scenes, her dreary life is contrasted with the sensual and seductive lives of El Magnifico and La Diva and the roaming Pole.

When Amanda finally ventures from the safety of her apartment, she encounters the Pole at a carnival. She is infatuated by him as the manifestation of her daydream. He is the object of her song, her objectification of the masculine Other. She yields to his advances and has sex with him in a doorway as the beginning to their short relationship. It is not long before the Pole involves himself with El Magnifico. Again he is a sexual object but now it is of El Magnifico's subjectivity.

Similar to Song Liling, both Amanda and the Pole submit to performative acts as a requisite prelude to sex or as the requisite component of gender association. The Pole uses his soulful behavior to empower El Magnifico. He permits himself to be another sexual conquest for El Magnifico's oppressive character. Coincidentally, Amanda realizes that she has been denied herself by submitting to the Pole when she sees that the Pole has conceded to El Magnifico. It humiliates her to realize that she had no value, no meaning to the Pole and that her relationship with the Pole is subordinate to the one he has with El Magnifico. So she decides to assume yet another manifestation of female gender. She duplicates the costume and actions of La Diva, the tango whore, to be accepted in El Magnifico's environment. By performing the part, she enters the world of the tango, the world of assigned roles, of prescribed

motions/behaviors, of sexual role playing. She uses the ultimate assertion of power to regain her self-identity by subverting the rules of the tango. She kills the Pole and El Magnifico. In doing so, she, like Gallimard, is left with a discontinuous life. She returns to her apartment haunted by her recollection and the awareness of discontinuity.

Nina Weiner's *Fierce Attachments* takes a somewhat alternative path. Her Woman in Green suffers from a broken relationship as well but not one like *M. Butterfly* and *Tango Varsoviano*. The woman repeatedly witnesses scenes from a past love affair that has shaped her emotions. She is only an observer peering from across a threshold of light, through a doorway or in the reflection of a mirror. She expresses desire to enter these scenes and, perhaps, repair them. In some she does become part of the action but without being able to reshape the outcome.

The portrayal of the Woman in Green suggests that she has a simultaneous awareness of the different parts to her life and consciousness. For her, reality shifts constantly between various temporal and spatial configurations of her past. It creates a consciousness of reality that is imagistic and spatial and unlike those in *M. Butterfly* and *Tango Varsoviano*. Those relied upon a subject/object relationship that was hierarchal and linear.

*Fierce Attachments* does not reconcile the Woman in Green with her lover. The piece suggests a reconciliation with her self and her awareness of the Other within her consciousness. In contrast, neither Gallimard nor Amanda can reconcile their failed relationships because they perpetuated or submitted to pornographic alliances. The Woman in Green is different. She becomes aware of multiple perspectives to her identity from the different representations of her self. Coincidentally, she sees the Other represented in various ways within her own consciousness. If a hierarchy were to exist, she would impose it within her own consciousness. The Woman in Green is searching for a realignment of her self-consciousness which integrates the multiple dimensions of her identity with that of the Other.

All three productions examined here suggest a contemporary notion of eroticism and, consequently, of self-consciousness. The notion promotes the displacement of hierarchal relationships through the assertion of Self to a position that is coincidental with the Other. This notion is particularly well-suited to the dynamism of theatre. Time and space configurations that might have affirmed hierarchies are reconfigured and manipulated so as to devalue chronology and historical consciousness.

*M. Butterfly*, the one piece that appears most conventional, jumps about in time and place settings because the action of the play is the re-enactment of Gallimard's memory. He is introduced in his jail cell and from that location he enters different parts of his past: his childhood, his early career as a diplomat struggling for position, his marriage, his affair with Song Liling and finally back to his jail cell and his present consciousness.

This means of portrayal suggests an awareness that his present state of mind, that is the consciousness he achieves after he is no longer within his fantasy world, is built upon a simultaneous awareness of all of his past. His sense of reality then has shifted from one that has a carefully constructed, hierarchal and historical relationship between him and Song Liling to a sense of reality that is built upon a simultaneous recognition of past and present events within his consciousness. It is an imagistic and spatial sense of reality that synthesizes the various representations of his self at once and without chronological order.

Amanda, the forlorn woman in *Tango Varsoviano*, is treated somewhat similarly. We watch her story intermittently and coincidentally with that of the tango couple. It is unclear whether the representation is a replaying of her memory or her fantasy. Since the production begins and ends in precisely the same fashion, with Amanda ironing and listening to the radio, both possibilities exist. A synchronous chronology is obstructed by the use of very brief scenes that end in blackout and then are repeated a short time later indicating that little, if any, time has passed.

This prevention of chronology provokes an awareness of the simultaneous nature of existence. Perceiving a chronology of events is less important than appreciating the different dimensions of Amanda's consciousness that she recognizes at once. That appreciation is facilitated by the construction of a performance space split between Amanda's apartment and a tango dance hall seen through the five picture frames. The action and a sense of reality shifts between the two locations. The separation of the two locations is destroyed later in the performance when the wall swings open so that the spaces are joined and the characters that had been separated are able to intermingle.

*Fierce Attachments* uses multiple performance techniques to arouse this awareness of simultaneity. The Woman in Green is both within a representation of her consciousness and outside it as an observer and as a participant. The physical setting is constructed of thresholds: window frames, mirrors, doorjams, empty spaces and, most interesting, mirrors and a line of light. The accompanying music by Lucia Hwong also suggests a blending of different realities. The music is a deliberate effort to combine Eastern and Western musical styles in a form that is plaintive and associated neither with one culture nor another.

These plays articulate Bataille's premise that the fuel for eroticism is the desire for continuity and that sexual relationships become the manifestations of the search and hope for that continuity. As important, these plays corroborate Theweleit's studies by asserting that self-consciousness and a sense of reality is non-hierarchal and non-historical. They suggest an awareness of Self and reality that must be placed into a spatial dimension not tied to chronology nor a fixed physical positioning.

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