

Philosophical Essays on Ugo Nespolo's Art and Cinema

Edited by

Davide Dal Sasso and Daniela Angelucci

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ONE FINE DAY WE'LL SEE¹

CAROLA BARBERO

And this Ridiculous Little Place...

Torre del Lago, outdoor Grand Theatre, summer evening.² The mountains are reflected in a liquid mirror, motionless and austere, as a poor *little girl's* dreams and illusions are taking shape. The edgy, colourful, comics-like and ironic touch of Ugo Nespolo's scenes and costumes make the setting of this sad story—originally set in the hills of Nagasaki—unique and special.

But how is it possible to make unique something that, by its very essence, seems to be repeatable? In fact, the opera is what it is—from the metaphysical point of view, it is an object of a specific type and not another—precisely because it can be represented on stage many times and always stay the same. There is no *one Madama Butterfly*. And even if there were, which one would it be? The one that was a fiasco at its La Scala debut on 17 February 1904, or the one that was staged shortly after in Brescia and was greeted triumphantly? Or should we believe that, if we really want to say that there is only one *Madama Butterfly*, then it clearly consists of Puccini's score and Illica and Giacosa's libretto?

Fortunately, we are not forced to choose between these alternatives, as well explains Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art*. We are not forced to choose because works of art can be of two different types: some are physical objects—such as paintings, sculptures and buildings—while others are abstract objects, such as music, literature, dance etc. The works of this second type are called “allographic”, while those of the first type are called “autographic” (Goodman 1968: 102). *Madama Butterfly* falls within the allographic works, that is why it does not seem right to talk about it in

¹ Quotations from the libretto come from:

http://www.murashev.com/opera/Madama_Butterfly_libretto_English_Italian.

² On 19 July 2007, *Madama Butterfly*—with sets and costumes by Ugo Nespolo and directed by Stefano Vizioli—opened the Puccini Festival in Torre del Lago.

terms of uniqueness: in fact, it is characterised as an abstract object that allows for multiple instantiations and gives itself in multiplicity.

Obviously the instantiations can then be unique and special, such as Nespolo's *Butterfly*, where stylised red and yellow trees seem to come straight out of a comic book and kimonos bear strange optical designs. But how did Nespolo manage to create "his own" *Butterfly* and make it different from all the others? He *carved the work*: he coloured and cut butterfly wings on paper which he then watched take flight; he sketched model clothes that have turned into rustling fabrics; he created sliding walls and rotating tracks so small that they can be held in your hands or rest on a table, and then watched them take shape and come to life on that stage. The ideal *Butterfly*, the type, has turned into a real *Butterfly*—the token.



Ugo Nespolo, poster, 2007, 98 x 68 cm. *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, Directed by Stefano Vizioli, scenes and costumes by Ugo Nespolo, Gran Teatro all'aperto, 53rd Festival Puccini, Torre del Lago, 2007.

Thus Nespolo's *Butterfly* was born: it could be one, none and a hundred thousand, but has become just *that* one, which that night came to life in Torre del Lago. It can be represented as often as one wants: now this *Butterfly* exists—beautiful like a line, coloured like summer flowers and sad like the shade of a rocking horse, blue and red, swinging as the irreparable is happening.

Beware... She Believes In Them!

That evening, in Torre del Lago, the first act opened with a playful spirit: the American lieutenant Pinkerton—half in jest, a bit for fun, a bit for vanity—is preparing to marry the young geisha Cio-Cio-San (Madama Butterfly), according to the Japanese ritual (and therefore with the possibility of divorce after a month). Pinkerton is not serious about his intentions (but "...Beware! She believes in them!" as American consul Sharpless notes). But how can you get married like that, just for fun? Butterfly is not a pastime, a trinket, a puppet, but a person with her own dreams, desires and fears (although Pinkerton will realise this, tragically, only at the end).

It is understandable why Nespolo's staging, with its lively colours and stylised forms, could not be more suitable to the opera: what Pinkerton is doing with Cio-Cio-San is nothing more than a game. And if it is true, as Leo Tolstoy (1899) wrote in *Resurrection*, that nothing reveals the character of people more than games, it is not hard to see why soon the time comes for the lieutenant to return home (where he will get married "in real earnest to a real American bride"). So a sad season begins for Cio-Cio-San in which that colourful world with comic features will be swallowed by sad and livid shadows, as in the worst of nightmares.



Ugo Nespolo, scale model for the scenography, 2007, 70 x 100 x 46 cm in plex box. *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, Directed by Stefano Vizioli, scenes and costumes by Ugo Nespolo, Gran Teatro all'aperto, 53rd Festival Puccini, Torre del Lago, 2007.

He'll Come Back

The lake is getting darker as the second act begins. It has been three years now since Pinkerton left and Butterfly continues to wait for his return. Not only does Cio-Cio-San wait but, in a way so paradoxical it is touching, she also tries to convince, in a famous aria, her maid Suzuki (and, of course, herself) that her beloved will return home (because one thing is to wait, another is to be sure to be waiting for someone—as Samuel Beckett (1952) highlights provocatively in *Waiting for Godot*):

One fine day we'll see
 a wisp of smoke arising
 over the extreme verge of the sea's horizon,
 and afterwards the ship will appear.
 Then the white ship
 will enter the harbour, will thunder
 a salute. You see?
 He's arrived!
 I shan't go down to meet him.
 No, I shall stand there
 on the brow of the hill and wait,

and wait a long time,
and I shan't find
the long wait wearisome.

And from the midst of the city crowd
a man—a tiny speck—
will make his way up the hill.
Who can it be?
And when he arrives—
what, what will he say?
He'll call, "Butterfly!"
from the distance.
Not answering, I'll
remain hidden,
partly to tease,
and partly so as not to die
at the first meeting.
And, a trifle worried,
he'll call, he'll call
"My dear little wife,
fragrance of verbena!"—
the names he used to call me
when he came here.
And this will happen,
I promise you.
Keep your fears;
with unalterable faith I shall wait for him.

(Madama Butterfly, Act Two)

But how can she really believe that he will be back (leaving aside the profession of faith before the aria: "Oh, you are lacking in faith!")? Has it not been long enough for her to realise that despite his promise ("Oh, Butterfly, my dear sweet little wife, I'll return with the roses") he is not coming back? Apparently not. The point here—and that is what makes the scene particularly poignant—is not so much that Pinkerton is gone (on the other hand, these things happen), but that the little girl lives in self-deception, not facing the truth even if the facts speak for themselves. Three years are not three months, and Cio-Cio-San knows it.

Why does she do this? Why does she tell herself (and also promise Suzuki!) that everything is fine when everything is wrong and her life is very sad? Very simply, she lies to herself.³ But how is this possible? It is

³ For a simple introduction to the phenomenon of self-deception, see Pedrini 2013.

not hard to understand why Pinkerton deceived her, but it is not so simple to understand why she would deceive herself: if the self is transparent to itself, how can Butterfly *delude herself*? We deceive ourselves when we *believe* in something we *know* to be false. In this specific case, Cio-Cio-San believes that “Pinkerton will return” even though she knows he will not. Why? Obviously because she *wants* to believe it: if she were not emotionally involved, she probably would not struggle to face reality (as do very well Suzuki, Goro and Sharpless) and, therefore, to believe many things other than those that, instead, she chooses to believe. Not surprisingly, self-deception is a form of “motivated irrationality”: it is a form of irrationality of which we would not be victims if we were not conditioned by some interest, namely, the desire to suffer less.

But does she delude herself on purpose or is her wish for her husband to return strong enough to tarnish her knowledge? Hard to tell. And then, what is it that she really wants while deceiving herself? Does she want to believe that reality is in a certain way, and that Pinkerton will return and love her, or does she want to be in the positive emotional state that derives from that belief? As sometimes happens, the truth lies somewhere in between: in fact, Butterfly certainly wants to be in a positive emotional state, but at the same time she wants this to be caused by the fact that things in the world are in a certain way. She wants to be happy thanks to the certainty that Pinkerton will come back and love her.

Also, are we really sure—as everybody says—that she is deceiving herself? What if she was right? What if the handsome American did come back and loved her till death do them part?

He'll Come... He'll Come, You'll See

Indeed, Pinkerton eventually returns. Unfortunately, though, he does not come back to call her “My dear little wife, fragrance of verbena!” He does not come back to call her anything—all he wants is the baby born out of their love. When she hears the distant cannon shot announcing the arrival of his ship, Cio-Cio-San holds back her joy and, after adorning the house with flowers, stands in the doorway with her child, waiting for Pinkerton.

Once again, the girl is waiting. After a while, exhausted by the long wait, she goes to rest, and when she wakes up she does not find her beloved but the truth, as heavy as a boulder and as black as death. So she asks Suzuki to stay with her child. Then she goes to the shrine and grabs the blade her father used to commit harakiri, when in comes her son and calls her. She hugs him, covers him with tender kisses, blindfolds him and

puts an American flag in his hands before doing what needs to be done (“He dies with honour who cannot live with honour”). This time, she does not wait.

The bellow house placed on a rotating disc, like one of those wooden music boxes with horses, is the location in which this sad story unfolds. It is a toy house where everything, from furniture to sliding walls, suggests something playful and light-hearted. Basically that is how Pinkerton has taken his relationship with Butterfly—his doll, his little fun game.

And yet, Cio-Cio-San decides to die like a proud daughter of the Rising Sun, thereby suffocating, with a knife stuck in her belly, her protest against the injustice. Had she been as strong as Nora⁴—another famous tenant of the doll house—perhaps she would have noticed something simple but very important, namely that she did not need Pinkerton to give meaning to her life. So perhaps she would not have killed herself with pride, but dismissed (with equal pride) that man who came from the sea, spoke a different language and was unable to love.

Maybe, asking him to never come back again, she would have given him the beautiful red and blue rocking horse—the same that, on stage, makes us guess the presence of a child in the house—so that he and Mrs Pinkerton could keep it as a memory. Sure, one could argue, in this case the opera would no longer be *Madama Butterfly*, but a different work. Or would it? It really depends on how we think we can characterise the relation between *type* (abstract object) and *token* (its instantiations).⁵ But that is another story.

In any case, even if it were possible to give the work a different ending, we still should not change anything of the scenery and costumes designed by Ugo Nespolo. They are perfect as they are. Indeed, Butterfly (whether she dies with pride in the tradition of her country, or whether she decides to tell Pinkerton to go back from whence he came, leaving her to live in peace among those sliding walls) remains the tenant of that doll house on the rotating disc—the very house that took shape in Nespolo’s hands, but in its first, tiny version, could have easily been mistaken for a real dollhouse, the kind that children play with.

Incidentally: if Butterfly decided to change the ending, she could also give the handsome American the rocking horse: properly packaged, it could be loaded onto a ship and transported anywhere. Then maybe the customs officials would have raised some problems (what kind of object is

⁴ The protagonist of the play by Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House*, staged for the first time at the Royal Opera in Copenhagen on 21 December 1879.

⁵ With regard to the debate on the type-token relationship, see Wollheim 1980 and Lamarque 2009.

it? A common object or a work of art?), but at that point it would be up to Pinkerton and his countrymen to deal with them.

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