

# The Haunting of Cronenberg's Cinema: Queer Monsters, Colonized Bodies and Repressed Desire in *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises*

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*“Deru kui wa utareru. (The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.)”*

-Japanese proverb

*“Under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me.”*

-Song Liling in *M. Butterfly*

There exists a more entrenched type of fear in the interstices and intricate enmeshing within the corporeality of David Cronenberg's cinema. The representation of queer gender in *M. Butterfly* challenges normative ideologies that perpetuate the binaries of male/female (sex), masculine/feminine (gender) and is exemplary of what Robin Wood in “The Return of the Repressed” terms “monstrous” (26). Furthermore, in *Eastern Promises* the representation of queer sexuality also illustrates the monstrous. Queer gender(s) and sexuality, as forms of the monster, represent the repressed, the marginalized and/or the fears of abnormality/queerness.

The queerness within *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises* exists as a partial pathology vis-a-vis a new form of doppelganger that is strategically employed by both texts to juxtapose the normal against the abnormal and, therefore, what Julia Kristeva theorizes is the “abject.” Each film's queer character has a doppelganger of normalcy, a character that best embodies the Caucasian, heterosexual, masculine male. In *Eastern Promises*, Kirill's (Vincent Cassel) queer sexuality is contrasted against Nikolai (Viggo Mortensen). In *M. Butterfly*, Song Liling's/Butterfly's (John Lone) queer gender is contrasted against René Gallimard (Jeremy Irons). Therefore, I will explore how *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises* portray the abject in a different “monstrous” form in relation to Cronenberg's past representations of horror.<sup>1</sup> Horror here becomes polymorphous with a direct connection to queer embodiment of gender and sexuality whereby

1. I would like to make clear here that a lengthier version of this essay, edited down to fit *Cinephile*, discussed the problematics of assuming that Cronenberg is the sole author of his filmic texts. It is necessary to criticize auteur-based analyses of Cronenberg to discover a multiplicity of ‘authors’ at work.

queers are made into Monsters.<sup>2</sup> I will explore these cinematic representations through the critical framework of a feminist perspective, particularly queer and gender theory.

### The Polymorphous, Queer Monster: Pathologizing the Marginalized

Both *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises* are in direct opposition to Cronenberg's body of horror films, which usually include mutations of the body or body horror: *Crimes of the Future* (1970), *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), *Scanners* (1981), *The Fly* (1986) and *Crash* (1996), to name a few. *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises* do not relate to the explicit horror found within most of his

becomes the other body that works as a shadow to colonize the colonized or the Other.<sup>6</sup>

Wood theorizes that horror films are representative of our collective nightmares (26). These collective nightmares are formed in response to the abnormal as he states that "normality is threatened by the Monster. I use 'normality' here in a strictly non-evaluative sense, to mean simply 'conformity to the dominant social norms'" (Wood 26). These social norms include heteronormativity and ideologies that constrain gender to a male/female and masculine/feminine binary and race (non-Caucasian). There is a kinetic polymorphous aspect of the Monster as Wood goes on to say that the "Monster is, of course, much more protean, changing from period to period as society's basic fears

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work, yet they embody a new form of horror: the element of transphobia and homophobia, which manufacture the marginalized as monstrous.<sup>3</sup> I argue that this is most apparent through the workings of the doppelganger that Robin Wood argued is a core component of the horror film (26).<sup>4</sup> Wood states that the doppelganger signifies an embodiment of normality and the Monster as two aspects of the same person (26).<sup>5</sup> The doppelganger effect in *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises* is not within the same person, but is within two or three characters that are contrasted against each other to highlight the form of the monstrous. Wood states that the "doppelganger motif reveals the Monster as normality's shadow" (26). In these films, the doppelganger

clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments" (26). These fears materialize themselves and are based upon the socially aberrant, the marginalized, the abnormal -- the queer.<sup>7</sup>

### *M. Butterfly*: Song Liling/Butterfly as the Embodiment of Monstrous and Unfathomable Gender

To be clear, Song's sex is not coherently male; neither is her/his gender specifically masculine (or male, if one believes gender is only male/female).<sup>8</sup> At one point in the film, Song states that "only a man knows how a woman is supposed to act," but never explicitly acknowledges his/her biological sex as male. There are others that try to prescribe it onto him/her like the lawyers in the courtroom and Rene who calls him "just a man," which Song swiftly counters by replying "I'm not just a man." Song is not "just a man," he/she is transgendered and occupies a fluid gen-

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2. This aspect of my argument borrows from Harry Benshoff's *Monster's in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*. Benshoff's text explores the constructions of monsters in Hollywood horror film through the classical horror period of the 1930s into the 80s and 90s.

3. By transphobia I mean a fear of "queer gender" and homophobia "queer sexuality".

4. Wood's argument here borrows from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical views about the "return of the repressed."

5. Wood points to films like *Metropolis* (1927), *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Frankenstein* (1931) among others which represent this type of doppelganger.

6. I am borrowing here from Said's theory of the Other. See *Orientalism* for more.

7. This is where I expand upon Benshoff's ideas of homosexuality as monstrous to include queer gendered embodiment.

8. I will employ both masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to Song because her/his gender is instable, non-normative and queer. However, as I will argue, the film attempts to repudiate this.

der identity. Instead of allowing Song and Rene to embrace in the film's penultimate sequence in the police van, there is an avoidance of queer love between the two characters. Song's indescribability is commented upon by de Lauretis with the title of *M. Butterfly* as she states that "M. stands for Monsieur in French, not Madame or Miss or Mrs or Ms" (312). Thus, there is already a "problem" with gender in the title of the film and de Lauretis goes on to say that "the problem of how to refer to Song Liling remains, as we shall see, a constant reminder of the constructedness of gender and its overdetermination by language" (313).

The problem with how to refer to Song continues not just within the film itself, but by scholars who appropriate terminology like transvesticism, homosexuality and masculine pronouns. By employing the term transvesticism in relation to Song's gender identity, it implies a sense of impermanence to her/his gender crossing and acceptance of the binary of male/female.<sup>9</sup> Not only does Song's gender transgressions adhere to a normative binary of male/female, masculine/feminine through the term transvestite, but it implies a momentary performance – or an "acting out" of body experience that repudiates what is rather a fluid and polymorphous subject position(s). Suner states that "Song's presence in the film as a transvestite body is consistently contained within the boundaries of performance" as spy (off-stage) and as actress (on-stage) (57). Moreover, Suner agrees that Song challenges the "binary oppositional categories of male and female as ontological essences," yet only through the performative aspect of her/his gender (57).<sup>10</sup> When contrasted against other Chinese officials, specifically Chin (Shizuko Hoshi), the term transvesticism is complicated by what is really a transgendered state of being. This is where I agree with Suner because "Song continues to wear feminine clothes even when s/he is giving reports to the Chinese officials" (58). However, transvesticism, whether it is "on-stage" or "off-stage", relates to performance and the pleasure of dressing like the opposite sex, and, therefore, it adheres to the binary of male/female and masculine/feminine. Transgendered embodiment refers to a fluid gender, one that directly challenges a static acquiescence to binaries.

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9. I want to clarify here that there is a cultural and historical foundation for transvesticism in Chinese opera and stage-play. But, I'm arguing here that Song's fluid gender extends *beyond* the stage and male/female binary.

10. Certainly, Butler's theory of gender performativity enabled the deconstruction of gender, which argued for its fluidity. However, this theory has been misinterpreted to mean that all performances are controlled whereas Butler means that the performativity is already inscribed onto us and is a "doing, thought not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (25). See *Gender Trouble* for more.

In cinema, as in reality, the body is also the marker of sex and what is now viewed as gender.<sup>11</sup> In an effort to maintain Song's transgenderism, the film manages to avoid portraying the explicit indicator of his/her gender or sex. The scene in the police van manages to avoid giving us closure with regard to Song's gender and sex (Suner 58) – we do not see anything but a body without genitalia, and, therefore, one cannot assume Song is male/female and/or masculine/feminine. Furthermore, Song states in this scene that "under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me," and this statement repudiates a masculine or feminine pronoun (Suner 58). To continue the problem with language in referring to Song's gender and sex, Cronenberg refers to Song as a male when he speaks about the casting of Song Liling. Cronenberg says "I wanted a man. When Gallimard and Song are kissing I wanted it to be two men. I wanted the audience to feel that" (327). However, Cronenberg also refers to Song as "she," which de Lauretis believes "suggests his identification with Gallimard" in identifying Song as a woman (329). And to complicate matters, de Lauretis herself identifies Song as a man with a masculine pronoun. In addition, two noted scholars on David Cronenberg's body of work, Ernest Mathijs and William Beard, both ultimately refer to Song as "he" in their respective analyses of the films. Mathijs' analysis of the film employs the feminine pronoun for Song until he states that "Song is a man" and then begins to refer to Song as "he" (174). Beard also changes from using "she" to "he" after he makes a statement about coherent gender and/or sex as he says "But Song Liling is precisely not a real female, she is precisely a creation of male fantasy, she is in fact a man" (359).<sup>12</sup>

Beard states that "the filmmaker himself declared that in this film, for the first time, absolutely no creatures and no special effects, 'John (Lone) is the creature' and 'John was my one big special effect' (361). On the contrary, the special effect and the monster in this film is the transgendered figure of Song – the unfathomable gender that cannot even be uttered by language itself. Furthermore, Beard goes on to say that the true monstrosity of the film, "is that a man-woman is far more a 'creature' than a woman-as-woman could be," (361) which is certainly valid because a man-woman, or in other words, a person that deviates from accepting either male or female as their gender/sex is a Monster. There is gender ambiguity, then, or forced assumption of gender onto Song not only by characters with-

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11. Science's narrow, definitional view of gender has infiltrated other discourses to the point that gender and sex have been conflated in our society.

12. I don't have the space to argue against Beard's notion of a "real female", but see Monique Wittig and Simone De Beauvoir's work on the constructedness of woman in *The Straight Mind* and *The Second Sex* respectively.

in the diegesis, but also by scholars, critics and the director who all seek to make sense of Song's queer, and monstrous, gender.

### Kirill as Queer Monster: The Colonizer/Heterosexual/Masculine/Male as Haunting Doppelganger



My theoretical framework of a queer Monster is furthered in *Eastern Promises* with the character of Kirill whose queer sexuality is represented within the film and rendered explicit. The doppelganger who illuminates Kirill's sexuality as monstrous and, thus, Kirill as Monster, is Nikolai. *Eastern Promises* portrays Kirill as dominant and controlling of Nikolai; however, I will suggest how Nikolai acts as the dominant force in this film not only to colonize the Other (Kirill), but along with the film, Nikolai makes Kirill into a Monster similar to Song in *M. Butterfly*. Mathijs states that "the homoerotic S&M play between Kirill and Nikolai parallels some of the situations Cronenberg had previously explored in *M. Butterfly* and *Crash*, with Nikolai, like Gallimard and James, not wholly uninterested or victimized" (240). Nikolai, like Gallimard, is not victimized because he is the one controlling and containing Kirill's queerness as doppelganger. Furthermore, Nikolai is partially interested in Kirill's sexual advances because he represses that what he also desires. Mathijs also makes a point about the "queer disease" that Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl) speaks about in the film, and I believe this queer disease is a further iteration of the pathologizing of queerness in Cronenberg's films; Kirill's queerness has to be demonized and made monstrous in order for the film to represent and then contain his sexuality.

Kirill's status as queer Monster rendered by Nikolai as doppelganger will be made clear by an analytical deconstruction of some of *Eastern Promises'* scenes.

Nikolai and Kirill are almost always connected by embrace and touching. There is a motif of having either Nikolai's hand on Kirill's back or vice versa – this reinforces the notion that they are really shadows of one another. In other words, the monstrous/abnormal and the normal are connected through physical contact. The film also complicates

Kirill's morality as Wood states that "the monster is clearly the emotional center and much more human than the card-board representations of normality" (27). There is a sense of moral ambivalence in Kirill and this illustrates itself throughout the entire film in different ways. When Nikolai and Kirill first meet Anna (Naomi Watts), Nikolai states "maybe somebody sent your Father a hooker for Christmas," while Kirill replies by saying "You're so fucking unbelievably disrespectful." This works as an example of Kirill's sensitivity, not only towards disrespecting his Father, but also disrespecting Anna.

In the following scene, Anna enters Kirill's family restaurant, called the Trans Siberian, and a following shot of Kirill renders him as Monster.

Kirill is positioned next to a stuffed animal's head in the mise-en-scene of the Trans Siberian, which implies a sense of associational wildness and/or savageness onto him. Kirill has done nothing up to this point in the film to garner such an image, but yet the film constructs this for us to think of him in a certain way. In contrast, the status of Nikolai as colonizer and Kirill's doppelganger is supported by the film's mise-en-scene(s). Directly after Anna leaves Trans Siberian, Nikolai is positioned erect beside a pole by Anna's motorcycle. Considering that Nikolai almost penetrates her motorcycle in a previous shot by driving his car in close proximity to it, his heterosexual phallicism is cemented in this scene, which juxtaposes itself clearly against Kirill's queerness.

In another scene, again in the Trans Siberia during a party (or family event), Kirill is consistently alienated in the mise-en-scene. Kirill is not sitting with family and/or friends for dinner; he is alienated and relegated through his seating next to the kid's table. His adult subject is denigrated here and he is also, again, framed with creatures. Only this time, the animal is a two-headed, bird-like animal chiselled into a stone pillar, which is a metaphor for the film's quick construction and containment of Kirill from a protruding animal's head to an object in stone. This specific connection constructed through the mise-en-scene between Kirill and the two-headed, bird-like animal is also metaphorically reaffirming the doppelganger effect as a leitmotif in the film.



Later in the film, Nikolai and Kirill enter the Trans Siberia, and Nikolai throws Kirill to the floor once they enter. The shot is from a low-angle that suggests Nikolai's dominance over Kirill, especially when Nikolai sits down in a chair after Kirill is shown on the floor. Kirill struggles to get up in his drunken haze and grabs onto Nikolai's ankle. While this is happening, Nikolai's legs are spread and he is leaning back in his chair with his right arm concealing half of his face. Kirill places his head directly onto Nikolai's shoe, which suggests his submissive position, and extends his buttocks into the air. This shot represents that what cannot be fully represented – sexual intercourse between Kirill and Nikolai – this must always be represented in symbolic ways to contain the queerness within the diegesis. Furthermore, Kirill's Father, Semyon is witness to this behaviour and punishes the implied queerness of the scene by physically attacking his son with kicks to the stomach, which works metaphorically to suggest that Semyon is punishing Kirill for his transgressions.

This representation of queerness or the sex between Kirill and Nikolai that the film cannot represent is furthered in a following scene where Kirill commands Nikolai to have sex with a prostitute while he watches to prove that he “ain't no fucking queer” as he si-

multaneously caresses Nikolai's face. The motif of anal intercourse is again reaffirmed here when Nikolai chooses to rape the prostitute from behind while Kirill watches.<sup>13</sup> However, considering that Nikolai actually works for Scotland Yard, could he not find a way out of this predicament? Surely, there could have been an alternative and a better way to “save-face” that would not have resulted in the rape of a woman. Could the alternative be Kirill and Nikolai having sex? Why is the rape of a woman able to represent itself clearly in Cronenberg's cinema while queer sexuality is repudiated or relegated to obscurity with metaphors and connotative meanings? This scene makes Kirill seem like a monster because he commands Nikolai to rape the prostitute; however, Nikolai *did* the raping, and this action is certainly more horrific and criminal than Kirill's voyeurism. Regardless of this fact, Nikolai is treated as the saviour here when he helps the woman after he rapes her. Nikolai is framed by a low-angle shot with a crucifix tattoo on his chest, and he also gives the woman money to return to her family. However, Nikolai is the *one* who rapes her, and yet Kirill bears the burden of responsibility and disgust.

13. “Rear-entry” sex is a sexual choice represented in other Cronenberg's directed works in addition to M. Butterfly and Eastern Promises: *Crash* (1996).

And again later in the film, Kirill is forced to take responsibility for an action he did not commit. After being made aware of the murder of a fellow *vory v zakone*, which occurred at the beginning of the film, Semyon remarks “My son commits a murder on my own doorstep.” But, Kirill did not do the killing; he may have ordered it, but this is the point – Kirill is forced to take responsibility for other’s actions: he is colonized by the film’s formal and semantic structure. Kirill is made into a queer Monster.

When Kirill takes Tatiana’s (Sarah Jeanne-Labrosse) baby from the hospital, which Anna is protecting, this is the moment of the film whereby Kirill’s moral ambivalence is most explicit. Kirill stands next to the water and says “She’s just a little girl,” and his conscience overcomes him when Nikolai and Anna come to rescue the baby. Kirill is abused, beaten and discriminated against by his own Father and this would be the first time Kirill would commit an act directly. However, Nikolai takes the baby from Kirill and then embraces him. They hold one another in a loving embrace – a queerness that the film quickly repudiates by replacing it with heteronormativity. This embrace is juxtaposed against the preceding shot of Nikolai, Anna and the baby as the heterosexual, white, nuclear family. Nikolai also kisses Anna, which quickly erases the queerness existing in the previous shot. Again, the doppelganger effect juxtaposes Nikolai’s normativity against Kirill’s queerness, which renders him as a Monster.

The Other is represented in cinema in different ways, and I do not suggest that my theory of the queer Monster can be mapped onto every film that features characters who do not adhere to normality. What I do suggest is that the representation of queerness in *M. Butterfly* and *Eastern Promises* is transformed into the monstrous by the workings of the doppelganger and the level of repression in relation to queer gender, sex and sexuality. The queer bodies become abject, similar to the other abject bodies in Cronenberg’s films; they exist on the border-lines, the interstices of Cronenberg’s cinema. They can only be represented on the level of symbolic order and semantic structure. Cronenberg may well be the “eternal outsider,” yet these two films disavow explicit representation of the queer “outsider” in an effort to replace/colonize the queerness with monstrosity.

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