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**THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT OF SUBLIME IN THREE  
ORIENTALIST OPERAS**

**Fedra Rodríguez Hinojosa (Brasil)<sup>1</sup>**

**ABSTRACT**

This article briefly places the opera as an important artistic genre in which several different features are combined, such as musical elements, mise-en-scène and literary ones, the *libretti*, resulting in a unique artwork. Moreover, a closed analysis of the plots displayed in *libretti* of three orientalist operas was carried out: two composed by Giacomo Puccini, *Turandot* and *Madame Butterfly*, and *Iris*, composed by Pietro Mascagni. In spite of an excessive sentimentalism and false exoticism that support the stereotypes related to the Oriental world and stimulate the Western preconceived clichés, the three operas present remarkable characteristics that can be evaluated and framed through some concepts about the sublime formulated by many philosophers as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

**Keywords:** opera, orientalism, sublime

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<sup>1</sup> Licenciada en Ciências Biológicas por la Universidad Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC), con segunda licenciatura en Letras Lengua y Literatura Francesa en la misma universidad. Máster en Estudios de Traducción, actualmente cursa el Doctorado, también en Traducción (UFSC). Ejerce la docencia en dicha universidad en las disciplinas de francés, español e inglés de los cursos Extracurriculares. Integra en la actualidad, como investigadora, el proyecto DITRAPGET-UFSC (Dicionário de Tradutores) y como colaboradora, el Banque Données Littératures du Maghreb de la Coordination Internationale des Chercheurs sur les Littératures Maghrébines.

The search for a suitable definition of opera leads us to Italy XVII century's *dramma per musica* and also to Wagner's treatise *Oper und Drama*. Taking these very distinct conceptions together, we might define opera as a musical drama in which several different elements such as aria, the lingering on a motive, the purely musical accessories, chamber orchestra and visual scene effects are combined, resulting in a characterization of a specific type of art that evokes cultural values, beliefs and passions, triggering the catharsis described in Aristotle's *Ars Poetica*.

The opera, as presented nowadays, has its roots in Florence, in 1597, when a group of erudites accompanied by patron Bardi discussed, during a gathering, the imitation of the Greek tragedies by Italian poets and the role of music in such presentations. In the same year, Ottavio Rinuccini started to write the first *libretto* *Daphne* and conductor Jacopo Peri composed the music, both developing a new genre whose main basis were the monodic chant and basso continuo, components featuring in baroque style<sup>2</sup>.

Subsequently to Florentine opera, created by intellectuals, the aristocratic baroque opera has risen displaying scenic, theatrical and music artworks, focusing the expression of human emotions through chanted melody<sup>3</sup>. So, the artist's main goal became 'the purifying control over the emotional source of art', molding and transforming it until the moment he achieves Orpheus's exploit: cause a commotion even in hell.

As it happens in every artistic developing process, the operistic genre has reinvented itself throughout the centuries, but always keeping an eye on the inter-relationship between action and musical continuity. From baroque opera and its ornamental arias, in which Monteverdi and Purcell were outstanding, to Gluck's reform and to Mozart's style, the nature of musical movement has changed many times. This feature can be easily noticed in Gluck's *Orpheus and Euridice* (1762) and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787). All those alterations in the genre have taken place due to the new public, made up of the bourgeoisie and yeomanry, who discovered and started to appreciate the mixture of music and 'theatre'.

The romantic movement rules the XIX century not only in music, but also in other arts such as literature and painting, revealing writers and artists like E.T.A Hoffmann, Keats, Delacroix and many others. In operistic genre, Richard Wagner is Romanticism's new exponent, composing pieces whose features were the orchestra's main role to ensure the unity and the idea of *leitmotiv*, where the themes are connected to characters and situations during the entire musical drama. The controversial composer of *Tristan and Isolde* (1857) has left his mark and influence in many other romantic and neo-romantic composers like Giuseppe Verdi. Moreover, it is with Verdi's Italian Romanticism that opera wins the heart of the great public and achieves the *status* of popular art. Later, but in the same way, Giacomo Puccini, who composed international language pieces as *La Fanciulla del West* (1910), has contributed to show opera in a different perspective when compared to the original conception established by intellectuals and erudites. Nonetheless, Puccini and his librettists have reached international success and recognition because of their ability to create operas that keep

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley, CA, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Otto Maria Carpeaux, *O livro de ouro da História da Música: da Idade Média ao século XX* (Rio de Janeiro, 2001).

syncrony between action and musical continuity as well as plots with mushy background.

Opposite to his lifelong friend Puccini, Pietro Mascagni composed operas in which subjects always changed, ranging from verismo to unabashed romanticism, most of them containing music of great beauty and dramatic power<sup>4</sup>. Although considered by Mallach ‘worthy of regular revival for its strange and compelling power as a work of musical theater’<sup>5</sup>, *Iris* and other Mascagni’s operas were severely reproached by critics, who have pointed out the excentric harmonies, disagreeable movements and a doubtful Japanese origin. Therefore, for the critics, the differences between Puccini and Mascagni, paradoxically have lead them to a convergent point: the misuse of Orientalism and emotionalism and the exploitation of the growing *fin de siècle* taste for the exotic. Both composers and their librettists would only be artists trying to express their own ideas and create a plot within an imaginary Orient, that is to say, non-existent Japan and China<sup>6</sup> (Mascagni admitted himself that *Iris* should be ‘judged as a work of art conceived as a whole, written accordind to my own criteria, with ideas that emerged from my own imagination’<sup>7</sup>). Thus, orientalist operas depict the unequal politics between Orient and the Western World, besides the reinforcement of some old clichés associated to Japanese and Chinese cultures<sup>8</sup>. Nontheless, if those operas might be defined as ‘misrepresentations’, on the other hand it is undeniable that they provoke commotion in audiences all over the world and thus, they carry out the task originally proposed by baroque artists: make people burst into tears. Due to this irrefutable argument, the present article’s main goal is the identification of sublime features in three orientalist operas: Puccini’s *Turandot* and *Madame Butterfly* as well as Mascagni’s *Iris*, where components as death, tragedy and pain are the pillars.

#### ORIENTALISM IN OPERA

The operistic art always focused the excitement of people’s imagination and also their emotional shades, that is the reason why it has used invariably several different features to compose the scenarios. In the end of the XIX century and beginning of the XX, the Western world started to get interested in oriental culture, inasmuch as, exactly the period in which commercial expansion and international relations with oriental countries were encouraged. Not only the opera was influenced by this historical passage, but also many other artworks, specially literature, which revealed the Western world curiosity about the mysterious and exotic Orient, where the habits were so distinct. One of those literature works evoking oriental customs was *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), written by French author Pierre Loti, afterward adapted and entitled *Madame Butterfly* by John Luther Long. The story shows a complex intercultural relationship between a French lieutenant and a woman from Nagasaki.

Thus, the Orientalism becomes stronger in arts during this historical period, however, the concept was twisted, strenghtening stereotypes linked to an enigmatic Orient. According to Edward Said in its book *Orientalism*<sup>9</sup>, the product of orientalist

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Mallach, *Pietro Mascagni and his operas*, (Boston, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem [4].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., [4]

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., [4]

<sup>8</sup> Maria Isabel Seguro Gómez, ‘M. Butterfly as a Total Theatre’, *BELLS Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies*, 15 (2006), 1-12 at 2.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979).

artwork acts as ‘Western world’s domination, re-structure and authority over the Orient’. Moreover, the author states that the distorted notion of orientalism reflects Michel Foucault’s conception of discursive practice of a whole society, achieved through cultural stereotypes that fortify the idea of an East world rich in sensuality, pleasure, cruelty and splendor<sup>10</sup>. The arrangement of such portrait is also remarkably strong when referring to the Asiatic woman. She is represented as resigned, meek and willing to serve her beloved man, no matter if she will have to die for love. This misrepresentation of the oriental woman, who is able to do whatever it is necessary for love and who prefers death to shame or abandon, is glaringly evident in several operas, as Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* (1904) with character Cho-Cho San, *Turandot*’s Liu (1924) and Mascagni’s *Iris* (1898).

Orientalist operas’s second feature is the presence of religious and mystic elements which carry, through occult ceremonial rites, an intense intolerance typical of the oriental nations, according to the Western representation. These aspects include infamy, disgrace and even curses upon young girls that have transgressed religious or social rules, like teenager Iris who was carried on by a fanciful world and is roughly doomed by her own father after he sees her at an *okiya* (gueseisha’s establishment), or Butterfly who became a Christian because of her devotion to Pinkerton, but is considered damned by Bonze, her uncle. Moreover, the oppressive and frightening power of Eastern beliefs entwines with the supporting characters’ social behaviour, as the crowd that eagerly follows the denouement of all situations in *Turandot* and as Cho-Cho San’s friends and relatives who are dominated by the imposed rules throughout many generations.

Nonetheless, for audiences, the false exoticism and the misguided mystic issues are not considered out of context and surprisingly, they are responsible to attract the public who has already crystallized the idea of oriental religions as a source of mystery and terror, responsible for fear and commotion, *id est*, feeling of sublime. For some philosophers like Edmund Burke<sup>11</sup> and Immanuel Kant<sup>12</sup>, emotion in the presence of sublime is evoked in many different nuances, according to what we are experiencing before the terrible, noble or magnificent<sup>13</sup>. Subsequently, aspects involving the sublime feeling in *Iris*, *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot* operas will be discussed.

#### SUBLIME AND OPERA

The conception of sublime has arisen in Classical Antiquity and it is presented and discussed in many subjects, from rhetoric to philosophy and other arts. The term sublime, from the latin *sublimis*, means ‘in a higher position’ or ‘elevated’. It has been related to greatness, transcendence and paramountcy. It was employed for the first time as a rhetorical term, referring to certain qualities of a literary artwork which gives the reader a sensation of rapture and it allows him to drive his thoughts to a higher level. Within this idea, opera, which harmonizes ‘images and rhythms creating softness,

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph P. Locke, ‘Reflections on Orientalism in Opera and Musical Theatre’, *Opera Quarterly*, 10 (1993), 48-64 at 52.

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (New York, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* (Berkeley, 1991)

<sup>13</sup> María Zárata, ‘Los creadores de ficciones sublimes’, In: *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* (Madrid, 1994), 129-136 at 131.

inexorability and a sharp magnificence', is an artistic genre capable to elicit the feeling of sublime<sup>14</sup>.

Throughout the history, the idea of sublime has been gradually constructed: philosopher and orator Cicerus systematized and renamed the categories of Roman oratory and it is due to this formalization, the term has got its stylistic meaning<sup>15</sup>.

Later on, in reponse to Caecilius de Calacte, who quarreled against the spurious sublime, Longinus wrote the treatise on epistolary form, *On the Sublime*, trying to identify the sources of that feeling and purposing the idea that sublime has its roots on five different points: great thoughts, powerful emotions that leads to passions (joy, terror, admiration and wonder), words, figures of thought and speech and noble compositions. Although this notion has been controversial in other moments of the history of art, specially for literature with translation of Longinus's work to Italian by Robortello in 1554 and to French by Boileau in 1693, it was Edmund Burke and his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* in 1757 who summarized the issues related to sublime and perception of an artwork. According to Barbas<sup>16</sup>, Burke has decided to study the possibility of the existence of a exact theory of human passions, through the identification of their genuine inception. Thus, in his treatise we can find three central goals: study of human passions, things that influence passions and the laws of nature which excite passions and affect bodies.

Burke is also one of the main theoreticians of sublime's mixed passions, made up of death, pain and pleasure and the opposition between the beautiful and sublime. According to the author, everything that somehow brings in ideas about danger and ache or everything which is dreadful or related to terrible objects, represent a source of sublime. Taking this conception, orientalist operas present such mixture of passions which evokes the feeling. The existence of fear, represented by the mystical elements, the presence of death, represented by suicides in *Iris*, *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot*, and the immanence of pain-pleasure, represented by *Turandot's* Calaf, elicit in the audiences an alloy of delight and pity, resulting in catharsis.

### SUBLIME IN IRIS

This opera in three acts, which premiered at the Constanzi Theater in Rome in 1898 and inspired Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, is one of Pietro Mascagni's greatest success after the spectacular presentation of his *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890). The *libretto* was also written by Luigi Illica, and by means of an exaggerated symbolism and a debauched exotism, sets forth the story of a beautiful and innocent 15 year-old girl who takes care of a selfish blind father (Il Cieco) and awakes the desire of a debased rich man, Osaka. Counting on Kyoto, a brothel's (Yoshiwara) owner, Osaka uses a puppet show to attract Iris and finally kidnap her, in order to allay his intense passion. Thus, the girl is seized and carried to Yoshiwara, driving her father mad, since he didn't know what exactly happened until the moment he finds some money intentionally left by Osaka. Desperate and furious, he is led to believe that his daughter has gone willingly and starts out to find her. 'Il Cieco', unaware of her kidnap and believing her a brothel's voluntary inmate, offends and curses Iris, who ashamed and in terror because

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem [11].

<sup>15</sup> Helena Barbas, '*O sublime e o belo – de Longino a Edmund Burke*' [E-letter], Artigos de Estudos Alemães da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (november 2002), <http://www.fcsh.unl.pt/docentes/hbarbas> (accessed 3 march 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem [15].

of such dishonor and opprobrium, jumps out of a window and falls into a sewer. At that moment, sun rays enlighten the girl, who's now carried to a special and perhaps, better world.

In the first act, Iris reveals all bad dreams she had the previous night suggesting that such nightmares were not pointless, but an ill omen. Rich in symbology, this part of the opera makes best use of an antithesis between unreal creatures as monsters and real ones such as dragonflies and flowers, reinforcing those old clichés linked to Oriental beliefs. Moreover, Illica, who is also *Madame Butterfly's* librettist, usually displays constituents of the beautiful which are related to Japanese culture and hold connotation of ephemerality. The chrysanthemum, used by Iris to embellish her long hair, is the same flower chosen by Pierre Loti to entitle his masterpiece (*Madame Chrysanthème*) and this is not senseless, since this flower, as a symbol, evokes the two different feelings analyzed in Burke's treatise: the beautiful because it fascinates and at the same time, it elicits the feeling of sublime, due to its symbolism. This flower is considered an Oriental sign and according to Western traditions, it is associated with death. Therefore, as the opera starts, the public feels the sublime and tension as a consequence of a terrible foreshadow over Iris, the delicate and ephemeral chrysanthemum. Burke has highlighted that when danger or pain appear as an impending threat, they cannot draw out any pleasure, nonetheless, when they are bound to happen or appear attenuated, they might be rapturous. In this manner, Iris's lack of emotional strength is the key element of the sublime, since it triggers the cathartic delectation.

After that, still in the first act, Osaka lets out his lust and curiosity for Iris, an issue not only analyzed by Burke, but also by Immanuel Kant<sup>17</sup>. As stated by Kant, the curious behaviour's main goal is to possess the object of desire as well as to disclose every single detail, abridging it to some principles<sup>18</sup>. That is, the subject who is driven by passion and a deep desire of cognoscitive possession tries to hinder the object's independence, no matter if the object does not know its own mind, completing a delightful circle of power. In a parallel way, for Burke, the curious examines his objects and uses them up, always trying to find a new facet to be amazed and astonished. Thus, either in Kant's dominance game, either in Burke's frenzied examination, by means of curiosity and possessiveness, the subject pleases himself. The desire and attraction issues put together the two male characters Calaf and Osaka: beauty present in Turandot and Iris and the relationship subject-object between the two couples is an anagnorisis in which the two male characters face themselves through the experience of the "other", whom they want to grasp, by means of a cognoscitive absorption. Despite that, starting from this philosophical point both *personae* take different ways: Calaf looks forward the absolut and goes beyond Kant's circle of power and its relative values. On the other hand, Osaka continues in the desperate search for the object's distinct features and, when he cannot find them, he becomes bored. A bored person (Osaka in the second act saying *Che noia!*) dives at the bottom of the situation trying to fulfill a desire of plenitude in which objects seem inaccessible or insufficient.

In the puppet show prepared by Osaka and Kyoto, an excess of sentimentalism is intentionally shown, in order to provoke a domino effect: Iris is fascinated and emotionally affected (*Oh, la istoria pietosa! Mi par che dentro al cuore mano mi prema*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem [12].

<sup>18</sup> José María Artola, 'Experiencia de lo sublime y principios racionales', *Revista de Filosofía* vol.III, issue 3 (1990), 83-112, at 85.

*e tocchi*) and so is the audience. In the same way, the moment ‘Il Cieco’ feels desperate and starts out to find Iris, is one of the opera’s peaks in which the effects of the tragedy are felt at the highest level. Burke stated that the more a tragedy gets closer to reality the more it elicits a cathartic effect. In case of orientalist operas, in spite of the fact they present a questionable veracity and the elements shown are just old commonplaces crystallized in Western world’s imagination, the public is “prevented” from realizing that it is only a fictional drama. At the same time, people accept that hindrance because the opera is a source of pleasure and relief. Moreover, if the spectator’s life is out of any impending danger, he pleases himself observing the real or imaginary suffering.

In the 2nd act, Osaka’s lust achieves its highest level, although it is not the girl’s beauty what attracts the rich man’s attention, but her kindness and sensibility (*Non è mousmè leziosa di città, ordigno fatto per la volutà; qui c’è l’anima!*). Burke has highlighted that man, brought up to have complex and varied relationships, associates passion to some social qualities which drive and increase the sexual appetite he has in common with other animals. According to the author, beauty consists, in most of cases, in a body’s quality that acts over the human soul, through the intervention of the five senses resulting in a passion that joins subject and fair object. In the light of this concept, Kant stated that beauty expresses an alliance between rationality and subjectivity leading us to pleasure and to subject-object union.

At last, the central persona Iris is analyzed as a sublime and beauty element: Burke stated that a person who is chosen to help or allay someone’s sorrow, usually represents a less noble subject, despite he is considered adorable. The same way, gracefulness and affability are considered less important qualities for our society. Therefore, Iris, a sensitive and generous girl who is responsible for an old blind father, personifies beauty ‘soft green of the soul on which we rest our eyes, that are fatigued with beholding more glaring objects’ and thus, sublimates. Displaying such outline, the character herself could not elicit a cathartic effect expected from an artwork like an opera. In this manner, if she could not be considered a sublime component, capable to trigger herself a deep emotion in the public or make them break into tears, at least the outcome should give Iris a sublime and apothotic end: a slow death in a muddy sewer concedes a moment of introspection and critical reflection in which the reasons of a tragic destiny remain unknown. The gloomy sewer completes the portrait of sublime, a metaphor of an outrageous and not-deserved dishonor, quickly displacing Iris from beauty to sublime.

#### SUBLIME IN MADAME BUTTERFLY

The first orientalist opera composed by Giacomo Puccini with an Italian *libretto* by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica, premiered in 1904 at Teatro alla Scala in Milan and conducted by Arturo Toscanini. The play *Madame Butterfly*, written by American playwright David Belasco, the short story *Madame Butterfly* by John Luther Long, as well as Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème*, were the sources of inspiration for Puccini and his librettists. According to Newman<sup>19</sup>, Puccini was fascinated when he saw the play in London in 1900. Moreover, the story of an Oriental woman who deeply abided intense distress caused by romantic failure, made him realize that his music could transform such interlude into something even more touching than Belasco did.

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<sup>19</sup> Ernest Newman, *Stories of Great Operas, Vol. III* (Garden City, 1930).

The plot, which was inspiring not only for the opera but also for several different versions such as the musical *Miss Saigon* and the David Cronenberg's movie *M. Butterfly* (1993), tells the story of B.F. Pinkerton, a young American lieutenant from the United States Navy, who bought a house in Nagasaki and the rights to have a Japanese wife, Cho-Cho-San a 15 year-old geisha, known by her friends as 'Butterfly'. She falls deeply in love with Pinkerton to such an extent that she abnegates Japanese familiar traditions and religion, and because of this decision, Butterfly is abandoned by her relatives and cursed by Bonze, her uncle, in the wedding day. The following day, Pinkerton goes back to USA but keeping the promise that he would return to Japan. Cho-Cho-San always escorted by faithful servant Suzuki, gives birth Trouble, a baby boy who is Pinkerton's child. Three years have elapsed, but Butterfly was still waiting for her beloved husband who returns as promised, however, married to another woman, Kate Pinkerton. Feeling a great sorrow, Cho-Cho-San says that Pinkerton shall have his child if he returns to fetch the little boy in half-an-hour. Then, the Japanese woman takes down from the wall a Japanese sword used by her father to commit *seppuku*, the suicidal ritual. She kisses the blade, welcoming it as a sign of redemption; for now, deprived of husband and child, she has no further desire for life.

Taking the synopsis above, it is possible to confirm the phoney exoticism and the reinforcement of the old stereotypes, specially about the Oriental woman: according to Van Rij<sup>20</sup>, Butterfly's nature is charming and distinguished, however her misperception of the surrounding world is 'unbelievably naïve'. Puccini composed this opera going from one element to another without following a specific logical sequence (he relocates and mixes details, makes characters change their attitudes) but always keeping a strong sentimentalism in every single moment, touching the public. Therefore, we discover the reasons why Puccini's operas are so popular: aesthetic pleasure raises from the thin line between illusion and reality which is produced by the spectacle. This disruption between real life and fiction would be the entertainment's main goal, leading each member of the audience to meet his deepest feelings.

In *Madame Butterfly*'s first act, Pinkerton is depicted as a careless and inconsequent young man who dares to make fun of traditions and mock Japanese names (*Nomi di scherno o scherzo*), strenghtening the idea of Orient as a peculiar place with bizarre traditions which succumb and are deconstructed, however, by the forceful Western manners. Despite the exoticism that could inspire fear, Puccini's Japan is far from sublime, since it is submissive and does not display anything of splendid or magnificent. In Burke's conception<sup>21</sup> about power and superimposing forces, sublime is related to terror and contempt to docility and subserviency, and probably that is the reason that leads Pinkerton to show such disrespectful behaviour.

Later on in the first act, Bonze, Butterfly's uncle, shows up at the wedding celebration, humilliating and cursing his niece, because he was informed that Cho-Cho-San has converted to Christianity. This is one of the turning points of the opera, not only for the public but also for the characters, since it evokes dread, source of sublime through a strained atmosphere. According to Burke's treatise<sup>22</sup>, every single element that is able to produce this kind of excitement might also elicit a similar passion, even if it is not linked to any sign of danger. Precisely, Butterfly is not in immediate danger

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Van Rij, *Madame Butterfly: Japonisme, Puccini and the search for the real Cho-Cho-San* (Berkeley, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem* [11].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, [11].



during her wedding celebration, nonetheless, the foreboding and the possibility of a terrible misfortune predicted by Bonze cause her uneasiness and even physical disorder (Cho-Cho-San almost faints). This amalgam of feelings associated to mystical constituents are the main bases of sublime.

The young geisha expectations and love illusions figure as a union between joy and grief that affects souls. When Butterfly waits for Pinkerton, her soul is torn and happy at the same time, a complex feeling that makes her survive, in spite of loneliness. According to Burke<sup>23</sup>, the one that suffers from the intense passion called sorrow is dominated and succumbs, reaching the stage of complete submission to a noxious feeling. Paradoxically, it is exactly this harmful feeling, an amalgam of pain and hope that approaches Cho-Cho-San to a chained Prometheus, the main source of pleasure. Thus, for the author, when we profoundly feel that an object of desire is gone, grief raises in our soul which consequently evokes pleasant elements, such as happy recollections, producing delight. In Butterfly, Liu and Iris' regrets we might find pleasure and hateful anguish, a mixture which originates from pure pain and has a serious nature.

#### SUBLIME IN TURANDOT

*Turandot*, a three act opera composed by Giacomo Puccini, premiered in 1926 at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy. *Turandot* was unfinished by the time of Puccini's death, and was later completed by Franco Alfano whose outcome was severely criticized because of the putative excess of sentimentalism and romance. The *libretto* was written by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simone and based on Carlo Gozzi's play. It tells the story of Emperor Altun's daughter, the Chinese Princess Turandot, who hates all men and swears that she will never get married as a vengeance against those who have offended Lo-u-Ling, her ancestor. However, due to dynastic and Chinese traditions, Altun imposes her a marriage. She accepts, but inflicts a condition: any prince seeking to marry her must answer three riddles and if he fails, he dies. Prince of Persia, the last suitor, failed and thus, has to be executed at the moonrise among the cries of a bloodthirsty crowd. Turandot's resentment and implacability, summed to her beauty, awakes a violent passion in young Calaf, the unknown Prince, son of Timur, vanquished king of Tartary. Timur, blind and lonely, was forgotten by all his servants, except the beautiful servant Liu, who remained faithful to him. When Calaf decides to accept the challenge, Timur, Liu and ministers Ping, Pang and Pong try to discourage him, however, despite their pleas, Calaf strikes the gong and calls Turandot. This important moment of the opera reveals not only the Unknown Prince's uncontainable passion but also Turandot's sadistic personality which is present in Calaf's nature too. After answering correctly the three questions, the Unknown Prince generously offers Turandot a riddle of his own: if she can learn his name by dawn, he will forfeit his life. Then, the cruel princess announces that on pain of death, no one in Beijing shall sleep until she learns the stranger's name. This is another turning point of the opera, rich in constituents of sublime: death as the utmost punishment, where tension achieves the climax.

The exotic setting summed to the intensity of *personae* allow us identify several elements which are able to evoke the feeling of sublime in either the public, either in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., [11].

mise-en-scène. According to Burke's notions<sup>24</sup>, passions and human weaknesses' *mimesis* provokes a relative delight that usually is triggered when we are in the sight of disgraces represented in arts.

In the beginning of the first act, the presence of an excited multitude, attentive to Turandot's injunction, uttering aloud and calling the executioner is a clear example of what Burke calls "sympathy in the distresses of others". The philosopher has stated that we undergo a delightful experience before other people's misery and such feeling not only grabs our attention, but also overwhelms us in a pleasant way. In addition, he states that our delectation becomes even more intense if the person who is suffering is someone valorous, defeated by a humiliating destiny. For the audiences, in turn, the Princess suitors' situation elicits a deep pleasure that combines terror and compassion, sources of sublime.

Later on, Calaf is dazzled by Turandot's beauty, which can be considered, under Edmund Burke's conception, astonishment in the sight of the power, beauty as a social quality that results in a feeling of joy and rapture that dominates human beings and leads to an irresistible passion. Beauty, in Burke's treatise<sup>25</sup>, "consists, most of the times, in some qualities of bodies that act mechanically over the human spirits by means the intervention of senses". Therefore, Calaf's reaction to Turandot's image is the result of the sublime elements's amalgam that influence directly the human soul. Consequently, in this moment of Puccini's opera, beauty and sublime get together, fuse, keeping their intrinsic features, but detaching their most remarkable characteristic: the power to excite passions.

We call into question, guided by Burke's notions about sublime feeling, the real psychological profile of the opera's main character: Turandot could be only an evil woman or someone who nourishes the social passion called sympathy, for her ancestor Lo-u-Ling. However, for Burke<sup>26</sup>, sympathy leads people to worry about others, at the point of eliciting a commotion and changing places with the person who is suffering. Then, when becoming copartners in feelings, specially misery, people call forth themselves a painful sensation, source of sublime, usually followed by a certain pleasure. Within this concept, suffering and humiliation inflicted to Lo-u-Ling were directly transmitted to Turandot as well as intense glee fused with bitterness and unhappiness. The mixture of those emotional elements are responsible for the Princess' sadistic and cruel nature. Considering the idea of sympathy and alterity, which has been transferred to Turandot, the same feeling was transmitted to Calaf, as a combination of ache-delight-death, guiding him to an unlimited passion.

Liu, Timur's young servant (as Iris, she has plenty social qualities, as generosity and kindness: both girls take care of old blind men) is another character who is very important within the conception of sublime, since she deeply loves Calaf. When Unknown Prince decides to risk his own life in the terrible task imposed by the Chinese Princess, Liu reveals her love and tries to persuade her beloved man, in one of the highest points of the opera, the aria *Signora, ascolta*. Liu suffers of intense pain, eliciting in her heart 'the strongest emotion that a spirit is able to feel'. Ignoring the pleas, Calaf accepts the challenge, evoking in Liu, the feeling of privation, which splendid and terrible, is one of the greatest sources of sublime. The young girl in love

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem [11]

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., [11]

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., [11]

who bears such feelings and sacrifices herself in the name of a non-corresponded love, provokes in the audiences the cathartic experience that raises from pity and identification, both supported by the synchrony between action and musical continuity. It is also possible to connect Liu to Iris and *Madame Butterfly's* Cho-Cho-San, the three presenting a mixture of delight and sublime.

Conclusively, in spite of the false exoticness and the reinforcement of preconceived ideas about the Oriental world, the three operas are able to produce an intense impression on people's souls and evoke the feeling of sublime, since many of its components are presented on details and passages throughout the dramatization. This artistic genre makes the audiences experience, although imaginarily, the characters's grief and pain, in order to purify the most intense passions they can feel.