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**Music, Myth and the  
Pursuit of Meaning in *Moulin Rouge!***

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## Contents

Introduction	p. 3
1. The Construction of the Film	p. 10
2. The Story	p. 28
3. The Intertextual Web	p. 44
Conclusion	p. 56
Filmography	p. 59
Bibliography	p. 60

## Introduction

The reception of *Moulin Rouge!* by newspaper and magazine critics has been mixed, at best. The two most common complaints are that the film is a visual assault on the senses, and that meaning is thin on the ground. Descriptions of *Moulin Rouge!*'s visual impact, particularly the first twenty minutes, include 'a harrowing sensory assault,'<sup>1</sup> 'a whole lot of whooshing,'<sup>2</sup> and 'a hurtling, vertiginous, computer-assisted swan-diving panorama,'<sup>3</sup> which 'feels downright sadistic in its infuriating refusal to let up.'<sup>4</sup> The resulting injuries reportedly suffered by the audience range from their feeling 'a little bruised'<sup>5</sup> to feeling 'as if they're being targeted by a squadron of kamikaze bombers loaded with sugary marshmallow.'<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most vivid description of the film's visual style is that it 'rabidly Hoovers up a century or so worth of pop culture detritus and then projectile vomits it all over the screen with a vengeance.'<sup>7</sup>

As if the experience of being punched, bombed or vomited on were not enough, the critics for the most part agree that the deeper offence is *Moulin Rouge!*'s inability to use the assault to deliver any message or meaning. As David Edelstein summarises,

It's an aesthetic that's intended to seem generous (a thousand climaxes for the price of one) but ends up leaving you starved for a single moment of unhyped emotion [...] The real problem isn't overload but emptiness [...] the ideas (the theme is the power of love) are so minuscule they'd have trouble filling a Hallmark card.<sup>8</sup>

Even within an otherwise positive review in *Variety*, Todd McCarthy criticises the lack of impact of the love story:

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<sup>1</sup>Fred Choi, 'Moulin Rouge', *The Tech*, 8 June 2001 <<http://www.screendaily.com/moulin-rouge/405678.article>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>2</sup>David Edelstein, 'Miracles Are Cheap', *Slate*, 19 May 2001 <<http://slate.msn.com/id/106186>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>3</sup>Sean Burns, 'Wearing Rouge', *Philadelphia Weekly*, 30 May 2001 <[http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/screen/wearing\\_rouge-38352369.html](http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/screen/wearing_rouge-38352369.html)> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Choi

<sup>6</sup>Philip French, 'Moulin Rouge', *The Observer*, 9 September 2001 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/sep/09/philipfrench1>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>7</sup>Burns

<sup>8</sup>Edelstein

For all the effectiveness of the storytelling, [...] the love story never truly takes on a life of its own that rouses viewer emotion and becomes moving in its own right. [...]By the time the predestined end arrives, the fact that Luhrmann's accomplishment is one of style rather than of substance has become perilously clear.<sup>9</sup>

In this thesis I will argue that, far from being a meaningless exercise in style, *Moulin Rouge!* has a meaning so complicated that it defies a singular or coherent summary. Rather than an overload of style for its own sake, I will argue that the film's rampant referentiality amounts to a substantial kind of reflexivity – one that challenges the audience to consider their own role within the interpretive process.

*Moulin Rouge!* is made up of several layers. The story proper contains an internal play that bears an allegorical relationship to the events that unfold, and to the very act of watching the film. The story proper is also presented within several narrative framing devices, including a retrospective narration by the main character, which add further levels of complexity. *Moulin Rouge!* is also full of references to other films, operas, pop songs and plays, each offering avenues of interpretation beyond the film itself.

The scholarly reception of *Moulin Rouge!* has recognised that the film's meaning is deeper than its simple love-story. Four previous academic studies have discussed *Moulin Rouge!* in terms of the texts to which it alludes. Stacy Magedanz has described the film as having an 'allusive form', whereby meaning is generated through the references the film makes to previous works.<sup>10</sup> Mary Elizabeth Everett discusses its relationship to the wider genre of the film musical, while Kathryn Conner Bennett and Grace Kehler each focus on one of the films allusions to opera – *La Boheme* and *La Traviata* respectively.<sup>11</sup> But while all of

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<sup>9</sup> Todd McCarthy, 'Moulin Rouge', *Variety*, 9 May 2001

<[http://www.movietome.com/pages/tracking/index.php?tid=7&ref\\_id=280300](http://www.movietome.com/pages/tracking/index.php?tid=7&ref_id=280300)> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>10</sup> Stacy Magedanz, 'Allusion as Form: *The Wasteland* and *Moulin Rouge!*', *Orbis Litterarum*, 61 (2006) 160-179

<sup>11</sup> Mary Elizabeth Everett, "'Spectacular, Spectacular": The Mythology of Theatre and Cinema within Baz Luhrmann's Red Curtain Trilogy' (unpublished master's thesis, North Carolina State University, 2005); Kathryn Conner Bennet, 'The Gender-Politics of Death: Three Formulations of *La Boheme* in Contemporary Cinema',

these scholars are right to search for meaning in the intertextual web surrounding the film, each, I maintain, reveals conclusions that are too simplistic to allow for the many different levels on which *Moulin Rouge!* operates. In trying to get to grips with *Moulin Rouge!*, I have found that its apparent meaning holds inherent contradictions that cannot be distilled into any simple, single answer.

On the one hand, *Moulin Rouge!* is full of gestures, such as the many allusions, which are an apparent source of meaning for the story. But an attempt to trace the allusions, to pin down exactly what the gesture is for, reveals only an interpretive space that cannot be filled. This contradiction of a meaningful emptiness has been identified as an inherent characteristic of both music and myth, which, as I shall show, are both central to *Moulin Rouge!*'s meaning, or lack of it.

One area in which the concept of music and myth intersect is the much-discussed technique of the leitmotif. James Buhler has identified musical leitmotifs as having two innate, but contradictory, characteristics.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, they are signifiers intended to represent something particular in a concretely identifiable way. But on the other, they are musical, which means that ultimately they can signify nothing. The meaning of a motif can only exist when it reoccurs in conjunction with the signified extra-musical event; if it is used independently, in a context where the signified is absent, it risks being redefined. The meaning of a leitmotif never properly resides within the music itself, it remains in the labels attached to it. Following Theodor Adorno's discussion of Wagner's leitmotifs, Buhler uses the term 'linguistic' to describe the ability to signify, and 'mythic' to describe the quality that does not allow for definite signification.

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*Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 32 (2004) 110-121; Grace Kehler, 'Still for sale: Love Songs and Prostitutes from *La Traviata* to *Moulin Rouge!*', *Mosaic (Winnipeg)*, 38 (2005) 145-162

<sup>12</sup> James Buhler, 'Star Wars, Music and Myth' in *Music and Cinema*, Ed. by Buhler, Caryl Flinn and David Neumeyer (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000) pp. 33-57

This is the riddle of the leitmotif, which entwines myth and signification in a knot almost impossible to solve. The leitmotif draws attention to itself; it must be heard to perform the semiotic function attributed to it. The leitmotif says: listen to me, for I am telling you something significant. So long as it remains music, however, its meaning remains veiled. The clarity promised by the linguistic function dissolves but leaves us believing that this would all make sense if we gave ourselves over to the music.<sup>13</sup>

The meaning of the leitmotif can only be defined in terms of the extra-musical things it is associated with; the proper location of meaning is in the extra-musical. Yet, by some sleight-of-hand, the music claims the meaning for itself even as it fails to support it. To ‘give ourselves over to the music’, as Buhler puts it, is to believe that, rather than music being inadequate because it cannot provide concrete meaning, it is the definition of the leitmotif that is inadequate because it fails to summarise the intangible meaning of the music. We end up feeling that there is an overabundance of potential meaning in music, which cannot be narrowed down and defined, rather than an inherent lack of meaning.

Claude Levi-Strauss also compares music and myth, but care must be taken to realise that their use of the terminology is slightly different. While Buhler uses myth to mean that single inability to signify, opposed to the linguistic ability, Levi-Strauss describes both music and myth as ‘languages,’ but ones which ‘in their different ways, transcend articulate expression.’<sup>14</sup> In other words, myth shares both properties of the leitmotif identified by Buhler – it apparently signifies, and simultaneously resists signification. To this similarity, Levi-Strauss adds one more significant property that is shared by myth and music: both unfold through time, which means that they require active participation on the part of the audience to remember and understand each passing sound or event as part of the larger narrative. This leads to a further similarity between myth and music, that they need an audience in order to have meaning at all. ‘The intention of the composer, ambiguous while

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<sup>13</sup> Buhler, (p. 43)

<sup>14</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, Trans. by Jonathan Cape (London: Random House, 1970; repr. 1994) p. 15

still in the score, [...] becomes actual, like that of myth, through and by the listener.’<sup>15</sup> In fact, of myth Levi-Strauss says that the author’s intention is of no importance at all:

Myths are anonymous: from the moment they are seen as myths, and whatever their real origins, they exist only as elements embodied in a tradition. When the myth is repeated, the individual listeners are receiving a message that, properly speaking, is coming from nowhere; this is why it is credited with a supernatural origin.<sup>16</sup>

This is very similar to the Barthesian view of intertextuality, which sees all writings as made up of quotations that, intentional or not, are more crucial in forming meaning in the work than the author’s intention. In ‘The Death of the Author,’ Barthes says that ‘the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.’<sup>17</sup> *Moulin Rouge!* draws from many sources, both mythic (where the authors are actually dead) and intertextual (where they are nominally so). And yet this seems to be a deliberate act on the part of the filmmakers. Baz Luhrmann has deliberately included pointed references to the works that have influenced the film. It raises an interesting paradox of intentional intertextuality, where the author deliberately diminishes his role in creating meaning. It is perhaps unsurprising that the relationship of authors and readers to works of fiction is a major theme of the film’s story.

One final definition of myth must be addressed before I continue. Jane Feuer describes the backstage-musical as a genre that presents a ‘myth’ about its own origins, using the term to mean a falsehood. In the backstage musical, she suggests

entertainment is shown as having greater value than it actually does. In this sense, musicals are ideological products; they are full of deceptions. As students of mythology have demonstrated, however, these deceptions are willingly suffered by the audience.<sup>18</sup>

If the meanings of music and myth are, as Levi-Strauss and Barthes assert, formed in the mind of the listener, whether or not they are falsehoods depends solely on whether they are perceived as such. They are deception that are both built in the minds of the audience and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 18

<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Steven Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977) pp. 142-147 (p. 147)

<sup>18</sup> Feuer ‘The self-reflective musical and the myth of entertainment’ in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, Ed. by Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 31-40 (p. 32)

willingly suffered by them. In other words, whether or not they are falsehoods depends upon how they are interpreted by the audience. The audience either participate as willing sufferers of deception, or they simply perceive the myth, or the music, as true.

This is the reason that the meaning of *Moulin Rouge!* seems so crucial, and is yet so unfathomable: on the one hand it calls for interpretation, and through self-reflexive gestures such as copious intertextual allusions presents clues towards such interpretation that the audience is encouraged to follow. The gestures and allusions are so pointed; so self-consciously 'knowing,' that one cannot help thinking that an author has put them there as deliberate clues for the audience to follow. But on the other hand, in opening the scope of the search for meaning to include all the source-texts of allusive references, the author is more or less relinquishing control over the reader's interpretation. Moreover, because these 'clues' are so copious, they feel as if they lead nowhere, to an 'infinitely lost imitation', as Barthes would say, undermining the author's status as someone capable of guiding the audience in its search. The audience can then turn nowhere except inward, to their own relationship with the film, to invent their own meaning for it. The entire film can be likened to a leitmotif, unfolding at truly mythic scale – brimming with apparent meaning, to such an extent that any definition of it falls short of what we feel would be accomplished if we 'gave ourselves over' to it. In the end, meaning can only be provided by the extra-filmic or intertextual links formed with something else, and existing only in the mind of the interpreter.

In what follows, I shall show how *Moulin Rouge!* sets itself up as an object to be interpreted, where the interpretive clues lead, and in what way the story itself provides an allegory for the interpretive journey. By its nature, this argument is not one that presumes to establish clear conclusions about the ‘message’ of the film. But at the same time, it aims to illustrate how the very challenge to thread the maze of self-conscious intertextuality can deliver a kind of ‘meaning’ about the very act of searching for it.

## 1. The Construction of the Film

### *Frames and Openings*

*Moulin Rouge!* begins with darkness and the sound of an audience. An oboe sounds the conventional ‘A’ of orchestral tuning, and the lights come up to reveal the frame of a proscenium arch within that of the screen, as if the camera is positioned in the middle of the theatre stalls. A conductor stands in front of the footlights, facing the audience. This self-reflexive opening shot reveals some fundamental points about the film, which crucially affect the way the audience apprehends it. The theatrical setting establishes a relationship between the audience and the film based on the world of stage performances, and it introduces the first of many framing devices that will be used in the film.

The device of the internal audience has been described at some length by Jane Feuer in her study *The Hollywood Musical*. As Feuer notes, such a technique is generally used to frame isolated scenes of stage performances, and it can be described as having two effects on the audience. The first of these is to associate the cinema audience with a theatre audience in order to bring a feeling of community and shared experience which is generally lacking in the act of watching a film. As Feuer comments,

It's just unnatural to applaud those unhearing celluloid ghosts, even though your fellow audience members can hear you. But the audience in the film makes of the movie audience a live audience.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, it encourages the audience to behave and feel as if the performers were really in front of them. This leads to the second effect, which is that the performance is apprehended as though it were live. One of the obstacles in presenting a show within a film is the lack of spontaneity in the aura of the performances. As Feuer says, ‘During the numbers, then, we are encouraged to identify with the audience in the film, to regain that precious live aura.’<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, (London: Macmillan, 1982) p. 26

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

Since in *Moulin Rouge!* the internal audience is used not to frame an isolated scene, but the entire film, its effects are slightly different. The first effect, of altering the way the audience feels about itself, remains the same. The audience is reminded of its status as an audience, and of the act of watching. But Feuer's second effect, in this case, is significantly expanded, as the audience is invited to consider the film itself as a kind of performance. The theatricality and artificiality of the experience about to unfold is pointedly brought to the fore. The self-reflexive drawing attention to the film as film is essential to an understanding of it – *Moulin Rouge!* is deliberately presented as something to be seen, watched, thought about and interpreted by the self-conscious audience.

Before the curtain opens, another important event occurs. The conductor signals the (unseen) orchestra, and the music begins. To call both orchestra and audience to attention, he makes a rapping sound with his baton - despite the fact that he has no stand in front of him, and nothing to tap against. This very brief moment, the first moment of synchronised sound in the film, immediately signals that the relationship between sound and image in this film may not conform to normal expectations. When the music begins, the somewhat altered nature of the relationship between images and sound becomes even clearer. For although he is supposed to be leading the music the conductor appears to be controlled by it, as he dances and thrashes around almost puppet-like to the strains of the film's short overture, made up of 'The Sound of Music' and the 'Can-Can' from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. The conductor's behaviour establishes music as a force capable of moving even the people who should be in control of it, a theme which is to be developed in the story about to unfold.

That the conductor appears, somewhat unconventionally, with his face to the audience, is something that should not pass without comment. The invisible orchestra he is conducting cannot be located in a pit under the stage. Although the reason for this anomaly can only be speculated upon, there are two implications to his position. Firstly, the conductor

is deliberately facing the source of the music within the cinema: the speakers. Rather than the music being figuratively located within the depicted world of the theatre, its source is realistically assigned to the mechanical apparatus of the cinema. Secondly, he is facing the audience. Inside the audience is where the myth, music and film come into being. Their minds carry the interpretation and the meaning. Levi-Strauss has said that 'the myth and the musical work are like conductors of an orchestra, whose audience becomes the silent performers.'<sup>21</sup> The conductor's position evokes this literally, and emphasises that the location of meaning is ultimately within the minds of the audience.

### *The Technology Unmasked*

The conductor's acknowledgement of the direction of sound is the first of many self-reflexive gestures that draw attention to the mechanical apparatus of the cinema, and thus to the film as something deliberately constructed. Rick Altman has suggested that the relationship between images and sound in a film is a complicated co-dependence which persuades the audience that they originate in the depicted world, rather than the cinema projector and speakers.

Highlighting the importance of synchronised dialogue, he says

Portraying moving lips on screen convinces us that the individual thus portrayed - and not the loudspeaker - has spoken the words we have heard. The redundancy of the image - seeing the speaker while we hear 'his' words - thus serves a double purpose. By creating a new myth of origins, it displaces our attention 1) from the technological, mechanical and thus industrial status of the cinema, and 2) from the scandalous fact that sound films begin as language - the screenwriter's - and not as pure image.<sup>22</sup>

In *Moulin Rouge!*, this co-dependent relationship of sound and images is challenged from the very start. The conductor's baton, which makes a sound even though it is tapped on thin air, and his apparent conducting of the loudspeakers, is only the beginning. Occasionally, characters are shown miming to voices that are not their own, for example when the four

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<sup>21</sup> Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* p. 17

<sup>22</sup> Altman, Rick 'Moving Lips: Cinema as Ventriloquism' *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980) 67-79 (p. 69)

Bohemians mime the backing vocals to the Green Fairy and Christian's rendition of 'The Sound of Music'. Here, the sound is clearly Kylie Minogue (who plays the Green Fairy) singing each of the lines of harmony, and the only male voice heard is Ewan McGregor's, but the images display the four Bohemians, perfectly in sync, as though they were singing. The result is an air of artificiality: the characters revert from real people to being images on the screen; their voices are identified as sounds on the soundtrack, issuing from the speakers. The reason for the change in the relationship between images and music seems to be to draw deliberate attention to the film's artificiality, by highlighting in particular its technological origin, and, as Altman points out, this implies its origin inside the heads of a screenwriter and director.

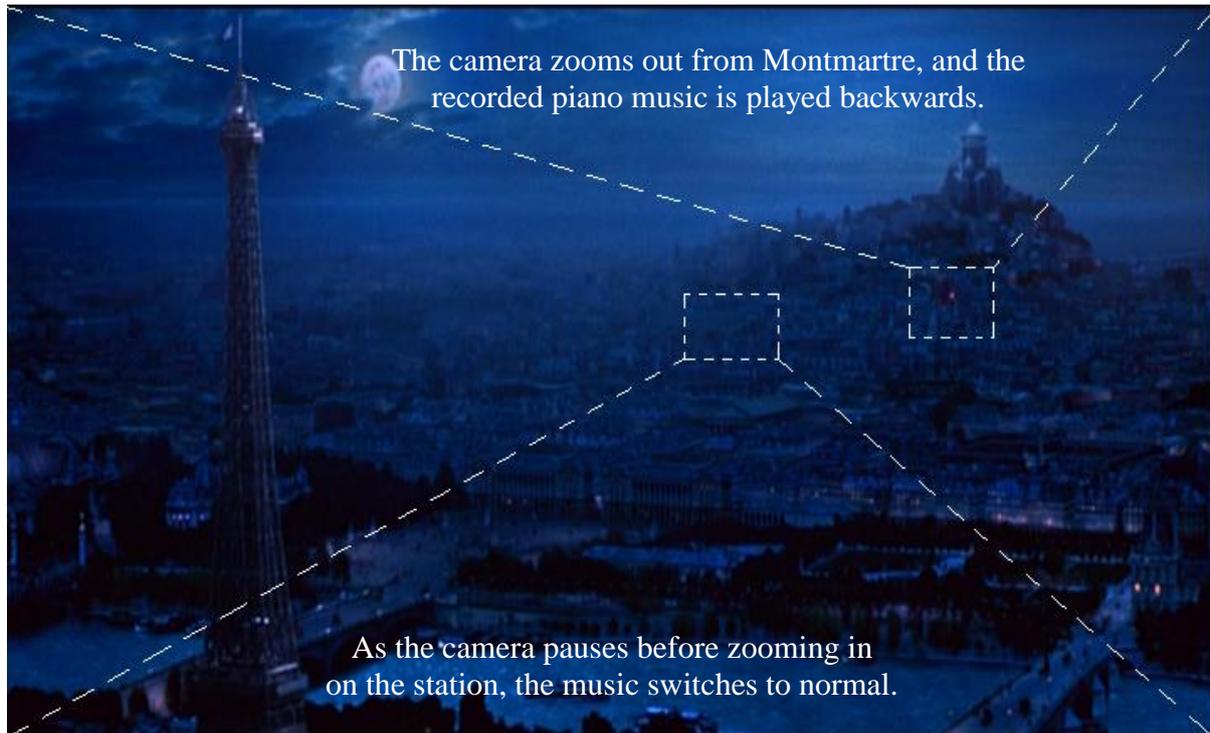
It is not only when sound and image fail to support each other that the artificial and technological origins of the film are foregrounded. A shot early on in *Moulin Rouge!* shows a digital landscape shot of Paris. The camera zooms out from the location of the Moulin Rouge in Montmartre, lingers briefly over a wide shot of the city, and then zooms in to a railway station. The piano music that accompanies this shot matches it by being played backwards during the outward zoom, and normally during the zoom in (see Example 1). The effect is of footage being played backwards along with its soundtrack, and then played forwards. The purpose is to suggest a 'rewind' in time, because this shot signals the beginning of a flashback. Michel Chion has discussed the 'vectorization' of music; its ability to illustrate the passage of time because, unlike a camera move, 'played in reverse, it can immediately be recognized as "backwards."'”<sup>23</sup> The zoom out from Montmartre uses the 'vectorized' attribute of recorded sound to portray the reversal of time, while at the same time drawing attention to

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Chion *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* ed. and trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1994) p. 19

the film's technological status, and therefore its origin in the mind of an author, without the need to alter the relationship between the film and its sound.

### Example 1



The double illusion created by synchronised sound described by Altman, that the sound and images belong to a real person who is speaking, and not merely a projector and loudspeaker, can be likened to an illusion of depth. Rather than a two-dimensional screen, the images are perceived as a set of people and objects existing in a three-dimensional space. The sound, also, appears to issue from different locations within that space, rather than the single location of the loudspeakers. Technologies such as surround sound do, of course, allow for different sounds to come from different speakers, but even when watching a film in mono the soundtrack's 'ventriloquism' (as Altman puts it) persuade the audience that different characters are speaking from different places, as long as the sound is synchronised to the speakers' lips.

The effect of separating the soundtrack from the images in the ways I have described is to make the sound no longer seem to issue from the characters speaking – in other words, to dislocate it. This ‘dislocation’ of the sound from its apparent source of the character speaking forces it to be relocated in the speakers. Deprived of its ability to make sound, the world of the characters becomes flat, as it reverts to projected light on a screen.

*Diegetic/Nondiegetic: Beyond the Binarism*

The world of the characters is most often referred to in film and music studies as the ‘diegesis’. It has been used by film music scholars from Roy Prendergast to Claudia Gorbman, Michel Chion and Nicholas Cook as a way to distinguish music that is a part of the narrative world of the film, as opposed to traditional ‘nondiegetic’ underscoring. The binary suggested by these terms has been challenged in recent scholarship, by the likes of Anahid Kassabian, Buhler, and Robynn Stilwell, and it seems appropriate to reconsider them here, in light of a film whose diegesis is constantly in danger of collapsing.

Referring to the binary of diegetic and nondiegetic, Anahid Kassabian asks ‘Is there only in or out?’ In other words, is it appropriate to discuss the diegesis, that lives ‘in there,’ the film screen, in stark and clear opposition to the real world ‘out here’?<sup>24</sup> Many scholars including Kassabian have objected that the simple binary does not sufficiently explain music that is ambiguously positioned between the two, or seems to be in both at the same time. But Kassabian raises a much more fundamental question which should be considered first. She says that the diegetic-nondiegetic dichotomy

describes a "film," prior to the music, that constructs its narratively implied world silently. This clearly cannot be the case, since music (and sound more generally) contribute significantly to the construction of spatial relations and time passage in narrative films. [...]

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<sup>24</sup> Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (New York: Routledge, 2001) (p. 42)

The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic music thus obscures music's role in producing the diegesis itself.<sup>25</sup>

It is not only music's role that is obscured by this distinction. Asserting that the diegesis can exist independently from the narrative music implies that it can also be divorced from lighting, editing, camera moves, and everything else that combine to construct the world of the film. It is like asserting the existence of a reflected image independent from the mirror. This does not pose a problem for discussing the majority of films, which make a deliberate attempt to obscure all the mechanisms that produce the diegesis. For example, music in the 'classical' Hollywood films, as described by Gorbman, followed rules deliberately designed to hide the nondiegetic makeup of the film, so that the diegesis could appear more real.<sup>26</sup> Any film that attempts to uphold the classical cinematic principle of the 'filmic illusion' is likely to try and hide the mechanistic nature of film as much as possible. But *Moulin Rouge!* deliberately allows the artificiality of the film to come into view, to the point where separating the story from the techniques used to tell it becomes a highly subjective exercise, one that does not accurately reflect the experience of watching the film.

When the curtain opens after the highly self-conscious 'overture,' it is to reveal a grainy black and white film of Toulouse-Lautrec sitting next to a windmill, icon of the eponymous nightclub. As he begins to sing his introduction, the view changes to a postcard of Paris, with the Eiffel Tower in the foreground, and Montmartre in the distance. But then, the camera zooms in and flies right into the image, proving it to be not a postcard but a three dimensional digital composite of a series of cut-outs and models. Toulouse-Lautrec and the black and white Parisian landscape constitute one of several framing devices erected around the story proper. This layer of framing includes one level of narrative information: the song 'Nature Boy', whose words describe an encounter with a 'strange enchanted boy'. This boy,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

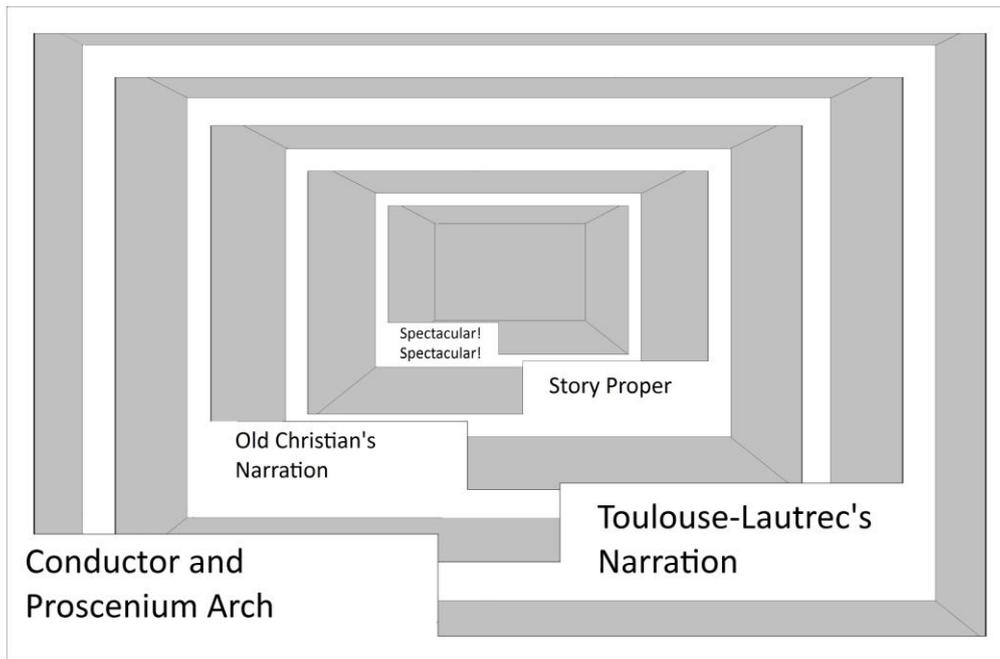
<sup>26</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 84

it turns out, is the main character of the film, Christian. As Toulouse-Lautrec sings, the camera continues its flight into the streets of the city. When he reaches the last lines of the song, the camera reaches Christian's garret, where Christian is seated at his typewriter:

And then one day/ One magic day he passed my way  
 And as we spoke of many things/ Fools and kings/ This he said to me:  
 "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return."

This, the last line of the song, is sung by Christian in voice-over, while the camera cuts between the typewriter, spelling out the words being sung, and Christian's face. As well as maintaining the distance between sound and image initiated by the opening shot of the conductor, the voiceover establishes Christian's status as narrator. Toulouse's narrative control over the story is the passed on to Christian, who begins by giving a précis of what has happened. As he says the words 'I first came to Paris one year ago...' the camera makes the reverse move I discussed earlier, to its starting position in front of the Eiffel tower, and the forward move to the railway station. Here we see Christian disembark from a train. This flashback signals the start of the story proper, which is narrated in voiceover by Christian but which also unfolds on screen. For convenience, I shall refer to 'Old Christian' as the narrator who introduces the story and occasionally reappears between scenes, as opposed to 'Young Christian' who takes part in the unfolding narrative.

The construction of *Moulin Rouge!* can be described as a series of layers, nested within one another, with the conductor and his proscenium arch making up the outermost layer:



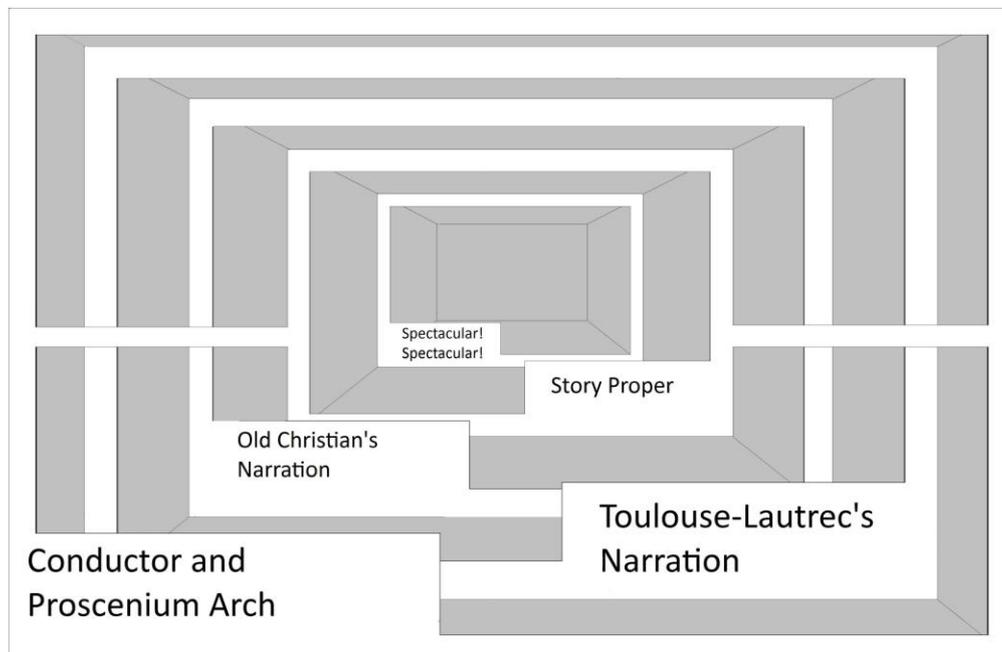
The extra layer I have added within the story proper is the play within the film, *Spectacular! Spectacular!*, a musical written by Christian. There is perhaps some doubt as to whether it constitutes an independent layer, since the focus of the narrative never truly leaves the story proper, but it will become clear that from a musical point of view it makes sense to treat it separately.

In attempting to categorise the music of *Moulin Rouge!*'s various layers of 'story,' the most simple problem is that music diegetic to one layer may not be diegetic to another. For example, Old Christian's voice is only diegetic to his own layer – his voiceover is nondiegetic to the story proper. The larger problem is that the orchestra performs all the traditional classical underscoring for the film, and also accompanies the diegetic singing in each of the layers. This means that, while the music is simple enough to categorise when it is either diegetic or nondiegetic, there are moments where it crosses from one space into another which cannot be easily categorised. When the orchestra crosses the boundaries into the internal layers the effect is curiously artificial, rather like one narrator providing the

voices for all the characters in a story. In her study of music that crosses in and out of the diegesis, Stilwell refers to a ‘fantastical gap’ that lies between the diegetic world and the nondiegetic orchestra. As the music crosses this gap, Stilwell describes a

sense of unreality that always obtains as we leap from one solid edge toward another at some unknown distance and some uncertain stability – and sometimes we’re in the air before we know we’ve left the ground.<sup>27</sup>

The feeling of ‘unreality’ is key here – the switching of the music’s function from diegetic to nondiegetic or vice versa, which happens whenever the orchestra joins a character’s voice unexpectedly, or transforms the end of a song into a nondiegetic interlude, brings into view the unreality of the cinema. It reminds the listener that the separate layers apparently existing within one another actually inhabit the same space – that they are a three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional screen. Just like the optical illusion of my diagram, the sense of distance between the outer and innermost layers is impeded if anything suggests that they lie on the same plane:



<sup>27</sup>Robynn J Stilwell, 'The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic' in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema* ed. by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert (California: University of California Press, 2007) pp. 184-204 ( p.187)

The connection between the outer layer and the story proper forces a two-dimensional interpretation of the image. And this is similar to the effect that occurs when music seems to exist in both layers simultaneously. The effect is not so much of a gap being crossed, as being closed. It is more like a 'fantastical overlap', as the listener is reminded of the flatness of what they are actually hearing and seeing. Just as when the sound is located in the speakers and the diegetic people are shown to be nothing more than miming images, or when the postcard image of Paris springs to life as a three-dimensional expanse, the question is one of depth. The depth of the screen has to be interpreted from a two-dimensional picture, just as meaning has to be made by reading into the story. As Feuer says about myth, it is a deception that the audience willingly submit to, and as Levi-Strauss implies, one that they build for themselves.

*Locating the Music of Moulin Rouge!*

The self-reflexive gestures of *Moulin Rouge!* set the film up as something to be interpreted. By drawing attention to its mechanical apparatus, which in turn suggest its origins in the mind of the author, and by reminding the audience that they are there to watch and interpret, the film asks the audience to find meaning in it. And the most natural place to begin the search for meaning is the film's story. But before we consider the events of the story, more discussion is needed on how the music helps to set up that story, because it is in effect two stories that unfold side by side. On the one hand, we have Young Christian, who is the emotional core of the story proper. It is from his perspective that the audience is first introduced to the people of the Moulin Rouge, and the story revolves around him. On the other hand, we have Old Christian, who is the centre of a much different story. He is someone who has lost the love of his life, and is coping with her death by retelling what happened. The difference between the two stories is very subtle, and the audience would easily fail to distinguish between them if it were not for the music. But keeping the stories separate is essential to understanding *Moulin Rouge!*'s cryptic status as something that signifies something indefinable.

It is perhaps surprising that even though the orchestral music is located in the outer layer, it is able to function as either nondiegetic underscoring or diegetic accompaniment to the inner layers as the need arises. But its ability to do so is crucial to the audience's understanding of the film, so much so that it cannot pass without discussion. Much of the current understanding of whether music is perceived as diegetic or nondiegetic depends on its apparent 'location' within the film. For example, in Gorbman's recent discussion of the opening scene from *Eyes Wide Shut* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1999), it is upon seeing a stereo that one of the characters switches off, and the coincidence of this with the music stopping,

that the music is apprehended as diegetic.<sup>28</sup> Until that definite visual location was established, the music was nondiegetic.

In *Moulin Rouge!*, and indeed in most musicals, the orchestra accompanying the diegetic singing is rarely, if ever, seen. In the literature on musicals, the absence of a definite location of the orchestral music has understandably warranted little discussion. Despite the fact that the characters' ability to hear the nondiegetic orchestra is unexplained, it is such a well-established convention of the genre that the question of 'where' the music is coming from is relatively unimportant. In his extensive discussion of the musicals genre, Altman, instead of speaking of nondiegetic and diegetic music, simply talks of the 'music track,' grouping both the songs and the underscoring together without trying to 'locate' it. In Altman's terms, the function of the music remains the same regardless of whether it is underscoring, of which the characters are apparently oblivious, or song accompaniment.

the diegetic track reflects reality (or at least supports cinema's referential nature), while the music track lifts the image into a romantic realm far above this world of flesh and blood.<sup>29</sup>

The example Altman chooses as an illustration of the two tracks is one of the scenes in the railway station in *Brief Encounter* (dir. David Lean, 1945).

We hear the click of glasses, the bumping of chairs, the shuffling of feet as people await the arrival of their train; then suddenly the bell rings, the engine appears with a huff and a snort, compartment doors slam, and the train roars off. There are times, however, when these diegetic noises recede into the background, in favor of the romantic strains of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. Symbol of a world beyond middle-class morality and its earth-bound limitations, Rachmaninoff's music lifts us out of the here-and-now into a special realm which is the private province of romantic love - and the cinema which portrays it.<sup>30</sup>

It serves my purposes well that the music in question is actually given a location within the film's framing device. The concerto is the piece of music Laura Jesson is listening to with her husband as she reminisces about her affair – the film's story proper – and narrates it in voice-

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<sup>28</sup> Gorbman, 'Ears Wide Open: Kubrick's Music', in *Changing Tunes: The Use of Pre-Existing Music in Film*, Ed. by Phil Powrie, Robynn Stilwell, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) pp. 3-18 (p. 9)

<sup>29</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987; repr. 1989) pp. 62-63

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63

over. The music in fact is a double reference to Laura's emotion as the story unfolded and her emotion as she listens to it. It is telling that Altman heard it as being only connected with the story proper, because it suggests that music's ability to represent the characters of the inner layer is just as important as its location within the outer layer. What the music is describing – the emotions of the characters in the inner layer – is just as important to its function as its actual location in the outer layer.

In *Moulin Rouge!*, the division between the story proper and its framing devices are greater than in *Brief Encounter* because the difference between Old Christian's and Young Christian's emotion is emphasised. The tone of the story proper, which unfolds in the style of a romantic comedy, reflects Young Christian's optimism and belief that he and Satine will have a happy life together. By contrast, because Old Christian is narrating the story after Satine's death, the moments when his voiceover breaks into the story proper interrupt the comedy with the tragic knowledge of Satine's death, reflecting Old Christian's depression following it. The difference of emotion between the comic story proper and the tragic narration makes the music easier to understand. It is mostly tragic when it represents Old Christian's layer, and comic or romantic when it represents the emotion of the story proper. The music is not 'located' within the inner layers, but perhaps we could say it is 'orientated' towards them.

#### *V: Modes of Musical Orientation*

Music's ability to orientate itself towards the different layers is crucial to this discussion because it affects fundamentally the audience's understanding of the film. I have said that the contrast between the story proper and Old Christian's narration is one of comedy to tragedy, but in fact it is mainly the music that provides this distinction. During the most comic scenes of the story proper, for example the scene in which Christian meets the four Bohemians, the

music punctuates every spoken line with an interjection evocative of a cartoon score. Short xylophone glissandi, drum rolls, and quotes from nursery rhymes are all employed, just as they are by the likes of Carl Stalling and Scott Bradley, to match the words being spoken. A typical example is when Toulouse-Lautrec explains that the Argentinean actor suffers from narcolepsy, and the underscore quotes ‘Rock-a-Bye Baby.’<sup>31</sup> As well as evoking what might be called the most extreme comic medium, the cartoon, these interjections also call attention to the one-liners and to the sense of living in the present. The emphasis on the present is especially needed in this first comic scene after Old Christian’s narration has revealed ‘The woman I loved is dead.’ The comic tone of the story proper is achieved through a focus on the happy present, just as the injection of tragedy that accompanies the voiceover narration is caused by a reference to the future.

The music orientates itself towards the layers, and helps define them, in more ways than just aligning itself with the emotional content. There is of course the obvious point that if the characters are singing along to the music then it must be representing that layer. But there are two other techniques used to orientate the music to the layers that are worth considering.

Firstly, the music is orientated towards Old Christian’s narration by its timbre. Gorbman has coined the term ‘meta-diegetic’, which seems perfectly apt for this example since it refers to ‘narration by a secondary narrator.’<sup>32</sup> However, Robynn Stilwell has pointed out that this term implies a level of subjectivity that not all narrators appear to have. Instead, she suggests the term ‘over’ (as in voiceover).

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<sup>31</sup> Film running time [00:06:10] approx.

<sup>32</sup> Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 23

"Over" is a foregrounded space, under the control of a character/narrator who is usually to some degree controlling our responses, through omniscience, knowledge gained through time, or language. It might be possible to think of the metadiegetic as music existing in or around "over," rising up into the foreground and into the expression of a particular point of view. But within that space, we can also range along the axis of objectivity/subjectivity. Captain Kirk narrating a series of events into his log or Mozart composing is fairly objective. Rebecca Crozier's memories of dances past [in *I Know Where I'm Going!*] or the adult Scout recalling the events of her youth in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are more gently subjective.<sup>33</sup>

The objective/subjective axis that Stilwell's 'over' allows is appropriate for Old Christian, whose subjectivity does not pervade his narrative. It is also appropriate because the timbral quality of the music associated with his voiceover is deliberately matched to his voice.

Although Christian speaks softly, the sound is mixed so that it seems clearer, and more intimate, than the sounds of the diegesis. Similarly, the piano chords that accompany it are played softly, but are mixed in a way that reflects this closeness and intimacy.<sup>34</sup> Even when the music appears on its own, it calls to mind that intimate space of Christian's thoughts as he sits at his typewriter, in his garret, after everything that unfolds on screen for the audience has already occurred.

The other way in which music orientates itself to particular layers is through the use of leitmotifs. Buhler has identified the leitmotif as used in film as being far simpler than its original function in Wagner's music dramas. I have already mentioned Buhler's description of the motif as having both a 'linguistic' quality as a signifier, and a 'mythic' one as something that ultimately resists definition. In Wagner's use of motifs, the mythic quality is used deliberately (because the subject of the dramas themselves is often myth) whereas films tend to downplay this element by making the simpler, worldly signification more prominent. Where Wagner resisted using leitmotifs simplistically to signify one particular character or thing, and chose instead to make them more ambiguous by using them independently of their

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<sup>33</sup> Stilwell, 'The Fantastical Gap', p. 196. Stilwell refers to *I Know Where I'm Going!* (dir. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1945)

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, film running time [00:04:48] approx

signifieds, most films stick to the principle that a leitmotif is only heard when its signified is present or referred to.<sup>35</sup>

*Moulin Rouge!* includes one or two leitmotifs that behave fairly simplistically. ‘Nature Boy,’ for example, is only sung diegetically by Toulouse-Lautrec, so that when it appears in the underscoring it inevitably reminds the audience that, as well as this story being narrated by Old Christian, it is also being witnessed and retold by Toulouse-Lautrec. But as well as this fairly straightforward use of leitmotif, there is one example in particular of a motif harder to define. The sequence of piano chords that is associated with Old Christian’s voiceover inevitably calls to mind the narrator in his garret. But it is also associated with the tragic ending of the story proper, the cause of Old Christian’s misery. It is first heard when Old Christian, shortly before introducing the flashback, announces ‘The woman I loved is dead.’<sup>36</sup> It subsequently recurs during the story proper during moments when Satine faints, when Old Christian reminds the audience of her impending death, and other scenes that foreshadow the ending of the flashback. It therefore comes to mean Satine’s impending demise as well as Old Christian, and his depression. To complicate this further, the chords are actually used within the story proper as the accompaniment for one of Satine’s songs. In a scene where the owner of the *Moulin Rouge!*, Zidler, has discovered Christian and Satine’s affair and warned her to end it, he leaves her on her own and she sings to herself the pre-composed song ‘Gorecki’ (originally performed by Lamb)

If I should die this very moment / I wouldn't fear/  
for I've never known completeness / like being here/  
wrapped in the warmth of you / loving every breath of you

The double imagery of dying and of ‘breath’ is evocative of Satine’s impending death from tuberculosis. It is heightened by the already established associations of the leitmotif for her

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<sup>35</sup> Buhler points out that, even when used most simplistically, the leitmotif by its very nature is nevertheless at risk of reverting to indefinable music. See Buhler, p. 43

<sup>36</sup> Film running time [00: 04:40] approx.

death, and by the fact that it is followed by a coughing fit. The use of the leitmotif here is not particularly problematic; it could simply stand for her death. But looked at together, the various instances of the motif bring together a mix of associations: Old Christian, his heartbreak at the loss of Satine, her death, and her need for Christian.

One of the most important aspects of this motif is that it associates Old Christian's narrative with Satine's death, to the exclusion of all other events in the story proper. Along with the difference in emotional tone, this helps delineate the story as Young Christian experiences it from Old Christian's narration of it. Young Christian's personal expectation is that all will end well; he cannot have any knowledge of what is to come. In contrast, Old Christian's narration points consistently towards Satine's death, allowing the tragic story to appear to run alongside the romantic comedy. Let us turn now to an examination of each of these stories to see how they develop the film's self-reflexive gestures into an indication of where meaning is to be found.

## 2. The Story

### *The Romantic Comedy*

To address the story of Young Christian first (which is the story proper), Christian arrives in Montmartre with a desire to write about love. He meets a group of Bohemian artists who live upstairs, and they persuade him to write a show for the Moulin Rouge. The five of them go to the club, and Christian sees a performance by the courtesan Satine. He instantly falls in love with her, the star to whom the Bohemians are intending to pitch their play. Satine mistakes Christian for the Duc de Monroth (or simply the 'Duke'), who she is to persuade to provide funding to convert the Moulin Rouge into a theatre. During a typical bedroom-farce scene, Satine discovers her mistake and hides Christian from the Duke. When he is inevitably discovered, Satine persuades the Duke that they were rehearsing their new play. The Bohemians then reveal themselves to have been hiding in the room also, and pretend that they were all rehearsing. Zidler, the owner of the club, enters, and everyone turns the 'rehearsal' into a pitch for the Duke's funding. Making up the story as he goes along, Christian gives a synopsis of the play (*Spectacular! Spectacular!*) and the funding is granted. In a scene between the Duke and Zidler, the Duke demands that in addition to the standard terms, his contract must state that he is to be Satine's exclusive client, and he shall hold the deeds to the Moulin Rouge until the contract is fulfilled. Christian, meanwhile, visits Satine and persuades her that love is more important than financial security. The couple fall in love, and the following weeks are spent rehearsing the play and avoiding the Duke's attempts to spend any time with Satine.

When the Duke is finally told of the couple's liaisons, he orders Zidler to forbid him from the premises, and warns that he will have Christian killed if he returns. Zidler persuades Satine to get rid of Christian by telling him she does not love him, and when Satine threatens to leave with Christian, Zidler tells her she is dying, a fact of which she was oblivious until

this point. Satine leaves Christian, but he cannot resist seeing her again. He sneaks backstage at the play's opening night to remonstrate with her. Taking the guise of a character in the play, he argues with her on stage, and turns to leave. Satine begs him to stay and, in front of the Duke, the couple are reunited. After a farcical scene in which the Duke and his henchman fumble around after a lost gun, and attempt to shoot Christian, Zidler knocks the Duke out and the finale of the play is performed to the audience, who remain entirely oblivious that any of the preceding events were not simply part of the spectacle. The curtain descends, when behind it Satine is overcome by a coughing fit, and dies in Christian's arms. We are then returned to Old Christian in his garret.

If we temporarily set aside Satine's death, the romantic comedy is easily identified. The main plot of the story is the love triangle between Christian, Satine and the Duke. Central to this is the tension between what is bought and what is freely given. Satine offers to give Christian for free what she is selling to the Duke, which is a digression in the eyes of a commercial society. Moreover, it highlights the difference between the material, tangible aspects of love, which can have a price, and its transcendent, intangible aspects which are harder to value. Grace Kehler has highlighted this aspect of *Moulin Rouge!*, and has tied it into the film's self-reflexive gestures. She suggests the conflict between the different types of love is an allegory for the film's own status as both a commercial venture and a legitimate work of art able to offer a transcendental experience.

What *Moulin Rouge* achieves is an intelligent satire on purist, binary taxonomies of art which purport to separate empty, pandering commercialism from "legitimate" expressions of emotion.<sup>37</sup>

The binary between commercialism and transcendental art, between what is bought and paid for and what cannot be valued, is certainly present in the film. But it may be possible to

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<sup>37</sup>Kehler, ( p. 159)

broaden Kehler's focus into a more general binary between what can and cannot be quantified.

Speaking of Satine's first performance, which induces both Christian and the Duke to fall in love with her, Kehler says

Satine's performance of "Diamonds" sets in motion men's desires to possess the yet-untouched affections of the paid performer, that elusive and non-materialist part of her more private than her sexuality.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the word 'non-materialist' is key here, because the difference between what Satine sells and what she gives to Christian is not just their price, but their quantifiable nature. The experience of love cannot be quantified in the way that the sexual transaction, in its most brutish form, can be. And if we examine the love-triangle from a different point of view, and focus instead on what Satine is receiving from each man, rather than what she is giving, we see that the Duke offers her a quantifiable sum, whereas Christian offers only the intangible experience of being loved. The binary of what is sellable versus what is not can therefore be broadened to be what is tangible and what is not.

Christian lives in the world of the intangible. The audience is informed of this by the first words he sings within the story proper: 'The hills are alive with the sound of music.'<sup>39</sup> As well as being an allusion to *The Sound of Music* (dir. Robert Wise, 1965) and its main character Maria, who is equally optimistic and naive, it literally describes the act of perceiving the metaphysical within the mundane. Significantly, it is music that represents the transcendental - music, whose actual content can never quite be translated into language, or quantified. We can either 'give ourselves over to it' without attempting to define it, or dismiss it in favour of the tangible and mundane. In *Moulin Rouge!*, Christian is someone who sees the abstract, musical, emotional content of things automatically.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, (p. 148)

<sup>39</sup> Film running time [00:07:20] approx

In *Moulin Rouge!*, music represents the emotional, unquantifiable realm. This is typical within the musicals genre, as Altman points out. In his description, the musicals' style grows out of the conflict between the mundane and the ideal, as 'Seductive unreality runs side by side with unseductive reality until such time as the stylistic conflict [...] can be resolved by a merging of the two strains.'<sup>40</sup> Taken in its entirety, however, *Moulin Rouge!* has a more complex structure than the simple merging of the real with the ideal. Satine's death ensures the reassertion of the real directly after it has been subsumed into the ideal of the happy ending and climax of the musical performance. But the romantic comedy of the story proper does conform to this template. The mundane world of Zidler, the Duke and Satine's employment as a courtesan is finally subsumed into the ideal world of Christian's optimism, through the actions of the musical play Christian has written.

#### *Christian the Composer*

It is music that identifies Christian as representative of the metaphysical. Despite the fact that Christian is said to have a talent for writing, what he is shown to have is a talent for music. Even though *Spectacular! Spectacular!* has a nominal composer in the form of Erik Satie, Christian is seen writing many of the play's songs spontaneously as he sings them. And it is his gift for music that induces Satine to fall in love with him. Not only that, but his music is seen to strip Satine of her own artifice. In the first scene between the two of them, Satine has mistaken Christian for the Duke and invited him into her boudoir. She has already asked Zidler what the Duke's 'type' is, in other words, how she should behave towards him: 'wilting flower, bright and bubbly, or smouldering temptress?' Following Zidler's advice, she plays the smouldering temptress for Christian, much to his bemusement since he is under the impression that he is auditioning for the role of writer for the new play. As he makes up a

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<sup>40</sup> Altman *The American Film Musical* p. 60

poem on the spot to show off his skills, Satine shows off hers, writhing on the floor, practically ignoring him. But when he starts to sing, she forgets to act, and sits in rapt attention. The audience sees Satine display genuine emotion for the first time, revealed by the power of Christian's music.

Christian's ability to sing is contrasted by the Duke's inability. The first song Christian sings to Satine is 'Your Song' by Elton John, which they later work into the play. In the very next scene, when Christian has been discovered by the Duke and the entire thing is passed off as a rehearsal, the Duke sings one of the song's lines in a pathetic voice that captures none of the song's meaning or emotion. The vocal castration of the Duke is symbolic of his inability to provide Satine with any of the transcendental emotional gifts that Christian possesses and is willing to bestow.

In a key scene, the conflict between the quantifiable physical and the unquantifiable metaphysical is highlighted using music. After the play has been successfully pitched to the Duke, Christian visits Satine to ask her if she still loves him now that she knows he is not rich. Satine confesses that she only told him she loved him because she thought he was the Duke, and says that she cannot really fall in love with anyone. An argument ensues, during which Christian professes his love for her and proclaims love to be the most important thing in life. Satine disagrees, saying that more worldly considerations such as food and shelter must be considered first. Their argument takes the form of song lyrics, which are first spoken and later sung.

Example 2 shows the musical argument between Christian and Satine. The scene can be split into three sections, first with both speaking, then with Christian singing, and finally they both sing. At first, Satine counters Christian's idealist music with realist spoken words, contradicting the songs' composite meaning. But she cannot resist joining in singing, and in switching from mundane words to emotional music she shows that her resolve is weakening.

The italicised words represent those that are not altered from their original context, and one can immediately see that it is Satine who does most of the paraphrasing. This means that the music is doubly on Christian's side, because as well as the fact that music cannot support an unemotional point of view, the original meanings of the songs tend to agree with Christian. The love songs cannot support Satine's mundane, unemotional view of the world.

**Example 2**

A chart showing the words on the left, and the songs they are taken from, with the artists who performed them, on the right. Words that have been lifted wholesale, without paraphrase, are in italics.

**Both Speaking**

S: I can't fall in love with anyone.	Sweet The Four Aces Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes The Beatles
C: Can't fall in love? But a life without love, that's terrible!	
S: No, living on the street – that's terrible	
C: No! <i>Love is like oxygen</i>	
<i>love is a many-splendored thing</i>	
<i>love lifts us up where we belong</i>	
<i>all you need is love</i>	
S: Please don't start that again.	

**Christian singing, Satine speaking**

C: <i>All you need is love</i>	The Beatles, 'All you need is love'
S: A girl has got to eat.	
C: <i>All you need is love</i>	
S: She'll end up on the street.	
C: <i>All you need is love</i>	
S: Love is just a game.	

**Both singing**

C: <i>I was made for lovin' you baby</i> <i>You were made for loving me</i>	Kiss, 'I was made for lovin' you'
S: the only way of loving me baby is to pay a lovely fee	
C: Just one night, give me just one night	Phil Collins, 'One more night'
S: There's no way 'cause you can't pay	
C: <i>In the name of love, One night in the name of love</i>	U2, 'Pride (In the Name of Love)'
S: You crazy fool, I won't give in to you	
C: <i>Don't leave me this way, I can't survive</i> without your sweet love, <i>oh baby don't leave me this way</i>	Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes; Thelma Houston; The Communards, 'Don't Leave Me This Way'
S: <i>You'd think that people would have had enough of silly love songs</i>	Paul McCartney 'Silly Love Songs'
C: <i>I look around me and I see it isn't so, oh no.</i>	
S: <i>Some people want to fill the world with silly love songs</i>	
C: <i>Well what's wrong with that? I'd like to know, 'cause here I go</i>	
S: <i>Love lifts us up where we belong,</i> <i>Where eagles fly on a mountain high</i> Love makes us act like we are fools, Throw our lives away for one happy day	Joe Cocker & Jennifer Warnes 'Up Where We Belong'

C: <i>We could be heroes just for one day</i> S: <i>You, You will be mean</i> C: (speaking): No I won't S: <i>And I, I'll drink all the time</i> C: We should be lovers S: We can't do that C: We should be <i>lovers</i> , <i>And that's a fact</i> S: Though nothing will keep us together C: <i>We could steal time just for one day. We could be heroes forever and ever</i> S&C: <i>we could be heroes for ever and ever we could be heroes</i>	David Bowie, 'Heroes'
C: Just because <i>I will always love you</i> S&C: I can't help loving you	Dolly Parton; Whitney Houston, 'I will always love you'
S <i>How wonderful life is now you're in the world</i>	Elton John, 'Your Song'

This scene is more powerful for the fact that the audience may already be familiar with the songs. The sheer variety of sources (from David Bowie to Kiss; Paul McCartney to Joe Cocker) suggests that anything and everything is being called upon, regardless of period or style, perhaps in order to address directly diverse groups within the audience. While the inherent anachronism is a further self-reflexive gesture that encourages interpretation on the audience's part, it ensures that Christian is not simply viewed as someone who can create music. In this scene, he behaves much more like a 'reader' than an 'author' (in Barthesian terms), adapting songs from their original contexts to suit his purpose. And, crucially, when put in its new context the song does not always retain the meaning from its original context. Sometimes the original context of a song adds to the understanding of it, at other times it does not. For example, the songs that are taken literally, such as 'Silly Love Songs,' carry their meaning with them from their original context. But there are other songs whose original meanings are so incongruent that they can add nothing to the scene. For example, 'Pride: In the Name of Love' is a song about Martin Luther King Jr., but in its new context the short phrase used carries none of its political connotations. Leitmotif is clearly not the only form of

music that risks being redefined by a new context. The inherent linguistic quality of song does not save it from its mythic quality (to use Buhler's terminology).

The act of seeing the emotional within the mundane can be likened to the act of interpretation; of finding meaning in the film. Whether or not Christian sees the emotional qualities of everything is not influenced by the world around him, it is a product of his own persistence in looking for and finding it. Similarly, the meaning that the audience finds in the film is not necessarily in the control of the film or its authors. Of course what the interpreter is shown influences his interpretation, but ultimately the ability to find meaning rests with him. In this way, Christian is an allegory for all the interpreters in the audience.

### *Christian the Writer*

Christian is also a writer. The way he behaves towards what he writes, as both author and reader, has bearing on his role as allegory for the audience, and therefore on the meaning of the film. A large portion of the story proper concerns the creation and staging of *Spectacular!* *Spectacular!*, the play written by Christian and performed by Satine and the Bohemians. In this respect, the story of Young Christian sits firmly within the backstage musicals tradition. It is a tradition which has been identified in two separate texts by Feuer as having a specific agenda, namely to subvert its own status as a commercial product by portraying itself as folk art. In her book *The Hollywood Musical* Feuer says

The Hollywood musical as a genre perceives the gap between producer and consumer, the breakdown of community designated by the very distinction between performer and audience, as a form of cinematic original sin. [... It] becomes a mass art which aspires to the condition of folk art, produced and consumed by the same integrated community.<sup>41</sup>

The backstage musical portrays the creation and performance of a show as a self-reflexive gesture that will influence how the audience apprehends the film. An examination of the scenes involving *Spectacular! Spectacular!* and how they correspond to Feuer's descriptions

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<sup>41</sup> Feuer *The Hollywood Musical* p. 3

of musicals in general will shed light on the purpose of Young Christian's role as author and allegory for interpreter of the film.

In a more recent article 'The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment,' Feuer describes the creation and performance of plays within musicals.<sup>42</sup> Feuer has said that the stories of musicals invoke the myth of entertainment in order to subvert their status as mass art and promote themselves as folk-art. This myth is comprised of three smaller myths, the first of which being the internal audience I discussed in the introduction. The second is the 'myth of spontaneity,' whereby musical numbers are shown as though they were being improvised, rather than a product of previous rehearsal. This suggests that making music is something completely natural. 'Performance is no longer defined as something professionals do on a stage; instead, it permeates the lives of professional and nonprofessional singers and dancers.'<sup>43</sup> It promotes a feeling of community between audience and performers which counteracts the film's commercial status. Thirdly, the 'myth of integration' similarly suggests a unity between the audience and performers by telling a story in which success on stage is intimately connected with success in the performers' personal lives. 'The achievement of personal fulfilment goes hand-in-hand with the enjoyment of entertainment.'<sup>44</sup> This same aspect is identified by Altman, when he says that 'unseductive reality' is merged with 'seductive unreality.' Altman, as well as Feuer, sees the integration of real-life success and on-stage success as representative of the integration between audience and performers.

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<sup>42</sup> Feuer 'The self-reflective musical and the myth of entertainment' in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader* ed. by Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002) pp. 31-40. I have taken Feuer's use of the term 'self-reflective' to be synonymous with 'self-reflexive.' The Oxford English Dictionary defines self-reflection as 'serious thought about one's character or actions', which film is arguably incapable of. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines 'self-reflexive' as 'A term applied to literary works that openly reflect upon their own processes of artful composition,' which seems to concur with Feuer's description of the backstage musical. See 'Self-reflection *noun*' and 'Self-reflexive *adjective*' in *Oxford Reference Online* <<http://www.oxfordreference.com>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>43</sup> Feuer, 'The self-reflective musical' p. 38

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

The relevance of Feuer's thinking to *Moulin Rouge!* has already been noted by Mary Elizabeth Everett, in her Master's thesis on Baz Luhrmann's Red Curtain Trilogy (which comprises *Strictly Ballroom*, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, and *Moulin Rouge!*).<sup>45</sup>

Everett concludes that the purpose of utilising the self-reflexive techniques is purely formal:

As in Feuer's argument, Luhrmann attempts to bridge the gaps between cinema and theatre through self-reflexive tone and content. Referencing cinema and theatre side by side, Luhrmann integrates the two mediums into what he calls a "theatricalized cinematic form."<sup>46</sup>

It is surprising that Everett gives no consideration of Christian's play, because there are some crucial aspects in which it diverges from the normal of the play within the musical. By comparing *Spectacular! Spectacular!* to the internal performances of other shows, particularly those scenes focusing on the creation and the reception of them, we can see that, although *Moulin Rouge!* does evoke Feuer's myths of entertainment, it does not in fact embody them, as Everett suggests. Instead, it turns the use of myth into a reflexive gesture which encourages the audience to challenge the myth, rather than submitting to it. It bears a much closer relationship to Levi-Strauss's definition of myth as something that provides apparent but undefinable signification, than to Feuer's simpler definition of myth as deception (albeit one the audience submits to willingly).

The first important difference between *Spectacular! Spectacular!* and the majority of interior plays in musicals is that the story of its production is told from the perspective of the writer. In her earlier book on Hollywood musicals, Feuer describes in more depth how backstage musicals portray the conception of the play within the film. During these scenes, props will be improvised by whatever is to hand, and the characters will make up the dance as they go along (in accordance with what she later describes as the 'myth of spontaneity'). The revealing of the apparent moment of creation for a dance sequence or song belies the

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<sup>45</sup> Everett

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, (p.73)

number's real origins as a carefully choreographed and painstakingly rehearsed scene. The idea is that, by association, the audience will form the idea that the film itself was conceived in similar terms, and that they are witnessing the birth of the film itself. Feuer uses Claude Levi-Strauss's term 'bricolage' to describe the illusion of spontaneity, which is key to the success of the number:

Levi-Strauss contrasts the *bricoleur* of folk cultures to the goal-directed engineer of modern scientific thought whose tasks are subordinated to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purposes of the project. [...] Engineering is a prerequisite for the creation of effects of utter spontaneity in the Hollywood musical. The *bricolage* number attempts to cancel the engineering (a characteristic of mass production) by substituting *bricolage* (a characteristic of folk production).<sup>47</sup>

*Moulin Rouge!* uses a bricolage scene to describe the genesis of *Spectacular! Spectacular!*, in which Young Christian, under pressure to explain to the Duke what the as-yet unwritten play is about, takes inspiration from the Indian-themed room they are in. As he suggests elements of the plot based on what he has to hand, the Bohemians, Zidler and Satine all assist in a performed preview. The Indian-theme of the room becomes the setting for the play; the main character, Christian decides, is a sitar-player; and the story he bases on the newly-formed love triangle between himself, Satine (who he casts as a courtesan) and the Duke (who he replicates in the play as the 'evil' Maharajah). The main character of this particular bricolage scene is, unusually, the writer. In the many bricolage scenes described by Feuer (from *Singin' in the Rain*, *Holiday Inn*, *Top Hat* and others) the bricoleur is always a dancer or a singer. But here we have the genesis of a story, rather than of dance choreography or of a song arrangement.

Even more significant than the foregrounding of the author's perspective is the importance of it in the author's own eyes. For Christian, writing the play is an exercise in wish-fulfilment, creating for the sitar-player the ending that he desires for himself, in which the rival is defeated and the courtesan chooses a penniless man instead. *Spectacular!*

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<sup>47</sup> Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* p. 5

*Spectacular!* is Christian's 'myth' in Feuer's sense of the term, a deception that he builds for himself and submits to. Crucially, he is not the only one who feels the play's importance. The Duke also sees *Spectacular! Spectacular!* as an allegory. The scene in which the Duke finds out about Christian's relationship with Satine is a rehearsal. The chorus-girl Nini, whose motives we can only guess at, approaches the Duke and says quite casually,

'This ending's silly. Why would the courtesan go for the penniless writer? Whoops! I mean *sitar player*.'<sup>48</sup>

Upon being told this, the Duke's first words are 'I don't like this ending.' He then demands that the ending be re-written. This is his priority, above having Christian ousted, showing that the play has allegorical significance for him also. Victory over Christian in life is not enough for him, he needs it symbolically in the play as well. He too submits to the deception of the myth, because he sees the meaning in it.

The most important allegorical feature of *Spectacular! Spectacular!* is the lovers' secret song. When Satine and Christian's affair is first discovered by Zidler (long before the Duke finds out), Satine tells Christian that they must stop seeing each other. She also voices her fear that he is becoming jealous of the Duke. In response, he turns again to the play, using it as a way to remedy his life's problems. He writes a song for the sitar-player to sing to the courtesan in front of the maharajah, so that only the lovers will know what it signifies. And he intends it to serve this function when they rehearse it in front of the Duke. Christian uses music's inability to have concrete definition to disguise its true meaning. Upon recognising its allegorical status, The Duke has it cut from the play. During the performance of *Spectacular! Spectacular!*, when Christian has gate-crashed and assumed the role of the penniless sitar-player, Satine calls him back by singing their song. She subtly changes the words to be a request for forgiveness as well as a profession of love, and it is this that makes Christian turn around. 'Come What May' becomes the climax of the musical, as Christian's

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<sup>48</sup> Film running time [01:09:00] approx.

life success and stage success coincide. It is the power of Christian's music over even its own author that ensures the triumph of the metaphysical and emotional over the tangible mundane.

### *The Two Audiences*

The success of *Spectacular! Spectacular!* conforms to the genre's norm as described by Feuer and Altman, in which success on stage is equated to success in life. But the agenda of most musicals, which is to portray entertainment as an essential part of happiness in life, is diverted by the fact that the film's audience know it not to be simply entertainment. In most backstage musicals, the internal audience's relationship to the internal play acts as a mirror for the external audience's relationship to the film (a phenomenon Feuer describes as the 'myth of the audience'). But in *Moulin Rouge!*, the meaning of the play, its mythic quality and allegorical status, is not known to the internal audience of *Spectacular! Spectacular!* *Moulin Rouge!* of course has two internal audiences, the one sitting in the theatre of the outermost layer, and the audience of the Moulin Rouge. The former acts conventionally according to Feuer's description, but the latter cannot because they are not privy to the crucial information regarding its mythic status. The film's audience cannot identify with the internal audience of *Spectacular! Spectacular!* because they see the importance, the meaning, of the play.

Feuer describes the technique used in *Summer Stock* to place the viewer's perspective firmly within the internal audience:

We see the folk audience responding emphatically to professional entertainment; then through the cut in to a closer view of the stage, we take the place of that folk audience. In this way our subjectivity is placed within the narrative universe of the film. Film editing has the power to help us arrive at responses the internal audience presumably came to spontaneously.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27

Within Young Christian's story this technique is not used. Instead, the camera follows Christian as he sneaks in to attempt to talk to Satine. The shots of the internal audience seem to be there to draw deliberate attention to the difference in interpretation, the fact that they are oblivious that anything they are being shown has meaning. The film's audience recognise that the way they see the play is informed by knowledge the internal audience do not have. Rather than setting an example, the internal audience is held up as a contrast to the external audience's interpretation. The integration of the audience into the community making the play remains uncompleted.

The film musical's usual agenda of sending the audience away feeling that entertainment is crucial to their lives is further thwarted – inevitably so – by Satine's final consumptive spasm, exactly at the moment of the climax of the play, the apex of the romantic comic trajectory. Entertainment may be able to bring about life's happiness but it cannot counteract death. Everything in the story so far has pointed to Christian's optimistic view that the emotional, transcendental things in life can triumph over the mundane, but here we have the most quantifiable, most mundane ending there could be. The trajectory the camera takes from Satine lying still in Young Christian's arms to the garret where Old Christian sits typing flies over the internal audience, who are still applauding on the other side of the curtain. This final act divorces the film's audience irrevocably from the internal audience; it is not entertainment anymore.

Old Christian's story, which is of course the end of Young Christian's story, sees a depressed man sitting at a typewriter. Christian's first act on losing Satine is to write her and himself into a story. His myth of *Spectacular! Spectacular!* failed to triumph over the obstacle of death, but now he re-mythologises them both in, as his very last line proclaims, 'a story about love. A love that will live forever.' And the form the myth takes, the way in which Christian chooses to portray his loss of Satine, is the romantic comedy of errors we

have witnessed. Rather than telling a story of disillusionment or despair, Christian retains his optimism and his ability to find meaning in the mundane, turning even death, arguably the most mundane thing there is, into an attainment of that least quantifiable concept - eternity. He gives meaning to the otherwise meaningless simply by wanting it to be there, and by believing in it.

In such a self-reflexive film as *Moulin Rouge!*, Christian's behaviour is an encouragement to the audience to look for meaning within the film. But what meaning is there to find in a film whose story is so simplistic, so generic a romance as this? Taken on its own, the story is a naive portrayal of a one-dimensional concept of love as something that is worth having, even if (or perhaps because) one's life may be short-lived. It is the film's self-reflexive gestures that suggest a second area in which a deeper meaning may be found. The film's reference to its own status as a film, a cultural artefact in need of interpretation, is coupled with a self-conscious presentation of itself as a work of bricolage. The myriad of references, quotations and allusions that make up the film suggest that a comparison of *Moulin Rouge!* to its sources will provide the subtler meaning that seems to be missing from the story itself.

## The Intertextual Web

### *Allusion and Reception*

In her article ‘Allusion as Form,’ Stacy Magedanz uses *Moulin Rouge!* to examine the general characteristics and effects of allusion. Following Ziva Ben-Porat, Magedanz defines allusion as ‘a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts.’<sup>50</sup> In this view, unlike a simple quotation, an allusion does not just refer backwards to the original source text, but by providing a new context for the quote, changes the audience’s impression of the source text as well as the new text. The original context of the quote influences the interpretation of the new text, and the new context influences the old text. Magedanz points out that this effect is entirely dependent upon the reader’s ability to recognise the reference. If the allusion goes unrecognised, it has failed.

The process of the reader’s recognition and understanding of allusion is outlined by Magedanz, following Carmela Perri:

The reader comprehends the literal meaning of the allusion, recognizes it as a reference to a source text, realizes that further interpretation is required, remembers aspects of the source text’s meaning, and connects these aspects to the alluding text to complete the allusion’s meaning.<sup>51</sup>

The second step, the moment of ‘recognition,’ is worth emphasising. This recognition depends on one of two things. Either the reader has prior knowledge of the source text, in which case he can move on to interpret the allusion, or he does not. But Magedanz does not point out that, even if the reader does not know the source text, he may recognise that something is an allusion simply by the manner in which it is presented. For, although allusions must fit literally within their new context, they often do not match that context stylistically. For example, in *Moulin Rouge!*, one or two lines from the Madonna song ‘Material Girl’ are inserted into Satine’s performance of ‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best

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<sup>50</sup> Magedanz, (p. 161)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., (p. 163)

Friend'.<sup>52</sup> The differing musical style would arguably ensure that even someone who knew neither song would recognise that the inserted lines did not originally belong there.

The reader who does not recognise the source text cannot know the significance of the allusion, but they can still recognise that it signifies something beyond its literal meaning. The allusion exudes significance even when the source is unknown, and it is when the allusive meaning appears to have more significance than the literal meaning that an allusion is most likely to be spotted. For example, during the first love scenes between Christian and Satine, the moon is depicted as being able to sing, and has an animated cartoon face. On first seeing the film, I had no idea that the moon's face was copied from the moon in the film 'Le Voyage dans la lune' (1902, dir. Georges Méliès), but I recognised it as being out of place, that there was no reason for the moon to be portrayed like this unless it was an allusion to something. In other words, the literal reason for its inclusion was not sufficient to explain it; its incongruity marked it as a possible allusion.

In asking the question, 'Why is the moon portrayed like this?' I was really asking 'Why has the author portrayed the moon like this?', because the question does not refer to any internal, literal meaning of the film. It is a question about how the text has been constructed, and encourages a consideration of the person constructing it. In 'Allusion as Form,' Magedanz describes the relationship between the author and the reader:

For allusion to operate at all, the author and the reader must have a shared pool of poetic memory on which to draw, and the author assumes a (possibly nonexistent) knowledgeable reader when engaging in allusion. [Gian Biagio] Conte goes so far as to suggest that the author 'establishes the competence of his (or her) own Model Reader, that is, the author constructs the addressee and motivates the text in order to do so.'<sup>53</sup>

We can easily turn this around, and say that the reader constructs a 'Model Author' based on the allusions he or she picks up on. It is important, therefore, to realise that this model author is also – to borrow Magedanz's parentheses – 'possibly nonexistent.' In fact, it is an

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<sup>52</sup> Film running time [00:15:45] approx

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., (p. 164)

interesting paradox that allusion should be studied in terms of the author's intention, when the post-structuralist argument is that an intertextual work in fact has no author. It seems fair to say that a reader may imagine an author when they come across so self-reflexive an inclusion as an allusion, but it is also vital to realise that when a reader perceives a link between two texts, the author of neither text can be in control of the reader's interpretation. Finding out the author's exact intention is impossible, and any attempt to find meaning within *Moulin Rouge!*'s allusions must be recognised as a reader-centred, and not author-centred exercise.

### *Some Operatic Affinities*

The difficulty presented by attempting to understand *Moulin Rouge!* in light of its allusions is that there are so many. And beside those allusions that seem to be a deliberate reference to another work, there are numerous references and borrowings that cannot be categorised under Magedanz's description of the 'simultaneous activation of two texts.' The songs that are used in the argument between Christian and Satine, for example, may draw nothing from their original contexts. Two scholars have interpreted *Moulin Rouge!* in light of just one of its allusions, but doing so inevitably eclipses much of the film.

Kathryn Conner Bennet and Grace Kehler have come to different conclusions in their attempt to identify the most important of *Moulin Rouge!*'s allusions. Bennet discusses the story in terms of Puccini's *La Boheme*, while Kehler discusses it in light of Verdi's *La Traviata*. There is evidence to support either view – *Moulin Rouge!* makes references to each – but either view risks distorting *Moulin Rouge!* by overemphasising one set of allusions and ignoring others.

As Bennet points out, *Moulin Rouge!* borrows certain ideas from *La Boheme*. The most striking of these is the four Bohemian artists that Christian encounters on his first day in

Montmartre, and the garret they live in. Numbered among them are a painter (Toulouse-Lautrec) and a musician (Satie – presumably composer Erik Satie, although this is never spelled out), who correspond to *La Boheme*'s Marcello and Shaunard. Christian, himself a writer, is of course the equivalent of Rodolfo, the writer who also falls in love with a consumptive. In support of this parallel, there is the fact that Baz Luhrmann directed a production of the opera in Sydney in 1993. The Bohemian's garret is modelled on the set for this production, which was revived on Broadway shortly after *Moulin Rouge!* was released. But it is possible that this fact has overemphasised the influence that *La Boheme* has on the film's story. While the evidence to support the idea that Christian is Rodolfo is clear enough, Bennet has more difficulty finding parallels between Satine and Mimi, the heroine of *La Boheme*:

She [Satine] begins as the Musetta character, only far more extreme because she is actually a courtesan. [...] Satine does not remain an empowered Musetta; throughout the film, she grows more Mimi-esque and less in control of the events that affect her.<sup>54</sup>

Bennet describes Satine's personal trajectory as a transformation from an empowered woman who chooses her relationships 'to serve her sexual and fiscal needs' to one who seeks to 'regain sexual virtue through a meaningful heterosexual relationship' with Christian.<sup>55</sup> This description in fact has much more in common with Violetta, the heroine of *La Traviata*, than it does with any of *La Boheme*'s characters. Grace Kehler comes to very similar conclusions, even though she focuses on a different source-text. This is perhaps not surprising, given that both operas, and the film, examine society's treatment of sexual relationships.

Kehler describes both *Moulin Rouge!* and *La Traviata* as stories that use the figure of the prostitute 'as a means to interrogate contemporary society's fraught treatment of the commercial.'<sup>56</sup> In this reading, Satine's story is likened to that of Violetta, which is a much

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<sup>54</sup> Bennet (p. 116)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Kehler (p. 146)

closer match. As well as the fact that both women are prostitutes who renounce their occupations in order to be with the men they have fallen in love with, they both altruistically decide to lie to their lovers, pretending they no longer love them. As well as the fact that both *Moulin Rouge!* and *La Dame aux Camellias* (*La Traviata*'s source novel) are narrated in flash-back, two key scenes that *Moulin Rouge!* has in common with *La Traviata* support the comparison. The first of these scenes happens after Satine has first met Christian, when she sits alone in her room and sings that she does not want to fall in love:

One day I'll fly away, leave all this to yesterday.  
What more could your love do for me? When will love be through with me?

But her thoughts are broken in on by Christian singing a reprise of his address to her ('How wonderful life is now you're in the world') from his garret across the street. This scene corresponds to *La Traviata* at the end of Act I, when, during Violetta's aria 'Sempre Libera' Alfredo is heard singing under her balcony:

Violetta: Sempre libera degg'io  
Folleggiar di gioia in gioia (etc.)

*Free and aimless I must  
fly from pleasure to pleasure (etc.)*

Alfredo: amore è palpito  
Dell'universo intero

*Love is the pulse  
Of the whole world*

These scenes share the fact that the location of the hero is ambiguous. Christian is singing from his garret, but we suspect Satine may be hearing him inside her own head. Similarly, the stage direction in Verdi's score says that Alfredo is under the balcony, but the audience might conclude that the offstage voice indicates what Violetta hears in her head.

The other key scene is when, after Satine has left him saying she does not love him, Christian insists on paying her for their time together, throwing money at her feet. Alfredo does the same to Violetta during the finale to Act II.

Kehler and Bennet both see a key to the meaning of *Moulin Rouge!* in Satine's trajectory from courtesan to redeemed romantic heroine, and the view that society takes of this transformation. Bennet concludes that *Moulin Rouge!* 'has chosen nineteenth-century

morality through condoning, even praising, Satine's regression from Musetta to Mimi<sup>57</sup>, while Kehler focuses on Satine's death as a redemptive measure:

Then, and only then, according to nineteenth-century fictions, may the prostitute become the heroine, no longer a corrupt and corrupting body, but a spiritual memory of perfect love, a saint whose legend will be passed on to the children when they are big enough.<sup>58</sup>

However, while an aspect of *Moulin Rouge!* is the interaction of society and the prostitute, this interpretation leaves out some of the film's other large-scale gestures, such as the story of putting on a show, and the fight for creative control. And the assumption that the society depicted is one of Victorian morality ignores some small but crucial differences between the stories of *Moulin Rouge!* and *La Traviata*.

### *Beyond the Parallels*

The first difference of note is the treatment of the hero's father. In *La Traviata*, Alfredo's father Germont is represented as a hypocritical pillar of the society he symbolises. It is he who persuades Violetta to leave his son lest their family's reputation be forever ruined. In *Moulin Rouge!*, Christian's father appears only briefly in short flashbacks intended to describe Christian's background. He may indeed represent society and its morals, especially when he refers to Montmartre as a 'village of sin,' but it is a society that Christian has left behind. No representative of that society reappears to rescue Christian from his ignominious liaison. The only society we are shown acting upon Satine and Christian is the society of the dancers, courtesans and artists that make up the Moulin Rouge.

In *La Traviata*, the relationship between Alfredo and Violetta is an aberration within society because the prostitute is out of place, and considered to be a dangerous influence on those around her. In *Moulin Rouge!*, the relationship between Satine and Christian is again an aberration, but this time Christian is considered the dangerous influence on Satine, and their

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<sup>57</sup> Bennet (p. 116)

<sup>58</sup> Kehler (p. 150)

relationship is considered abnormal because it is not part of a financial transaction. Just as Alfredo's father fears that Violetta will drag Alfredo out of society and into an underworld, Zidler fears that Christian will take Satine away from the society to which she belongs.

A second crucial difference between *Moulin Rouge!* and *La Traviata* is the treatment of the hero's rival. In *La Traviata*, where the main impetus on Violetta to leave Alfredo comes from his father, the role of Baron Douphol is very small. It is he to whom Violetta returns when she leaves Alfredo, and the two rivals duel over Violetta's honour after Alfredo publicly insults her by throwing money at her, but the Baron does not interfere directly with the couple, and it is assumed that he has a laissez-faire attitude to his relationship with Violetta. In *Moulin Rouge!*, it is Christian's rival the Duke who is instrumental in breaking up the couple. When Satine leaves Christian, it is because she learns that the Duke is threatening to kill Christian if she leaves him, and because she knows that, since the Duke holds the deeds to the Moulin Rouge, the community to which she belongs is in jeopardy.

The defeat of the Duke is the final, and most significant difference between *Moulin Rouge!* and *La Traviata*. In the opera, Violetta manages to spend her last precious moments with Alfredo only because she is dying. Germont, and society, have succeeded in keeping them apart, but because she is now on her deathbed, and can do no further harm, Germont permits her to write to Alfredo, explaining why she left him. On receiving her letter, Alfredo returns to spend her last moments with her. But in *Moulin Rouge!* Christian is reunited with Satine not because it is permitted by society or by the Duke, but in a deliberate, defiant gesture. Even Zidler, who is really Germont's counterpart in that he represents the jeopardised society, sides with the couple in the film's climax, punching the Duke to prevent him from shooting the couple. Although Satine dies, it is not a death representing society's will – Satine and Christian have already triumphed over that. If Satine's death represents anything, it is a point of comparison: death is unconquerable, society's forces are not.

The differences between *La Traviata* and *Moulin Rouge!* not only suggest a different interpretation of Satine's character, they also imply that interpretive emphasis might be productively switched to Christian. In their interpretation of *La Traviata*, Kehler and Bennet take Violetta as the main focus because it is she who is the outsider, the anomaly, and her struggle against society is the main driving force of the story. Germont represents society's 'everyman,' the implication being that no matter who Violetta had fallen in love with, she would have met with similar problems. Alfredo is therefore one of many, and unimportant as an individual character. In *Moulin Rouge!*, it is Christian who is the anomaly within the depicted society, and Satine is one of any number of courtesans he might have fallen in love with. The primary objection of that society to a non-financial relationship would have been the same.

One source text that brings the focus back to Christian is the myth of Orpheus. Baz Luhrmann has named this as the main inspiration of the film's story, in which Orpheus attempts (and fails) to rescue Eurydice from the land of the dead.<sup>59</sup> *Moulin Rouge!* alludes to Offenbach's operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld*, using the 'Can-Can' in both the overture and the scene where the artists pitch *Spectacular! Spectacular!* to the Duke. The parallel between the film and the Orphean myth can be drawn fairly simply: each concerns a man whose music has the power to move everyone around him, and who uses that power to rescue his lover from the 'underworld,' only to find that his power is not sufficient to conquer death. However, Christian's story differs from Orpheus's in one important respect. It is not Christian's powerful musical influence on those around him that brings about his brief happiness, but the power his own music wields over him. In other words, Christian is Orpheus in the sway of his own music. In *Moulin Rouge!*, music is not represented as a tool

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<sup>59</sup>Geoff Andrew, 'Baz Luhrmann (I)' *The Guardian* 7 Sept 2001  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/sep/07/1>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

through which a clever composer can manipulate others, but a power in its own right, able to influence even its composer.

The Orphean myth provides a further interpretive framework for *Moulin Rouge!*, but it is no closer to defining the film's meaning than are *La Traviata* or *La Boheme*. No single source text can provide a complete understanding of the film, especially given the comparative prominence of some of the other allusions. The visual reference to the set of *La Boheme* is no more striking than Georges Méliès's moon; Offenbach's can-can may be foregrounded in the overture, but hardly can be said to have prominence overall than any of the other pre-composed pieces. To attempt an interpretation that covered each reference in as much detail as I have the two operas and the Orphean myth would be to drown in an excess of information. However, a brief consideration of what the references appear to have in common does provide a crucial clue as to why each has been chosen.

The reference to Madonna's 'Material Girl' is particularly interesting because it opens up some complicated interpretive avenues.<sup>60</sup> The video for 'Material Girl' is a backstage view at the shooting of a music video. On set, Madonna performs a dance routine copied from Marilyn Monroe's performance of 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend' in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1953).<sup>61</sup> In the backstage story, Madonna chooses the apparently penniless video producer over a man who gives her diamonds. So in referencing 'Material Girl,' *Moulin Rouge!* is referring to another self-reflexive backstage musical that alludes to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and concerns the choice between money and love. On the one hand, 'Material Girl' opens up several more interpretive avenues of its own, by alluding in turn to something else. But to follow every intertextual avenue would be to defer meaning indefinitely, like Barthes's lost quotation. And on the other hand, the avenues

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<sup>60</sup> Film running time [00:15:45] approx

<sup>61</sup> 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953)' in *The Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045810/>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

‘Material Girl’ opens up seem more like cul-de-sacs because they refer back to other aspects of the film.

Many of *Moulin Rouge!*’s references are to works that share something fundamental in common with the film, such as its setting or its love-triangle plot. Georges Méliès’s *La Voyage Dans La Lune* was made in Paris in 1902, very close to *Moulin Rouge!*’s fin-de-siecle setting.<sup>62</sup> *La Boheme*, *La Traviata*, and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are all set in Paris. There is even a reference to *French Can-Can* (dir. Jean Renoir, 1954), in the form of the song ‘Complainte de la Butte,’ which is about the opening of the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s. Furthermore, by referring to so many works that have a setting in common, their intertextual nature seems to be deliberately highlighted. For example, as well as George Méliès’s film, music from Offenbach’s ballet *La Voyage Dans La Lune* is referenced. Both these works were adapted from the Jules Verne novel. Even the historical characters in *Moulin Rouge!* seem to have been chosen because they have been the subjects of other fictional accounts. Toulouse-Lautrec and the clown Chocolat both appear in *Moulin Rouge* (dir. John Huston, 1952), and Toulouse-Lautrec’s painting of Chocolat (‘Chocolat dansant dans un bar’) provided the basis of one of the ballet scenes in *An American in Paris* (dir. Vincente Minnelli, 1952).<sup>63</sup> The dancer Nini Legs-in-the-Air (Nini Patte-en-l’air) appears in *French Cancan* (dir. Jean Renoir, 1954), which is another fictionalised account of the opening of the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s.<sup>64</sup> *Moulin Rouge!* also makes a more direct reference to this film in the form of ‘Complainte de la Butte,’ a song written for *French Cancan*.

Of course, all texts are intertextual to some degree. That is the point of structuralist and post-structuralist arguments. And yet *Moulin Rouge!* seems to be making this fact

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<sup>62</sup> ‘La Voyage Dans La Lune (1902)’ in *The Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0000417/>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>63</sup> ‘Moulin Rouge (1952)’ in *The Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044926/>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

<sup>64</sup> ‘French Cancan (1954)’ in *The Internet Movie Database* <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046998/>> [accessed 31 July 2009]

particularly blatant, by choosing sources that are recognisably similar, and referring to some works, such as 'Material Girl,' whose own intertextuality is particularly blatant or programmatic. Many of the references included in *Moulin Rouge!* refer in turn to other things, but many of them also lead back to the film's own subject matter of love and money, or the film's own setting in Paris. Despite the abundance of references, or perhaps because of it, the limitless scope for interpretation means that no singular 'meaning' can be divined. Unless the interpreter deliberately focuses on a single allusive reference to the exclusion of others, which inevitably distorts the work, the possibilities for interpretation are endless. The interpreter navigates the intertextual web only to find an overabundance of potential meaning that the film refuses to narrow down. And in drawing attention to itself as the common denominator of all these references, the film risks devolving into cliché. But even reduced to a cliché, the meaning of the film remains elusive.

One final avenue is left for the interpreter in the search for meaning, and that is the film's own claims about what it means. As well as Christian's final testimony that his story is about 'a love that will live forever,' there is a pronouncement of the film's meaning at the end of the credits. 'This story is about' is written at the bottom credits, which stop rolling upwards to linger over this message for a moment. Then, coinciding with four orchestral sforzando chords, three emblems and a caption flash onto the screen one after the other, emblazoned with the words 'truth,' 'beauty,' 'freedom' and 'but above all...' respectively. Finally, as the orchestra swells its last chord from piano to forte, a last emblem appears, emblazoned with the word 'love.' The film provides the audience with the answer, and yet any attempt to divine in what way the story embodies these themes leads to an unfulfilling conclusion. Certainly, *Moulin Rouge!* is a love story, but it tells the audience nothing new about love. It adds nothing more to our understanding of love than do any of the songs quoted by Christian

and Satine. And as for the other three themes, there is no point of the film that expressly seems to confront any of them. It is hard to know what ‘truth’ is being emphasised within all the extravagant stagings and illusions. ‘Beauty’ is obviously present on screen, in the hallowed Hollywood figure of Nicole Kidman, but is hardly ever referenced in the plot. Initially, the ‘Bohemian’ counter-cultural trappings may represent a symbolic stab in the direction of mythic ‘freedom,’ but it is hardly given much substance by any coherent political gesture.

The fact that the film fails to embody any of the ideas it is labelled with is evidenced perfectly by the fact that two critics misremembered the four words. Between watching the film and writing his criticism, Jonathan Dawson had changed them to ‘truth, liberty, freedom and above all, love’, while Emanuel Levy remembered them as ‘beauty, freedom, deceit, and above all, love.’<sup>65</sup> In fact, one could substitute these four labels for just about any other metaphysical ideals, for example ‘liberty, equality and brotherhood,’ or ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,’ and the film would embody them, or rather fail to embody them, just as it does the originals. Just like the labels attached to a leitmotif, they add meaning while they are there, but can easily be removed, leaving something that will potentially attach itself to a variety of new labels or contexts.

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Dawson ‘The Fourth Wall Returns: *Moulin Rouge* and the Imminent Death of Cinema’ *Senses of Cinema* May 2001 <[http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/moulin\\_rouge.html](http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/moulin_rouge.html)> [accessed 31 July 2009]

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## Conclusion

The interpretive journey I have presented has failed to reveal any straightforward meaning behind *Moulin Rouge!* but I wonder whether this might actually be an essential part of the message the film attempts to convey. *Moulin Rouge!* presents a paradox of intentional intertextuality, in which the author's apparent message is that there is no author, no message.

The film's opening shot shows us a conductor who is in the thrall of the music he is supposed to lead, and who is facing the audience – the location in which the music's meaning is properly constructed. The conductor, a figure who might be considered able to control the audience through the music, defers to the higher powers of both music and audience. The film proceeds to repeat this relinquishing of authority on one level after another. As an author, Christian is an Orphean figure, but one in the thrall of his own music. Again, music is not the tool that can be used by the author to manipulate the reader; it is a power beyond even the person who brings it forth. Finally, the multitude of self-reflexive gestures bring to mind the film as a work, and its creator. Baz Luhrmann's presence is felt, even though it is a spectral presence, a 'model author,' in the sense that I have adopted after Magedanz's 'model reader,' created by the gestures inferred as intentional by the reader. And those intentional allusions seem to be a relinquishing of authority, an acknowledgement that the film is an intertextual construct, made up of a myriad of influences over which the author has no direct control. In encouraging the audience to consider the film as an intertextual construct, Luhrmann too seems to be deferring to the greater power film has over him. The film, like the music, becomes a power in its own right, and not a manipulation of the audience by its creator.

As well as author-figures that reflect the film's own origins, *Moulin Rouge!* can be taken to perform the act of interpretation. In his life, Christian's ability to see the intangible in the mundane is demonstrated by his instinctive perception of Satine as someone capable of

giving and receiving transcendental love, rather than a superficial liar who will lie to men for money. Christian interprets the presence of intangible meaning in the mundane, allying himself with music as representative of the unquantifiable. Even when faced with the permanent loss of Satine, he remains convinced of the power of intangible love over even death - the most irrefutable manifestation of the mundane. His relationship to his music, and his play, parallels his apprehension of the world. Having deferred his authority, Christian's submission to the power of his own music, and the power of his myth, is rewarded as it reunites him with Satine. In the end, it is his belief in her when she sings 'Come What May,' and his ability not to demand a full explanation from her, that allows him to rejoin her and share the brief happy ending. And after Satine's death, it is again his belief in the power of his own writing, his submitting to another mythological account of 'a love that will live forever,' that saves him from his misery.

In addition to portrayals of authors and interpreters, *Moulin Rouge!* upholds 'story' and 'music' as powers in themselves. Music is shown to have the power to ensnare its conductor, its composer and its audience. And in the film, music is allied to the intangible, the emotional, the realm that cannot be quantified. Christian and Satine argue in one scene over whether something as unquantifiable as love can have as much importance as mundane concerns as money, food and shelter. The music, by its nature, cannot be captured or restrained to the earthly realm of Satine's view, and so the argument leads only to a foregone conclusion on the side of Christian's transcendent terrain. On a larger scale, the film again plays out this argument between Christian and the Duke, as the two alter *Spectacular!* *Spectacular!* to reflect their personal desires. But the musical cannot possibly uphold the Duke's insistence that the courtesan should choose the Maharajah. The play prepares a foregone conclusion as well, providing only that it is allowed to determine its own ending, and that those involved in it 'give themselves over' to it.

This brings me back to Buhler's frustration at the impossibility of defining leitmotif. To 'give oneself over to the music' is the temptation, an act which promises to provide an answer or some kind. But no answer is forthcoming because music is incapable of being translated into anything like a stable 'message' or meaning. The power of music to signify the intangible and advance the emotional is portrayed in the film in the same self-reflexive manner as are the authors and interpreters, suggesting that it, in turn, represents the power of the film itself. *Moulin Rouge!* is deliberately representing itself as something intrinsically unquantifiable, and indefinable. The story is presented as simply as it can be, and its intertextual origins are revealed so plainly, in order that it cannot mean anything. It is deliberately empty as it aspires to the properties of myth and of music, which present an apparently inexhaustible wealth of meaning, but are ultimately incapable of embodying any single definition. Meaning is made through linking the film with other things – its allusive source-texts, or the labels at the end of the credits, but ultimately the meaning remains in these extra-filmic things, dependent on the individual interpreter's knowledge. The film holds no meaning on its own, but in constantly promising to reveal transcendence, if only we 'gave ourselves over to it,' it encourages the audience to become performers through the act of interpreting the myth.

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