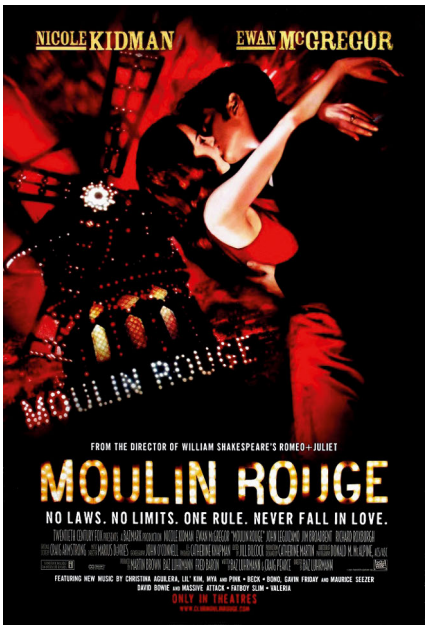
Moulin Rouge! (2001)

Nicole Wiedenmann

dir. Baz Luhrmann; prod. Martin Brown, Baz Luhrmann, Fred Baron; screenplay Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pearce; photography Donald M. McAlpine; music Craig Armstrong. 35 mm, color, 128 mins. Bazmark Productions, distrib. Twentieth Century Fox.



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Moulin Rouge! is a U.S.-Australian musical film drama by Baz Luhrmann and the conclusion of his Red Curtain trilogy, which began with *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and continued with *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (1996) (Rosiny 174). According to Luhrmann, in each of these three films a different aspect of theatrical conventions is at the center of a synthesis of stage and screen: dance in *Strictly Ballroom*, Shakespeare's language in *Romeo+Juliet*, and, finally, music in *Moulin Rouge!*, in all its popular varieties from rock songs and musical themes to Offenbach's can-can (Coyle 13; Krenn 7-8). Another feature of the Red Curtain trilogy is the transfer of highly familiar narratives into different times and/or spaces. In *Moulin Rouge!*, Offenbach's operettas *Orpheus in the Underworld* and *The Tales of Hoffmann* are blended with topoi from Alexandre Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias*, Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata* based on Dumas' novel, and Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* and set against the backdrop of the 19th century Moulin Rouge (Coyle 13). These set pieces are then interspersed with music and dance interludes, with Luhrmann taking his cue from both the American revue film of Busby Berkley and Bollywood film, which he values as an opulent theatricalized cinema that is equal parts musical comedy and tragedy (Rosiny 174).

The setting of this spectacle is the legendary nightclub Moulin Rouge in 1899. The hitherto unsuccessful writer Christian (played by Ewan McGregor) comes to Paris to find his fortune as an author. He indeed succeeds in being commissioned to write a play for the Moulin Rouge, in which the beautiful courtesan Satine (Nicole Kidman) is to play the leading role. Satine is the star of the establishment and the men are at her feet—but she is suffering from an incurable case of tuberculosis. In order for the play

to be put on stage, Satine is supposed to seduce the rich Duke (played by Richard Roxburgh) and win him over as a financial backer. Due to a misunderstanding, however, she initially mistakes Christian for the Duke and falls in love with him. Satine ultimately chooses true love over fame and a financially comfortable life—but then dies of her illness in Christian's arms.

Luhrmann follows a practice of postmodern eclecticism and of intertextual as well as intermedial referencing, both on the level of narrative and in their audio-visual presentation. This pastiche is not arbitrary, however, it reflexively pays homage to the principle of excess on the most diverse levels. Thus, the formula that Harold Zidler, the director of the Moulin Rouge (played by James »Jim« Broadbent), uses to mold the planned show also provides an apt description of Luhrmann's film itself: »The show will be a magnificent, opulent, tremendous, stupendous, gargantuan bedazzlement! A sensual ravishment. It will be spectacular, spectacular. No words in the vernacular can describe this great event, you'll be dumb with wonderment.« And the focus is not only on the constitutive sense of sight, but, as far as »a sensual ravishment« is concerned, all senses are to always be stimulated and overwhelmed. This form of melodrama has been referred to as *melodrama of excess*, in which shifts within relationships and feelings are accompanied by formal aesthetic exaggerations, such as opulent color dramaturgies, a dominant use of music, saturated pictorial spaces, rapid editing sequences, and sudden weather changes that mirror the moods of the characters (Brunner). This »hyperintensification of expression« (Brunner) comes close to kitsch but is again ironically undercut by Luhrmann. Accordingly, the protagonists in *Moulin Rouge!* sing in front of heart-shaped decorations and dance around a miniature Eiffel Tower under a moon reminiscent of Meliès, who joins in the lovers' song with the voice of Placido Domingo. What is satirically revealed in Luhrmann's *melodrama of excess*, however, are the strategies of melodrama itself: a form of excessive melodrama already existed in the 19th century—thus the setting of the Moulin Rouge can be interpreted as a return to the cradle of carnivalesque melodrama. As Tom Gunning puts it: »Certainly, one of the main genres in the theater was melodrama. But, there's a 19th century form of melodrama, particularly in France, which is very filled with blood and thunder and sensations. It was very popular and, again, carnivalesque« (qtd. in Anderson). In addition, *Moulin Rouge!* also cites classics of U.S. melodrama: for example, in that Satine's face is staged with veils, as in Marlene Dietrich's films by Josef von Sternberg, or when a desperate Christian calls Satine's name in the rain, just as Marlon Brando called Stella's in Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In addition, the conflicts of the characters and their states of mind are reflected, quite in the manner of a Douglas Sirk (Klinger), in the furnishings of the interiors, the respective blue or red coloring of the settings, the color of the clothing, and the spontaneous changes in weather.

While music in most melodramas is not equally important as plot and visual language (Brunner), it is central in *Moulin Rouge!*. Luhrmann takes seriously the audio-visuals (Chion) of melodrama, only to simultaneously break it ironically through exaggeration. Accordingly, medleys are repeatedly used in *Moulin Rouge!* to allow for as many quotes and collages as possible on the level of sound, too, yet at the same time revealing the textual monotony of well-known pop and rock songs on subjects of love and jealousy. Last but not least, songs are employed to comment on the dilemma of whether Satine should settle down to a luxurious life at the side of the rich Duke (e.g.

through Madonna's »Material Girl« and Marylin Monroe's »Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend«) or follow her great love, the poor poet Christian.

The same old story of a man's love for a consumptive courtesan is also retold on a narrative level. Besides the already mentioned classics on the subject in novel and opera, the same story is negotiated in *Spectacular, Spectacular*, which Christian, Satine, and their troupe want to perform—this time between a poor lute player and a courtesan of an Indian sultan: The Lady of the Camellias meets Bollywood. However, as the Duke, the financier of the play, insists, the courtesan ought to die at the end of the play, following the laws of the genre. In the Moulin Rouge, the narcoleptic Argentine also tells the story of the tango in the form of a song about a sex worker in a Buenos Aires brothel and a man who falls for her. Thus, the narrative structure again and again operates according to the logic of *mise-en-abyme*, and in this respect confirms Linda Williams' observation that in melodrama there are »narratives that seem circular and repetitive« (3).

Furthermore, melodrama in general, and *Moulin Rouge!* in particular, aims at an explicit display of the body. In addition to the bodily ornaments of the revue (Kracauer), this »bodily excess« is here primarily attached to Satine, who em*bodies* the classic role of the beautiful woman »with a deadly or debilitating disease« (Williams 4). According to Williams, melodrama is a spectacle of the body in which we see the character at the mercy of intense sensations and the body beside itself with pain and sadness (4). Accordingly, in *Moulin Rouge!*, the pain of the consumptive Satine is staged as a spectacle of the female body and female martyrdom. For Susan Sontag, tuberculosis is the misunderstood, mysterious disease of the 19th century that served as a positive metaphor, marking the sick person a venerable, exceptionally sensitive, and passionate character. The audience learns about Satine's tuberculosis very early in the film—and they know that she is going to die. Nevertheless, her body is permanently staged as an aesthetic spectacle—often with the help of close-ups and slow motion: Her noble and spiritualized pallor, the pale pink cheeks, the rattle and the feverish look during a seizure, and the fainting all construe a romanticizing semantics of a too-early, tragic, but passionate, passing. Already in the libretto of Puccini's opera, it is said: »The blood of youth was flowing warm and red through her veins and colored her cheeks softly pink upon the white of her transparent skin, a white that resembled that of camellia.« Satine's beautiful but ailing body becomes the permanent object of the audience's and the characters' gazes: For example, when the Duke's eyes (literally) light up at the sight of her. Furthermore, the visual code of the coughed-up blood on her pale face and spotless white handkerchief is repeated excessively, such as in the red and white color scheme of the costumes or in the red and white rose petals that fall to the ground and frame her in the moment of her death.

According to Rick Altman, it is redundancies and such »unmotivated events, […] highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles« (345) like these that alert us to the existence of a deeper logic of the film and indicate that the excess is organized systematically (347). Thus, Luhrmann here adheres to the principle of cinematographic excess, following Kristin Thompson, in which the cinematic means become independent spectacles and their use is no longer motivated by the requirements of comprehension (55–56). Nevertheless, the cinematographic excess does serve a function: The film wallows in cinematographic curiosity as such (while at the same time using it as a theme), and the opulence of the means transcends into a pure aestheticism of the melodramat-

ic. *Moulin Rouge!* is thus a meta-melodrama that at the same time positions itself as a global melodrama: Because the film tells »a story about a time, a story about a place, a story about the people, but above all things a story about love—a love that will live forever«—a story at home in Argentina, France, India, and the whole world, and is retold over and over again, because »the show must go on. . .«

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