

Baz Luhrmann and Moulin Rouge essay sample



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'Genre' is a French term meaning 'type' or 'kind'. From this, we can immediately ascertain that, whatever the theories and thought processes surrounding the institution of genre, its primary purpose is to group its subject according to type or kind. The musical is amongst the most distinctive genres in Film; and although many would argue that the chief differentiation, that of the music itself, is more of a stylistic variation than a generic, it is undeniable that there is a set of codes and conventions great enough to justify the inclusion of the musical as a separate genre in its own right.

When Baz Luhrmann first had the concept for Moulin Rouge, his stated aim was to "Reinvent the Musical for the 21st Century" Previously to Moulin Rouge, the last commercially successful musical film was Grease, in 1977; Woody Allen's 1996 Everyone Says I Love You, although regarded by many as a seminal work for the genre, did not achieve any kind of commercial acclaim. So Baz came into what many thought was a stagnant genre, fresh off the back of Romeo and Juliet, and determined to bring it back to life.

In order to do this, he would have to pick and choose carefully which conventions needed keeping and which needed reinventing. Collins suggests, "There is a tension between live musical acts and film presentation..."¹ And it is this tension to which he attributes the charm of the musical. He goes on to suggest that the 'increasing technical sophistication of the medium... and the sense of nostalgia for a direct relationship with the audience' have forever marked the genre, being a draw both for film makers and film goers.

The chief reinvention that Luhrmann faced here was one of time. The notion that the Musical was a stagnant genre was based on the fact that most of the best examples were old, the most recent success story being 24 years previous. The draw on filmmakers to establish that personal rapport was as great as ever- the notion of a 'personal rapport' having been almost a Holy Grail- but audiences found little in the Musical to bring about that immersion.

To many, it seemed that the music and the style were speaking to another generation entirely. This was Luhrmann's starting point: to bring the genre up to date. In using young stars like Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor, Luhrmann was not only building his own publicity, but also preparing for modernisation- where *Everyone Says I Love You* stayed very much with the old guard, starring as it did Julia Roberts, Tim Roth and Woody Allen, *Moulin Rouge* was a love story for an entirely younger generation.

The visual style is very much for the modern audience as well; the two long shots over Paris, through the streets on Montmartre, past the Absinthe bar and into Christian's room hold the current record for the longest special effects in the history of Hollywood. So, having brought the style up to date, Luhrmann began to work on the content. The film carries numerous references to its predecessors, including the use of the first two chorus' from 'The Sound of Music' and a scene in which Christian twirls around the Eiffel Tower, umbrella in hand, a la *Singin' in the Rain*.

However, it is also careful to maintain its modern motif, with Kylie Minogue making a brief cameo (with, in a little-known fact, Ozzy Osbourne on vocal FX) and the vast majority of the film's music being drawn from the charts of

the last five years. Like *A Knight's Tale* after it, this film draws the audience of the twenty-first century in to its historical setting though identifiably culturally modern signposts.

Despite being set in late 1880 France, the film looks and feels like any other modern production- the stifled, stuffy world of the costume drama is obviously one that did not sit well on Luhrmann's shoulders, as he observes, claiming it would be "contrary to my style" 2. The concept of examination is one that has run throughout the history of the musical. The main strength of the musical, according to Dyer³, is that they offer "aesthetically utopian solutions to real needs and contradictions".

Taken to its logical extent, this argument could be used to claim that the role of the musical is to examine real-life issues and difficulties through a process of simplification, abstraction and resolution. The issue is first simplified through rendering it into song, dance and visual technique. Gene Kelly described this stage as 'the dance-drama', and is visible throughout *Singin' in the Rain*; whenever the characters face problems or adversity, it is first introduced through a song and dance number, in which the relative positions and relationships are made clear.

In *Moulin Rouge* an example of this stage would be the opening of the Elephant Love medley, from the lovers watching each other from their rooms to Christian's song finally winning over Satine. Further evidence is seen in that all of the characters fall in love to music; Christian to 'Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend', and Satine and the Duke both to 'How Wonderful Life Is',

from Christian and Satine respectively. This rendering into music also serves to enforce the abstraction of the issue.

The song and dance is often used as a metaphor for the actual events, while the events themselves are unshown, or even simply alluded to. This kind of abstraction is shown in the 'Roxanne' scene, on several levels; * firstly, the song itself, in which the Narcoleptic Argentinean and Nini 'Legs-in-the-air' (as she is credited) act out the story of the courtesan and the man who falls in love with her; * secondly, the montage, through which Christian externalises his jealousy toward Satine and the Duke; * thirdly, in which the actions of the dancers reflect Christian's jealousy, and fourthly, in which Satine sees and hears Christian and the issue is brought back to naturalistic, narrative reality.

Finally, in the manner above, issues are resolved, often through re-simplification. Dyers' notion that the musical is a method through which problems are solved through simplification is borne out here, as in many cases, despite an hour and a half of plot building, the matter is often ended with a simple gesture. In the case of Moulin Rouge, it is through Satine singing the secret song, in Singin in the Rain, through the opening of the curtains.

This is perhaps symptomatic of a wider trend in Hollywood, but it is certainly a trait that the musical has made its own. This trend towards examination is as internal as it is external. More than any other genre, the musical seems prone to self-examination. Moulin Rouge is set around a play and deals with, albeit in a cursory manner, a dichotomy between fame and love; Singin in

the Rain, also set around a production, deals with a similar conflict. In any examination of genre, the musical is a good place to start.

As Steve Neale says, “The musical has always been a mongrel genre⁴”; as I mention in the opening paragraph to this essay, there is some contention over whether it is a genre at all, with many observers labeling it as a style of sub-genre, nothing more. However, I would argue that genre exists to group films together by style as much as content; the uniting feature is far more clear between *Singin in the Rain* and *Moulin Rouge* than between, say, *Singin in the Rain* and *State and Main*, despite the disparity of content.

A similar argument rages over the necessity and value of genre distinctions. Grant writes, “Stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories though familiar characters in familiar situations. ⁵” This is perceived as true; however, it is also perceived as exclusive. If we accept, at least for the moment, that a genre is simply a type of film, then all films, not just the commercial, fall into the genre system, be it the Hong Kong wu xia pan, the documentary or the Japanese samurai film.

As noted in Steve Neale’s *Genre and Hollywood*, most modern theories on genre derive from Romanticism, and Romantic attitudes to genre were largely hostile: “This hostility was directed not just at the putatively routine, formulaic and impersonal nature of genre, but also, as a corollary, at their putative lack of creativity, originality and individuality⁶” The consequence of this was, the repetitive nature of genre was stressed in the theoretical approaches used to describe it.

By association, the codes and conventions that made these genres what they were were also cheapened, so that convention became known as cliché, structure became regarded as formulaic, and characters, stereotypes.

However, these concepts and theories were mostly carried by the very critics and theorists who would later in their careers set out to contest them. As a result, those who wrote in praise of the genre system found themselves using the same epithets, indeed the same arguments, from a different perspective, as those who did not.

For example, Schatz's argument that "A genre film... involves familiar, essentially one-dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting" is very similar to the one put forward by Grant five years later. In summary, then, genre is a tool used by Hollywood to allow the consumer certain pre-formed conceptions about the film that they are about to see. As Baz Luhrmann proved, genre is by no means restrictive, and is always open to reinvention- while audiences will often be content to see the same, formulaic genre films, originality will always have an audience.

Read also:

The Seven Samurai (1954)