

# Postmodernism: mis-en-abime assignment

[Art & Culture](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Postmodernism: Mis-En-Abime There have been multiple literary and artistic movements that have swept the globe in the last 300 years. Many which have changed the way in which we perceive the world. One such movement has been toward so-called postmodernisms. What are postmodernisms, and how have they come to be defined through art and literature? In this essay, I will explore Luhrmann's postmodern film *Moulin Rouge* in relation to the theories presented in Jameson's "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," and to postmodernism itself.

Through critical analysis of textual details, I will illustrate how various elements in the film complement and at times refute both the text and postmodernism as a whole. These elements include: pastiche, parody, citationality, double coding, irony, nostalgia mode, the role of multinational and corporate capitalism, and some paradoxical incongruities within the film concerning modernist and postmodernist paradigms. For the purpose of this essay, *Moulin Rouge* is a postmodern work, despite its many quintessentially modern themes.

This interpretation is dictated not only by the postmodern chronological definition, but also by the conceptual definition provided by Jameson (which is this paper's context). He describes postmodernisms as direct reactions against the established movements of high modernisms (1961). On a broader spectrum, the film's borders are highly ambiguous concerning modernism and postmodernism. In fact, the film is often both at the same time, which ultimately causes some incongruity between the film as "postmodernist" and Jameson's postmodern definitions.

I would go so far as to suggest that *Moulin Rouge* is a postmodern film about modernism, no doubt one of the great ironies of the film and of postmodernism itself. One significant feature of postmodernism is pastiche, which plays a crucial role in *Moulin Rouge*. According to Jameson, pastiche is a mimicry or imitation tactic very closely related to but different from parody. “Pastiche is a blank parody, a parody that has lost its sense of humor” (1963). Whereas parody “capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks. He argues that postmodernism is at least partially defined by the shift from parody to pastiche. This definitive shift leads to one of the many binaries present throughout the film, because I would argue that within the film a fair amount of parody also exists. There are many examples of imitation or referentiality (pastiche, parody, citationality and self-reflexivity) throughout *Moulin Rouge*. In particular, a great deal of Jameson’s pastiche exists within the film, most notably in the beginning with the *Sound of Music* anthem.

This is quite possibly the apotheosis of pastiche in the film because of its significant labeling of the film as a musical. The *Sound of Music* reference also invokes a high degree of nostalgia mode. The credits shown during the *Sound of Music* anthem spark a sense of nostalgia as well, a point touched on by Jameson as “always our first clue” (1966). Many of the movie’s citations are anachronistic, and gain their “power” through nostalgia mode. Luhrmann does a brilliant job of capturing the inner nostalgia of an extremely wide range of people, specifically the differences in generations and musical tastes.

He may have gripped my father by citing “ All You Need is Love,” by the Beatles or by the numerous references to Elton John’s “ How Beautiful Life is When Your in the World. ” He struck me by his use of Nirvana’s “ Smells Like Teen Spirit,” and U2’s “ Pride (In the Name of Love),” both songs that were my teen hood anthems. If you were an alien and somehow not reeled in by one of these fabulous ballads, then he surely got you with either: Whitney Houston, Madonna, EnVogue or the Police. These songs in the form of pastiche “ satisfy a deep (might I even say repressed? ) longing to experience them again,” according to Jameson.

Thus *Moulin Rouge* “ metonymically reinvents the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period” (1966). Jameson goes on to say that “ for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach”(1967). Consequently, the effects of nostalgia mode should not be underestimated in the evaluation of the overall effectiveness of the film to appeal to its viewers. As mentioned earlier, parody plays a distinct role in the film as well. The prime example of this is the “ Like a Virgin” scene.

Unlike pastiche, parody invokes a satirical element to it, something this scene is certainly not lacking. One cannot help but laugh at the visuals of Zidler running around taunting the Duke as if a bride or better yet a virgin. A great deal of irony exists in the extremely phallic champagne bottles and their ejaculatory like popping at the end of the scene. This form of homoeroticism further validates the ever-prevalent theme of sex and gender

in the film, something not covered in Jameson's article but nonetheless very important to the interpretation of the film.

Jameson's theory of the "death of the subject," is very applicable to *Moulin Rouge*. He argues that the end of individualism is the "new" component in postmodernism. "All that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (1965). This idea raises an interesting point. That is to what extent is *Moulin Rouge* considered "new" and individual in its own right? This hints once again to the fuzzy borders the film has regarding its dual existence as both modernism and postmodernism.

So not only is the film modernist in much of its actual subject matter, but it can also be called modern because there is nothing else like it. It may be speaking through dead styles (which is quintessentially postmodern), but it develops its own individual identity by doing just that. Do any other films imitate Luhrmann's in a nearly identical manner? I suggest that the film is independent from any other work before it. What is left? Can *Moulin Rouge* be imitated? My point is that an endless cycle of simulacrum is possible. One can endlessly try to define a work as either modernist or postmodernist.

Ultimately I disagree and agree with Jameson on this one point. I believe there are "new" ideas and original artistic works coming about, even in these "postmodernist," imitative times. Of course, these "new" works are heavily based on the work that has come before it, but so has all "new" subject matter, including the work of the classical modernists, because any movement must ultimately be based on or be in reaction to a previous

movement. Postmodernism is a reaction against classical modernism, just as modernism is a reaction against the earlier “realist” perspectives.

By no means do I expect to have the final word on this matter, nor do I pretend to know as much as Jameson on the subject. However, this argument seems to me to be a logical one, and one that is certainly open to further interpretation, the movie is a paradox in many ways. On that same note, Jameson’s “death of the subject” theory likely has more points of validity than not. The film essentially is defined as “speaking through the masks and with voices of the styles in the imaginary (might I add historical) museum.” Thus, back to the postmodern paradigm.

The first “love” scene on the elephant is perfect proof for the parallels between Jameson’s argument and the film. When Christian inquires about Satine’s professed love for him when she thought he was the Duke, he speaks almost exclusively through cited voices to try to persuade her to love him. Without a doubt, one of the truly postmodern scenes in the film. This “death of the subject” topic should be applied to some intensely important scenes. During the first love scene atop the elephant, Satine tells Christian, “I’m paid to make men believe what they want to believe. This remark exemplifies Satine’s commodified and un-individualistic existence, which endorses her as postmodern in relation to Jameson’s argument of death of the individual. However, there is an interesting shift in this idea near the end of the film. When Zidler tells Satine that the Duke is going to kill Christian, she loses control and yells at Zidler, “All my life you made me believe I was only worth what someone would pay for me.” At this point, Satine emerges

as an individual, questioning her commodified existence and thus becoming an increasingly “modern” figure.

This transition exposes yet another binary in the film's definitive development. Love is at the crux of this binary. Think of how “un-original” love is, yet can you question the uniqueness of each individual's own experiences with love? After all, Christian and Satine ripen much of their love affair through “Spectacular Spectacular,” which itself is immensely unique. Another element in postmodernism is represented by the term “double coding,” which is the basis for one of the features of postmodernisms presented by Jameson.

He argues, “the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (1961). This double coding or simultaneous pop-culture and elite culture is very prevalent in *Moulin Rouge*. When we are first introduced to the *Moulin Rouge* by Christian (whom is the narrator), he describes it as a place where the rich and famous come to play with the beautiful creatures of the underground. In this instance, Jameson's postmodernist definitions once again carry significant correlations to *Moulin Rouge*.

Jameson stresses in his text the importance of the change from classical competitive capitalism to corporate capitalism, and its role in changing the cultural mindset from “modernist” to “postmodernist.” He holds that after World War II, a new kind of society began to emerge characterized by multinational capitalism, forming postindustrial, consumer and media driven

societies (1974). Huge parallels between these theories are present throughout the entire plot in *Moulin Rouge*. Firstly, the “tribute” to Fox (the moneyman of the film), within the actual film is highly symbolic and exemplifies Jameson’s theories.

Secondly, the Duke stands as the moneyman within the plot of the film, and his “investments” are crucial to the financing of the *Moulin Rouge*. The Duke fits perfectly into Jameson’s model of corporate capitalism in postmodernism. The big guy (the Duke), buys out the little guy (Zidler), and thus consumer (Christian), sovereignty is lost. As Jameson’s title suggests, consumer society also plays an integral role in postmodernism. Consumer society in turn plays an important role in *Moulin Rouge* as well. For instance, the catch phrase “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend. This is a theme repeated throughout the entire movie, one emphasizing a consumer perspective. Likewise, Jameson states “They no longer ‘quote,’ they incorporate [referring to literary works], to the point where the line between high art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw.” By interpreting Jameson, one can draw two interesting lines to the film. Zidler, who is quite a squirrely character, has a binary existence within the film. That is, he has one foot in the financial world as owner of the *Moulin Rouge*, and the other in the artistic arena of the production of “Spectacular Spectacular. Talouse has a similar existence within the film, whereas artistically he strives to lead the children of the revolution, commercially he holds a rhetorical strategy of getting Christian to appeal to Satine so he can do “Spectacular Spectacular.” This money issue is elemental to the film, and is one of the key arguments of Jameson in defining the postmodern movement. Irony plays an extremely



important role in postmodernism, something in which Jameson cared not to give much attention to in “ Postmodernism and Consumer Society. One of the quintessentially ironic facets of the film is its self-reflexivity. For instance, Christian tells the story of the entire movie from his hotel room, completely after the fact. He is sad and the moulin rouge (red mill) is no longer lit or in motion, thus giving the viewer a pre-emptive clue as to what course the film is going to take. This particular irony is intensified at the end of the film when Satine is dying in Christian’s arms. She tells him to tell a story and to promise her he would. Then the movie goes back to Christian telling the story, thus fusing the films past into its present.

This fusing irony is also present in addressing the binary question of, is this film authentic or is it not? This “ real” issue is an incredibly interesting phenomenon that exists throughout the film. It is hard to know for sure at any one time whether the film is authentic or not. One interpretation might suggest that the theatrical production of “ Spectacular Spectacular,” represents the “ rehearsed” or un-authentic facets of the film, whereas the love story and the Bohemian ideals can represent the more “ authentic” facets of the film. The irony arises when the two fuse into one.

Near the end of the movie in which the performance of “ Spectacular Spectacular” is finally given, the “ real” world of the film actually becomes part of the produced performance. This is when Christian is tracking down Satine backstage, insisting to pay her for her “ services. ” At which time the walls open up and expose Christian and Satine to the audience, thus linking the “ theatrical” love story of the sitar player and the courtesan to the “ real” love story between the writer and the aspiring actress. This ironic twist of <https://assignbuster.com/postmodernism-mis-en-abime-assignment/>

fate is a beautiful addition to the film and is easily one of the pinnacles of Luhrmann's storytelling ability.

Another form of irony in the film is its ability to place the pop songs into an incredibly accurate context within the film. The apotheosis of this strategy is shown in the Tango scene with the Argentinean singing the Police tune, "Roxanne." When all the prostitutes and Bohemians are sitting around thinking that Satine is sleeping with the Duke, the Argentinean starts to dance. He tells Christian "Never fall in love with a girl who sells herself, it always ends bad." Then he busts into the chorus of "Roxanne," which fits perfectly into the film. You walk the streets for money, you don't care if its wrong or if its right, Roxanne, you don't have to sell your body to the night." It is highly ironic the Police even had a song so implicitly questioning prostitution. In conclusion, Moulin Rouge can quite effectively be seen as "mis-en-abime." It contains boxes within boxes of material that at times corresponds very well to Jameson and to postmodernism as a whole. At other times, the film resists an easily definable existence which seems to make it more "modern" in nature. Nonetheless, it may be this very resistance that makes the film so beautiful and enjoyable to analyze.

Interestingly enough, I believe this topic of resistance offers an approximate answer to Jameson's open ended question at the end of his essay. Jameson ends his article by saying, "We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces -reinforces- the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open" (1974).

One final irony remains concerning this open-ended ending by Jameson. The film actually offers a way in which this logic is indeed resisted.

Also in its ending, the film establishes itself as not another corporate sell out as the Duke had hoped for, but as a triumph over the almighty dollar in the name of truth, beauty, freedom and love. As the Duke makes one last attempt to get rid of Christian by charging at him with a pistol, Zidler (whom had been a whipping boy to the Duke the entire movie) intercepts and punches the Duke right in the face. To me, this delightful scene offers a great deal of resistance to the logic of consumer capitalism. Zidler defied the logic that was beneficial to his own self-interest, all in the “ Name of Love. “