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MEDC 3900-01

December 12, 2007

An Analysis of the Portrayal of Mass Media Myth #9

(All You Really Need Is Love, So It Doesn't Matter

If You and Your Lover Have Very Different Values)

In the Movie "Moulin Rouge"

## Thesis

The movie *Moulin Rouge* perpetuates Galician's Mass Media Myth #9, which states "all you really need is love, so it doesn't matter if you and your partner have very different values" [Galician 55]. The story leads the audience to believe that true love can overcome all obstacles except for perhaps death. The other myths that are present in this movie are myths #2, #6, #7, and #10. A hopelessly romantic writer moves to France to become part of the Bohemian Revolution. He instantly falls in love with a courtesan (myth #2) whom he tries to rescue from her loveless existence (myths #6 and #10). They live completely different lives which mean they live by different values as well (myth #9). But once they fall in love, they realize that their dreary lives are worth living. The Duke falls in love with the courtesan and also tries to rescue her from her lifestyle only because he wants to own her. The writer and the courtesan's love prevails in the end but then she dies. The ending is happy because true love prevails, but sad because the lovers don't live happily ever after. It is also unrealistic due to the fact that the writer cannot ever fall in love again. The parameters of the relationship are also unrealistic and unhealthy due to her profession.

## **Step 1: Detection**

### **Identification**

The movie *Moulin Rouge* (2001) is the subject of the analysis for mass media myths [[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)]. The movie was analyzed in its entirety.

## **Step 2: Description**

### **Detailed Description**

The setting of the film takes place in the year 1899 in Paris, France. Christian, played by Ewan McGregor, is a writer who is commissioned to write a play for the Moulin Rouge that encompasses the ideals of the Bohemian Revolution. He instantly falls in love with the brothel's star performer, Satine (who is played by Nicole Kidman). Satine's boss, Harold Zidler, encourages her to seduce the Duke so that he will finance the show. A case of mistaken identity ensues and Satine tries to seduce Christian, thinking he is the Duke. Christian spouts out some poetry and Satine begins to fall in love with him. A turbulent love triangle forms between Satine, the Duke and Christian. The Duke agrees to finance the show in exchange for Satine's love and monogamous services. Satine and Christian carry out their love affair in secret until it proves too dangerous to do so. On the night Christian tries to take Satine away from the city, the Duke threatens to kill Christian if Satine sees him again. She tries to push her lover away in order to save his life. Unaware of this threat, Christian becomes jealous and tries to reclaim his lover. Little does anyone know that Satine is living out her final days in the midst of this chaos. Even she doesn't know she is dying from consumption (aka tuberculosis) [Merriam-Webster Online].

### **Creator; Creator's Purpose**

Baz Luhrmann was inspired by the Greek story of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, along with several other Italian Operas [DVD commentary]. He wanted this film to be successful in the box office and an entertaining story for the audience.

### **Function/Purpose and Genre**

The primary purpose of this film is to be an entertaining, dramatic, and romantic story. This film managed to distinguish itself from the romantic comedy genre.

### **Step 3: Deconstruction**

#### **Underlying Myths/Stereotypes**

The primary myth exemplified for this analysis is myth #9: “all you really need is love, so it doesn’t matter if you and your partner have very different values” [Galician 55]. The secondary myths that apply to the film are #2, #6, #7, and #10. Myth #2 states “There is such a thing as love at first sight” [Galician 225]. Myth #6 states “the man should NOT be shorter, weaker, younger, poorer, or less successful than the woman” [Galician 225]. “The love of a good and faithful true woman can change a man from a ‘beast’ into a ‘prince’” is myth #7. Finally, myth #10 says “the right mate completes you- filling your needs and making your dreams come true” [Galician 225].

#### **Evidence for Linking Myths/Stereotypes;**

#### **Specific Examples of Content and Form that Represents Embedded Values**

An example of myths #9 and #6 was the relationship between Satine and Christian. The life of a writer and the life of a courtesan are completely different. Christian had no idea about what he was walking into when he first went to Montmartre. His profession was highly respected in ‘normal’ society whereas Satine’s was looked down upon. However, the part of myth #6 that says “the man should not be shorter” does not apply to this film because Nicole Kidman is

slightly taller than Ewan McGregor. Half of this myth was dis-illusioned by the actors' physical attributes.

The first time Christian saw Satine his jaw literally dropped. Her beauty flabbergasted him so much that in the next scene he was professing his love for her and she didn't even know his name. He was 'head over heels' the first time he saw her (myth #2).

Myth #10 was illustrated quite heavily in the song lyrics of this film. Upon his first profession of love, Christian sings the words "how wonderful life is now you're in the world". The theme of these, and other lyrics, is that Satine and Christian felt that their lives were worth living once they found love in each other. About one hour into the story, Satine was told by Zidler that it's too dangerous for her to carry on her affair with Christian. The audience could plainly see that her heart was breaking. While frozen in devastation, there was a voiceover of Satine singing these lyrics: "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/ why live life from dream to dream/ and dread the day when dreaming ends". Christian and Satine also had a secret song that let them know, no matter what, they will always love each other. Part of that song says: "Suddenly the world seems such a perfect place...suddenly my life doesn't seem such a waste/ it all revolves around you".

### **Significant Omissions**

Watching this film with a media literate eye raised a few questions about the characters. Did Satine truly love Christian in the beginning or was she just acting? It is pointed out several times in the story that she was a good actress because that was a part of her job. It was almost creepy near the end of the film when 'the show must go on' and she had to tell Christian she was choosing the Duke over him. Her face became a blank, cold stare. Who's to say she wasn't

acting all along? Were Christian's feelings toward Satine actually love or was it lust? Since he fell so quickly for her, it's easy to assume it was lust because real love takes time. The audience wasn't aware of exactly how much time passed during the story, however it seemed to be a short amount of time to develop love nonetheless. Mary-Lou Galician brought up a good point when she stated "how can these characters espouse the first half of their motto (truth, freedom, beauty, and above all things love) with a straight face when they lie to each other and are enslaved by masters like the Duke?" [196].

The audience didn't get to see what would have happened if Satine had lived. Would her relationship with Christian have lasted? If they had run away together would she keep her old profession in a new place? Would Christian ever voice major concerns about that profession [Galician 196]? Pregnancy did not appear to be a concern for Satine or any of the Moulin Rouge girls, which was quite surprising.

Not much was said about Satine's illness either. How did she contract it? How was she able to keep performing and running around when she was that close to death? It is also interesting that she never went to a doctor voluntarily to see why she was coughing up blood. It's odd that she did not realize she was dying until after Zidler told her so.

#### **Step 4: Diagnosis**

##### **Meaning and Possible Interpretations (Preferred and Oppositional)**

The preferred reading of this text suggests that love conquers all no matter how hard you try. When Christian first met his Bohemian neighbors he stated "above all things I believe in love...love is like oxygen...love is a many splendid thing...love lifts us up where we belong... all you need is love". When given a choice between a lustful, possessive, rich man and a poor writer who 'truly loves you', true love should win over all even though it may mean a more

difficult existence. The text also seems to convey one romantic gesture, such as spouting out poetry, can warm even the coldest of hearts.

The oppositional text poses the more realistic ideas. Christian has nothing to offer but his love while the Duke can offer Satine a lifestyle of financial security. In reality, the decision of who to choose would be more difficult for her; at least depending on her morals. It usually takes more than a song to 'win someone over'.

### **Comparison with Rational Models**

Katz & Lui's "False Love Syndrome depicts love as an illusion rather than real emotion [Galician 56]. They describe the illusion as one "so powerful that it becomes difficult even to imagine any more realistic kind of love" [Galician 56]. The symptoms of false love that apply to *Moulin Rouge* are: being intensely attracted to your partner, feeling excited whenever you're with your partner, rarely fighting, rarely wanting to be apart from your partner, having great sex, never being sexually attracted to anyone else, never needing anyone in your life but your partner, and complete fulfillment [Galician 56]. Christian and Satine did not know each other long enough to develop the critical qualities of a lasting relationship such as understanding and trust [Galician 56].

Of course the "Romeo and Juliet effect" fits into this analysis because the two lovers (with conflicting values) had to keep their love a secret, but just didn't do a very good job of it [Galician 39]. However, this story differs slightly from Romeo and Juliet because this time it wasn't thought that love would conquer death [39].

### **Possible effects (harm)**

Someone who believes in the 'love at first sight' myth could be wasting their time looking for that moment when their eyes meet with someone's across a crowded room and

instantly they are in love! Instead, they should spend time getting to know someone instead of staring at people with a sappy look on their face. This story could also make someone fear true love because just as quickly as Christian found it, it was taken away and ripped his heart out along with it. The audience also saw the depressing state Christian was in after his lover died. It took him almost a year after her death to write anything. This could send the message that one cannot function without love in their life.

### **Judgment/Evaluation**

According to Wikipedia.com, *Moulin Rouge* was very well received at the Cannes Film Festival and at theaters across the world [www.wikipedia.com]. Millions of people were exposed to the media messages and myths this movie portrayed. It was a different kind of movie first and foremost because it was a modern musical with an old theme. The music was very catchy, the costumes were elaborate, and the set was completely man made. It's no wonder it received acclaim from fans and the movie industry. The "star crossed lovers" story is a classic theme (sometimes overused) but *Moulin Rouge* was produced in a way that it still engaged the audience.

It was interesting watching this movie with a media literate eye. I found that love is overly emphasized. The Internet Movie Database found that "love and its variations appear in the film 143 times" [www.imdb.com]. The tragic love story is a little confusing because it takes place in a bordello where the women are trained "to make men believe anything they want". It's hard to believe that a courtesan's emotional walls can be broken down so easily by a complete stranger who spouts some pretty words at her. It's very likely that many of her clients 'fell in love with her' upon their first meeting. I think the catchy songs, and the entire production for

that matter, make it easy to fall into the romanticism of the words being sung or spoken but the reality of love in this scenario is hard to believe in.

## **Step 5: Design**

### **Realistic Reframing**

It would take Christian more than five minutes to win Satine's heart. If she spent a lot of time building up an emotional wall, it should take a while to break it down. I've built up a wall of my own and I know it would take more than song lyrics to even attempt to get at my heart.

I also think that it's unrealistic that it took the Duke almost the entire movie to figure out what was going on between Christian and Satine. Being the type of man that he was, he would have used his money/power to get rid of Christian a lot sooner if he saw him as a threat. The Duke also wouldn't have simply given up in the final performance simply because Christian sang his secret love song to Satine. A more realistic portrayal of an insanely jealous lover would have been if the Duke picked up the gun and actually shot Christian.

I found it hard to believe that Satine didn't know she was seriously ill. She expressed too much shock when Zidler told her she was dying. Now grant it, I can understand that she could not have realized she was a few days from dying. But she should have at least known her own body enough to think "hmm coughing up blood and passing out aren't really normal activities". I think her death was too appropriately timed. I know that the timing was conducive to the plot and build up of emotion but in reality, Satine probably would not have been performing at all with her illness.

### **Likelihood of Use**

Being a media student, I know very well that the likelihood of using these realistic scenarios in a romantic movie is very unlikely. Reality in Hollywood films won't make

money which is why it is never used.

### **Existing Reconstructions**

In the movie, *Little Black Book* love doesn't always end 'the way it's supposed to'. Stacy (played by Brittany Murphy) has been dating Derek (played by Ron Livingston) for a year or two when she decides to snoop around and research his ex-girlfriends as a way of getting closer to him [www.imdb.com]. She meets Joyce who was 'the one' who broke Derek's heart and was probably his most serious relationship. Stacy reunites them, realizes that they (Derek and Joyce) are 'meant for each other' and just walks away from her relationship with Derek. Right at the end of the movie, Stacy runs into her college sweetheart (with whom she was once pretty serious). Just when you think there is a chance they will get back together and make it a happy ending, he tells Stacy he is married. There is no typical happy ending to this movie. Stacy is single and the world doesn't come to an end. This is the only movie that I know of with this realistic sort of ending.

### **Step 6: Debriefing**

#### **Personal Impact of Dis-illusioning;**

#### **Comparison of Personal Belief Before/After**

The first time I saw *Moulin Rouge*, I was sucked into the mythical romance of the story. I was a sap for stories of true love and love at first sight. I believed that there was "the one" out there somewhere. After becoming media literate, I have a different view of the story. Yes, the idea of romantic encounters that whisk you off your feet is nice, but it's unrealistic. Love is something that takes time. From personal experience, I know how hard and time consuming it is to break down an emotional barrier that was put up years ago. I also know it would take more than a romantic song to completely get rid of that wall. I still enjoyed the songs and the

production values of the film, but I didn't fall into the story this time. In fact, I actually made it through the ending without crying.

### **Personal Harm From Myth**

Over the years, I have wasted a lot of time and emotions thinking I had found "the one" as soon as I met the guy. Every time I met someone I would think "oh this is it" just to find out he wasn't even romantically interested. I used to think that I could love anyone despite their problems or our incompatibility because love would make all those problems go away. At the time I didn't realize that what I was feeling wasn't actually love, it was just infatuation. I thought I could live with the guy I found despite the fact that we weren't really a good match. I used to wish that a guy would sing me a pretty song and we would kiss and live happily ever after. Ew.

### **Step 7: Dissemination**

#### **Advocacy Action Plan**

I think there should be more media literacy analyses about the romantic movie genre. It would be interesting to see exactly what we are getting caught up in. I also think media literacy courses should be implemented as required courses for high schools and all colleges.

#### **Timetable of Specific Activities (Personal/Public/Professional)**

As a personal activity, I like to talk to whoever is willing to listen about what messages the media is actually sending to us. It would be beneficial to conduct more research and analyze more movies of this particular genre and have them published so as to get the word out there. A public activity I might consider is speaking to young kids who have not learned about media literacy yet.

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