MOULIN ROUGE is a kind of movie museum. Not the kind of museum in which, say, the coins of the last 200 years are arranged neatly in glass cases (and very interesting, no doubt, for numismatists), but the kind to which you might take your children, feeling sure they and probably you will have a good time. This is the sort of museum which makes a virtue of wild eclecticism, which tries anything it suspects might work, and which, whatever its faults, is too energetic to be dull. Baz Luhrmann has carried bricolage, the art of using what comes to hand, to new heights: his triumph is in both making it look as if anything—everything—goes and making sure that there is nevertheless a remarkable coherence to his phantasmagoric spectacular.

Here is a wide-ranging cultural display, at the service of a narrative that aims to illustrate the truth of the famous old 'Nature Boy' lyrics, sung at start and finish in case you miss the point (impossible anyway), that 'The greatest thing you'll ever learn/Is just to love and be loved in return'. And just before anyone says
cynically, gosh, how true, it should be recorded that Luhrmann and his stars get away with it, but more of that in a moment. The setting is Paris 1900, a Paris whose centre is the Place Pigalle whose centre, in turn, is the Moulin Rouge nightclub, presided over, entrepreneurially, by Harold Zidler (Jim Broadbent) and, at the level of star power, by the courtesan Satine (Nicole Kidman). Plunging into its glamorously depraved depths is a fresh-faced young provincial, Christian (Ewan McGregor), who quickly becomes enamoured with Satine, writes a show for her that will be funded by a nasty milord, the Duke of Worcester (Richard Roxburgh), in return for Satine's favours. What we and Zidler know is that Satine is dying—of consumption, of course. All this is watched over by a motley collection of bohemian types, most famously the altitude-challenged Toulouse-Lautrec (John Leguizamo); I hesitate to say 'dwarf' because he doesn't really, prosthetics notwithstanding, seem short enough.

On the basis of this plot—and the very word suggests a sustained articulation of cause and effect remote from what is on offer—we are treated to or assaulted by an astounding battery of cultural references. Those who feel assaulted will possibly find this too knowing, too undiscriminating; those who feel treated will be responding to the sheer audacity of the enterprise, to its wild and whirling willingness to yoke together the classical and the popular, to mingle past and present, and to cross media divides. I don't mean to suggest that Moulin Rouge is no more than a matter of echoes. It isn't just a ragbag of hommages. But the experience it presents is immensely enriched by the way it keeps calling up other works and other times.

Structurally, it seems to cross the myth of Orpheus with the story of Dumas' La Dame aux camélias, aka La Traviata, with, of course, more than a whiff of La Bohème. Christian descends into the underworld of Montmartre, as the camera sweeps magisterially across the rooftops of its gorgeously modelled turn-of-the-century Paris, and the essential action takes place in the enclosed world of the Place Pigalle, in the centre of which, oddly enough, stands a vast elephant structure, inside which is the glowing red plush of Satine's apartment. Like Orpheus, Christian wants to rescue Satine, his Eurydice. E. e so charms with his words and songs that he seems on the verge of saving her when (as he puts it): 'I had to find out [the truth about Satine], so I returned to the Moulin Rouge one last time'—again, like Orpheus, who couldn't resist looking back and lost Eurydice forever. But this is no simple reworking of a classical myth; this is not T.S. Eliot reimagining Oedipus at Colonnus as The Elder Statesman. From the moment we see Satine, as she descends from the roof of the Moulin Rouge after a breathtaking
close-up, we are also invited to have in mind Marguérite Gautier and Greta Garbo, Verdi's Violetta and all the famed interpreters of this Parisian courtesan who won the pure love of Alfredo. And the moment we take this reference on board we know the end, well before Zidler announces, with a feeling that takes us by surprise, that Satine is dying.

Love and death, Paris and consumption: these motifs are united in another famous operatic herione: Puccini's Mimi. And Luhrmann has been preoccupied with them since at least 1990, when he directed his dazzling modern-dress production of *La Bohème*.

The purity of love surrounded by but transcending the frivolous, the venal, the corrupt and the vicious is a romantic paradigm too entrenched in our culture for it to be worth taking issue with as a sentimentality so late in the day. But the resonances—the exhibits—are not all as high-toned as opera and classical mythology. Luhrmann further shows his daring in his willingness to invoke fantasy (Kylie Minogue as a Green Fairy, yet) and French farce. The latter surfaces in the comedy of mistaken identity in which Satine assumes Christian the writer is really the duke she is meant to be seducing, and culminates in a scene in her boudoir (deep in the elephant's belly—yes, that's where she lives) in which the astonished Christian has to be pushed out of sight as the moustache-twirling duke arrives to take the rewards he so confidently expects for backing the show, with Toulouse-Lautrec and other supporters hanging in the window-frame.

Luhrmann clearly knows the theatrical conventions and works them for all they're worth, and with the great Jim Broadbent as Zidler, trying to stage-manage it all, it is hard to suppress a recollection of his pier-end impresario in *Little Voice* (1998)—or of his ebullient Gilbert (of G&S fame) in *Topsy-Turvy* (1999). As well as farce and fantasy, the film's central romance works through the sort of binarism which, perhaps more than any other, has made melodrama so irresistibly potent a distillation of our experience: love persisting in the face of opportunism, cruelty and malignant fate. Here this is embodied in the pure hero, the tarnished but essentially noble heroine and the villain who will stop at nothing in pursuit of his own lascivious ends. And it should be said that, if Kidman sometimes seems a bit too detached from what goes on around her, she finally rises to the 'tragic' climax and that McGregor emerges with greatly enhanced credit as actor, singer and star, giving real substance to the provincial lad's growth and grief.

As a museum of cinema, the exhibits are more substantial than mere fleeting intertextual references of the Broadbent type, however engaging those are. Of course, the title itself inevitably situates the film in a continuity extending at least
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as far back as E.A. Dupont's 1928 British-made Parisian romance, and including four others of the same title, two French, one US and, most famously, John Huston's UK/US co-production of 1952, starring Jose Ferrer as Toulouse-Lautrec, and making much of the attractions of the Moulin Rouge itself, filmed in a smoky evocation of the artist's work by the great cinematographer Oswald Morris. There are a further nine or ten films, mostly French, that name the club in their title. It is one of those French phrases, endemically mispronounced as it is (even by Ewan McGregor, about whom nothing else but praise is in order), that is more or less part of our vocabulary. It conjures up a world of bohemian decadence, possibly destructive but certainly enjoyable, just as France itself, and Paris in particular, is an all-purpose signifier of liberating naughtiness and dissolute pleasure—for Australians and Britishers no less than Americans in Paris. And the latter draws us on to the pervasive presence of the Hollywood musical, which hovers over and infiltrates Luhrmann's film at every turn.

Filmed in the Fox Studios, Sydney, with presumably US finance, Moulin Rouge has been touted as the most ambitious Australian film ever, raising again the question of what constitutes an Australian film. This is surely at most an Australian/US co-production, with a lot of Australian personnel, but the US input is very significantly there in the way the film situates itself in a tradition of big-scale Hollywood musicals. Certainly, one of the more obvious echoes is Jean Renoir's French Can-Can (1955), though in retrospect its version of the famous (and, I am told, sometimes dangerous) high-kicking swirl see ms decorous by comparison with Luhrmann's. But it is the Hollywood musical, wildly inventive and boundlessly energetic, which seems the more pervasive influence. (And I don't mean here the Cole Porter Can Can, filmed by Fox in 1960.) The mad catholicity of the songs invokes The Sound of Music (1964), with McGregor as the lonely goatherd, and Marilyn Monroe singing 'Diamonds are a girl's best friend' from Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953), in Kidman's great star entrance (to be judicious, she doesn't quite live up to this); the bricoleur's appropriation of whatever is handy in the 'Make 'em laugh' number from Singin' in the Rain (1952) is at work in Christian's improvised account of his proposed play. This last reference reinforces the echo set up a few minutes earlier as Christian and Satine drift out of the elephant into the air, with umbrellas, singing about the wonder of love as they go, the quiet plangency of the love songs recalling the Gene Kelly-Debbie Reynolds duet of 'You were meant for me'. There is a sort of waiters' chorus that conjures up Barbra Streisand and Hello Dolly! (1969); and a rooftop (i.e. elephant-top) duet that recalls a romantic sequence from Luhrmann's earlier, wholly Australian homage to the musical, Strictly Ballroom.
And as in all musicals love is seen to triumph over the drabness or squalor or obstacles; admittedly, having the heroine die is a risky strategy for a musical, but there is *West Side Story* (1961) to recall to us that it can happen, and that transcendence takes over from the more usual utopian resolution involving professional success and romantic consummation.

The range of musical references goes well beyond the long-subdued genre of film musical to pull in great recording stars of recent decades, including Elton John, David Bowie, Sting, Phil Collins and Madonna, to pick just a few. It's as if Luhrmann were taking no chances on individual predilections; you'd need to be very narrowly exclusive in your tastes not to find some responsive musical chords being struck.

More crucially still, though, it is not just in exhibiting its awareness of belonging to a great generic tradition or calling up references to memorable moments to individual films (or recordings) that the film's real excitement lies. What is more serious and more wholly endemic is Luhrmann's wonderfully brazen exploitation of all that the screen can do. Unlike, say, the great MGM musicals of the forties and fifties, *Moulin Rouge* is less concerned with big production numbers that contrast with the surrounding narrative conventionality; here, the entire film is the 'number'. Mise-en-scène, editing and sound, in all their sub-categories, constitute the language of cinema and there is scarcely a moment in *Moulin Rouge* when Luhrmann is not making them all work tirelessly.

My only serious quibble is that I sometimes wanted a breathing space, a few moments when the editor was told to lay off or the sound man was reminded about how 'unheard' melodies can be sweeter. In the main I surrendered to the whirl of colour and sound, the riotous juxtapositions enjoined by the editing (Zidler's head seems to keep appearing between a dancer's legs), the total rejection of classical cinematic realism while making its instruments work harder than ever, the love of the theatrical without ever being remotely stagy. If, in about a hundred years, films are extinct, a carefully preserved print of *Moulin Rouge* would show eloquently what film once could do: how it could bombard our senses, touch our hearts and, if we are alert enough, make us think about human continuities all at the same time.

As for Luhrmann himself, the film anthologises his own thematic and stylistic preoccupations. This is only his third film but how firmly established he seems to be! He is one of the great risk-takers, one of those film-makers who appear to love what screen can do. I kept thinking of how Martin Scorsese in *The Age of Innocence* (1993) seemed intoxicated with the resources of film and made a masterpiece in one medium derived from a famous work in another. I'm not
wanting to claim masterpiece status for *Moulin Rouge* but it belongs with Luhrmann’s other films as a greatly daring take on pre-existing modes and media. *Strictly Ballroom*, which also opened and closed with red theatrical curtains, then turned irresistibly into a celebration of cinematic strategies as it played affectionately with the conventions of film musicals, of TV documentary reporting, of generational revolt, of the representation of romantic love—and played havoc with expectations of anything like linear realism. In *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996), he both pays his dues to Shakespeare (every word is from the original, except that ‘shriven’ is replaced by ‘forgiven’) and relocates him with vivacity and passion to another continent and another century—and above all to another medium.

As Luhrmann once did a revolutionary *La Bohème* for the Australian opera, and an equally revolutionary Shakespeare, he has now reimagined the film musical. *Moulin Rouge*, in its museum mode, parades for our delectation all the Luhrmann tics and excesses. But has there ever been another Australian filmmaker, wherever he makes his films or whichever countries may claim financial and cultural stakes in them, who has dared so much? All right, he and his brilliant collaborators—designer-wife Catherine Martin, cinematographer Don McAlpine, co-writer Craig Pearce and editor Jill Bilcock—may sometimes strike one as being too self-consciously knowing, even indulgent in their nods towards other and older forms, but though their energy might wear one out it’s not with ennui. Uncorseted by good taste, they invite us to inspect and be diverted by a kaleidoscopic mêlée of artefacts pressed into the service of a spectacular exhibition. To take in what is on display in this museum it is vital to stay alert; further, it expects us not to have checked in our own cultural baggage at the cloakroom.

### NOTES

1 Luhrmann has acknowledged this in an interview, ‘Baz knows the score’, *Observer* (London), 19 August 2001.

2 Which for a wild moment recalls not merely Mar.ene Dietrich and other such screen sirens but also the immensely knowing close-ups of Malcolm McDowell on the ads for *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), another film which brazenly juxtaposes the classical and the popular.

3 Barbara Ellen, reviewing the film in the London *Times*, 6 September 2001, was less impressed with this aspect of the film, and wrote: ‘The aural effect is that of a belligerent drunk with an eclectic musical taste and a lot of spare change hogging the jukebox in a Milton Keynes pub on a crowded Sunday lunchtime.’