

## CHAPTER 1

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# AN AUSTRALIAN IN PARIS: TECHNO-CHOREOGRAPHIC BOHEMIANISM IN *MOULIN ROUGE!*

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THE film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) might be thought of as a historical and cultural vortex, drawing in, fragmenting, and recombining art and popular culture of the last two centuries to produce a bohemian-inspired, turn-of-the-millennium film musical. The production and consumption of this cinematic eclecticism have been considered by scholars primarily in musical and filmic terms.<sup>1</sup> This chapter, however, takes bodies as its starting point—those on screen and those watching the film. It is particularly interested in how the on-screen bodies, layered with historical and cultural references and set in motion by choreography and the camera, affect the bodies on the other side of the screen. This is an important consideration for an analysis of *Moulin Rouge!*, as critical reviews of the film suggest that it elicits a particularly visceral response in its spectators. José Arroyo, reviewer for *Sight and Sound*, described being “walloped by talent and frazzled by cleverness”;<sup>2</sup> Peter Travers, writing for *Rolling Stone*, “felt mauled”;<sup>3</sup> and *The Observer*’s Philip French was “targeted by a squadron of kamikaze bombers loaded with sugary marshmallow.”<sup>4</sup> This chapter explores these physical experiences of spectatorship, focusing on the film’s dance sequences. It argues that in these sequences, choreography and digital technology (including computer-generated imagery and editing) combine to allow spectators to physically experience on-screen bodies that are historically and culturally complex, distant, and “other.” In so doing, *Moulin Rouge!* aligns itself with a bohemian tradition of cross-cultural and transhistorical self-performance, while reconfiguring that tradition for a twenty-first-century context.

## “NOT WHAT IT WAS, BUT WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO BE THERE”

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The dominant mode of contemporary filmmaking is a cinematic naturalism that invites spectators to view realistic action as if through a keyhole or window. Baz Luhrmann, the director of *Moulin Rouge!*, has sought in his trilogy of “Red Curtain” films to break these naturalistic conventions by using non-realistic devices of dance and song to keep the audience aware that they are watching a film.<sup>5</sup> In so doing, Luhrmann encourages viewers to adopt a more active form of spectatorship.<sup>6</sup> In particular, he aims to induce a physical and emotional response in the spectator, like those described by the critics above.

“You’re constantly awaking the audience so they participate,” Luhrmann says. “Just when you think, ‘This is so cheesy, I’m going to throw up, I’m going to kick you in the stomach. In that state, there’s an agreement that they know they are going to be emotionally manipulated, and they surrender to it.’”<sup>7</sup>

Luhrmann acknowledges that this form of “audience participatory cinema”<sup>8</sup> is no longer common in Western feature-length filmmaking. Indeed, film historian Tom Gunning argues that although a participatory aesthetic characterized the early “cinema of attractions” from 1895 to about 1907, the rise of narrative cinema forced it “underground” into genres such as the musical, where it was contained within song-and-dance numbers separated by narrative sequences.<sup>9</sup> *Moulin Rouge!*, therefore, is intended as an experiment in transposing a cinematic language across time and space to a historical and cultural context in which it is no longer the norm.<sup>10</sup> Luhrmann cites Hollywood and Bollywood musicals as sources for his construction of a participatory film musical, while refusing to be defined by these totalizing modes of production, positioning *Moulin Rouge!* as an Australian film.<sup>11</sup>

Through the historically and culturally dislocated cinematic form of the film musical, spectators of *Moulin Rouge!* are invited to physically engage in an even more distant constructed past, a reimagined version of the Moulin Rouge of the 1890s. Luhrmann approaches this by seeking in his depiction of the cabaret not visual authenticity but sensory authenticity, that is, an evocation of how it would have *felt*. This involves translating the feeling of watching the cancan in the 1890s, for example, into comparable experiences in contemporary popular culture, through which the audience can physically connect with the past. Luhrmann explains, “we did come out of a historical reality, we just manipulated them [*sic*] to make some sort of code for us to understand—not what it was, but what it felt like to be there. That’s quite a distinction. What the can-can was—a violent, sexy dance. What it would look like was a lot of leaping around in funny costumes. What it felt like was Fatboy Slim, people doing break-dancing, very funky. It’s this kind of decoding, just helping the audience figure where they are in a given moment.”<sup>12</sup> Elements of late twentieth-century hip-hop culture and the British



FIGURE 1.1 Screen capture of *Moulin Rouge!*, director Baz Luhrmann, (2001), “Zidler’s Rap”.

dance music scene of the 1990s are incorporated into the cancan number through the soundtrack (Fatboy Slim wrote *Because We Can* [2001] for the film), MTV-style editing, and the section entitled “Zidler’s Rap,” in which the Moulin Rouge manager, Harold Zidler, addresses the camera directly, flanked by female cancan dancers, in the style of a hip-hop music video (Fig. 1.1).<sup>13</sup> Luhrmann attempts to convey the exhilarating edginess of watching the cancan in the 1890s through these contemporary popular cultural references.

The film’s choreographer, John O’Connell, similarly tried to convey a sensory experience, a taste or a feeling, rather than a particular historical image in the dance scenes. After extensive research, including reading books on the cancan, watching film musicals and Bollywood films, and learning Argentine tango and Indian classical dance, O’Connell brought these together “subliminally” in the rehearsal room, aiming “for the flavor of it rather than trying to recreate or recycle something.”<sup>14</sup> By evoking familiar dance, music, and film cultures of the late twentieth century, *Moulin Rouge!* seeks to offer spectators a sensory encounter with a distant past beyond their living memories.

Media scholar Alison Landsberg uses the term “prosthetic memory” to describe memories transmitted by technologies of mass culture, such as cinema and experiential museums, which allow spectators to physically experience a past through which they did not live.<sup>15</sup> She argues that through films or museum exhibits about the Holocaust, for example, spectators can embody the memories of others, altering their subjectivity, and enabling empathy across boundaries of race, class, and gender. Landsberg and Luhrmann share a conviction that technological mediation does not foreclose, but rather allows the physical and emotional engagement of the audience with the film, by acting as a vehicle for the construction and transfer of memories. The notion of prosthetic memory provides a framework for thinking about how *Moulin Rouge!* creates a physical connection between spectators and the fin-de-siècle Parisian past.

## A BOHEMIAN SENSORY OTHERNESS

In pitching the play within the film, “Spectacular, Spectacular!” to the wealthy Duke, Zidler describes it as “the world’s first completely modern, entirely electric, totally bohemian, all-singing, all-dancing stage spectacular.” If Gilles Deleuze is right to assert that the play within the film often takes as its object the film itself,<sup>16</sup> then Zidler’s hyperbolic assertion suggests that technology, bohemia, singing, and dancing are also fundamental elements of *Moulin Rouge!*. Zidler’s statement implies that technology and bohemia are linked to song and dance in contributing to the spectacular qualities of the play/film, and therefore its relationship to the spectator. The next two sections will focus on the ways in which bohemia, dancing, and technology participate in the construction of prosthetic memory in *Moulin Rouge!*.

Luhrmann’s previous theatrical direction of the opera *La Bohème* (1990) influenced the formative development of the *Moulin Rouge!* project:

About ten years ago when we were researching *La Bohème*, the Puccini opera, and we went to the Moulin Rouge in Paris. . . . I was reminded . . . of a time and place—when Picasso was passing through there—when the popular culture of the 20th century was sediment that moved downstream from that place and time. It stuck with me. Finally, when we were looking for a place to set our Orphean world, it became not the idealistic bohemianism of 1830, but the commercialized bohemia of 1890/1900. This is a great reflection on us at this time, a time of incredible technological change, a time when the world is moving forwards and backwards. Armed with those three things, we had a starting point.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Luhrmann draws connections between the 1830s bohemian setting of *La Bohème*, the fin-de-siècle bohemianism at the heart of *Moulin Rouge!*, and the contemporary turn-of-the-millennium context. In particular, he notes the recurring theme of simultaneous nostalgia and innovation in these three historical moments. Perhaps, in choosing a fin-de-siècle bohemian setting for *Moulin Rouge!*, he recognized parallels between bohemian art and his own practice of scavenging from cultural history as a means of contemporary artistic reinvention. Indeed, bohemianism can be detected in Luhrmann’s filmmaking not only as the cultural backdrop of several of his productions, but also as an artistic and cinematic philosophy.

English scholar Mike Sell identifies two particular characteristics of bohemia, “theatricalized authenticity” and “exoticism.”<sup>18</sup> Following Sell, it might be observed that these elements have often combined in the bohemian attempt to fashion an “authentic” existence through performances of historical and cultural otherness. For example, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec frequently performed gender and cultural cross-dressing in photographic portraits (a tendency referenced in *Moulin Rouge!* through the kimono he wears to echo the “Elephant Love Melody,” evoking his costume in Maurice Guibert’s photograph of 1892). Sell points out that *Moulin Rouge!* reproduces this practice of

cross-cultural performance, citing references to blackness and the Roma gypsies that surround Satine. All of the main characters have orientalised equivalents in the play “Spectacular, Spectacular!” (for example, the Duke is orientalised as the maharajah, played by Zidler), and Christian is doubly exoticised since his role as the penniless sitar player is played by the Unconscious Argentinean, notably in the tango scene. Taking into account the nationalities of the film’s actors adds another layer of cultural complexity. For example, the Australian actress Nicole Kidman plays the French courtesan Satine, who plays an Indian courtesan in “Spectacular, Spectacular!.” Sell points out that “the theatre of bohemian exoticism can be simultaneously a memory theatre, too,”<sup>19</sup> making the past as ripe for bohemian appropriation as other cultures. For example, Catherine Martin, production designer of *Moulin Rouge!*, costumed Satine to evoke the feminine icons of film history. According to Martin, “The first moment we see Satine she is a combination of Marilyn Monroe (*How to Marry a Millionaire* [1953]), Marlene Dietrich (*Blue Angel* [1930]), with a sprinkle of *Cabaret* [1972] and a nod to Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* [1946].”<sup>20</sup> These cross-cultural and transhistorical performances in *Moulin Rouge!* might be considered a form of what Sell calls “bohemian memory,”<sup>21</sup> the rediscovery and glorification of forgotten cultural artifacts, especially those disdained by bourgeois arbiters of taste and defenders of sexual, racial, gender, or class boundaries.

The purpose of bohemian appropriations of the past and other cultures in *Moulin Rouge!* is partly narrative; Luhrmann claims that in the tango scene, for example, “the synchronicity [...] is really alive between a piece of existing culture [the 1978 song *Roxanne* by The Police] and our needs as storytellers.”<sup>22</sup> Luhrmann reveals another purpose of his cross-cultural scavenging while reflecting on his collaboration with hip-hop artist Missy Elliot on the *Moulin Rouge!* soundtrack: “The great thing about the hip-hop folk is that they are fearless and culturally blind. [...] Their ability to steal from culture without judgement, without a decision about what is right or wrong or good or bad, *it’s just does it affect you emotionally or not*, that blindness to pretension gets me going.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Luhrmann admires Elliot’s ability to create an emotional connection with the listener by “sampling” across cultural boundaries because this reflects his own aspirations. Luhrmann layers *Moulin Rouge!* with historical and cultural references with which the audience may already be familiar (Bollywood, rap culture, the golden era of Hollywood) in order to facilitate their emotional and physical connection to a time and place with which they may be less familiar (the *Moulin Rouge!* version of fin-de-siècle Paris). The result is “a heightened or created world that is at once familiar yet exotic, distant.”<sup>24</sup> In *Moulin Rouge!*, audience participatory cinema and historical/cultural sampling combine to offer spectators a mode of sensory, emotional engagement with a constructed past.

Luhrmann recognizes that physical encounters across cultural and historical boundaries have been the foundation of popular, bohemian-influenced entertainment since at least the International Exhibitions of the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Like the fin-de-siècle *Moulin Rouge*, *Moulin Rouge!* offers spectators a form of cultural and historical tourism.<sup>26</sup> Film scholar Anne Friedberg contends that cinema, from its emergence to the

present day, has invited spectators to adopt a mobile, virtual gaze, allowing them to be virtually transported into worlds and bodies beyond their direct experience.<sup>27</sup> *Moulin Rouge!* makes visible, in both form and content, its inheritance of this notion of entertainment as a virtual, but sensory, encounter with culturally and historically distant bodies. It traces a complex ancestral web, from bohemia through the World's Fairs, the Moulin Rouge and early cinema, "underground"<sup>28</sup> into the Hollywood film musical, and across continents into Bollywood cinema, to a point of convergence in *Moulin Rouge!* itself. The film does not learn from and discard these ancestors, but accumulates them, leading to the sense expressed by a number of commentators that it is a museum film,<sup>29</sup> "a journey through the cultural history of film itself."<sup>30</sup> It is, however, as Brian McFarlane specifies, "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."<sup>31</sup> It is, in other words, an experiential museum of the kind described by Landsberg, in which visitors are invited to participate with their whole bodies, and in the process, perhaps, take on prosthetic memories. In *Moulin Rouge!*, bohemian memory becomes prosthetic memory; the cross-cultural/historical role-playing of the individual artist becomes a mass cultural technology for physically experiencing other worlds.

## TECHNO-CHOREOGRAPHIC BOHEMIANISM

Deleuze writes that in some musicals, "dance is no longer the movement of dream which outlines a world, but now acquires depth, grows stronger as it becomes the sole means of entering into another world, that is, into another's world, into another's dream or past."<sup>32</sup> Film studies scholar Annette Kuhn has observed dance playing this role in the recollections of film spectators of the 1930s.<sup>33</sup> Several of her interviewees spoke of the moments in Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals when the dance number took the actors and spectators seamlessly from the "realistic" space of the narrative into the fantasy space of the musical number. Some interviewees remembered these moments as making them want to, and believe they could, dance. Kuhn summarizes their accounts: "The sensation imbues your body, and carries you out of your local picture house onto the familiar streets of your neighbourhood, and you are moved to dance along the pavement all the way home."<sup>34</sup> In these spectators' recollections, paradoxically, the non-naturalistic cinematic device of opening the dance into a fantasy space gave them the greatest sense of physical engagement with the film, making them want to dance themselves. As Walter Benjamin wrote of cinema in 1936 at the height of Astaire and Roger's fame, "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice,"<sup>35</sup> that is, technological intervention is necessary to produce an unmediated experience of film. In these musical moments, dance and technology combine to break down the barrier between the spectator and the world of the film, inviting their physical engagement with the dancing bodies on screen.

*Moulin Rouge!* at first appears to treat dance in an opposite way to the Astaire and Rogers films. While Astaire was renowned for maintaining the integrity of the dancing body by using long takes and full-body shots, the editing of many of the dance numbers in *Moulin Rouge!* (by Jill Bilcock, Luhrmann's collaborator on all the "Red Curtain" films) deliberately breaks up the shape and rhythm of the original choreography and fragments the dancing bodies. This is most evident in the cancan number, which attempts to convey the exhilaration of Christian's first visit to the Moulin Rouge with a flurry of legs, faces and petticoats. Indeed, O'Connell was disappointed that the speed of the editing made it difficult to see his choreography.<sup>36</sup> Following in the tradition of Busby Berkeley and Gene Kelly, the choreography in *Moulin Rouge!* is no longer solely accomplished by a choreographer working with live bodies, but now also involves an editor working with the raw material of the rushes. For Luhrmann, this editing phase of the choreographic process can enhance the spectators' physical engagement with the characters and their emotional journey, rather than detracting from it. Therefore, in many of the musical numbers Luhrmann uses the opposite cinematic technique to Astaire—fragmentation of the body and rapid editing—to achieve the same effect, an unmediated, physical experience of the dancing bodies on screen. In fact, Astaire was not adverse to the technological manipulation of his dancing image to achieve this effect, and some of these techniques are echoed by Luhrmann, as shown in the example below. Therefore, despite Luhrmann's rejection of the full-body shot and the long take, his cinematic treatment of dance has more in common with Astaire's than it might at first appear.

The "Your Song" number in *Moulin Rouge!* makes evident the parallels between Astaire's and Luhrmann's technological manipulation of the dancing image to achieve the physical and emotional engagement of the audience. Christian woos Satine in her boudoir by singing Elton John's "Your Song" (1970). As they begin to dance, they spin together in a ballroom dancing hold, bringing to mind the ballroom-influenced style of Astaire and Rogers. This spin initiates a shift from the realistic space of the boudoir to a fantasy space in the sky above Paris (Fig. 1.2). Aurally, this shift is signaled by the replacement of Christian's voice with the operatic voice of Luciano Pavarotti, which appears to emanate from the man-in-the-moon (based on Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage dans la Lune* [1902]). Visually, the couple leaps from the window of the boudoir into the clouds, settling on a Parisian rooftop. Astaire had also evoked the feeling of being in love by using trick photography to dance in the air, dancing up to and on the Washington Square Arch in *The Belle of New York* (1952) and on the walls and ceiling in *Royal Wedding* (1951). In "Your Song," the aural shift into an operatic register combines with the couple's liberation from gravity to produce a sense of suspended reality, beyond the demands and complications of the underworld they have left behind. In this new world, anything is possible. Christian acquires an umbrella, skips with it in circles across the clouds, and hangs from the Eiffel Tower as if it were a lamppost, referring to another famous cinematic moment of love-inspired liberatory dancing: Gene Kelly's title number from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). The final sequence of movement evokes Astaire and Rogers once again as Satine spins toward Christian, flaring her Rogers-esque dress, before Christian lifts her, still spinning, into his arms. As the song ends, the sky fades into the familiar surroundings



FIGURE 1.2 Screen capture of *Moulin Rouge!*, director Baz Luhrmann, (2001), “Your Song”.

of the boudoir, where the couple are performing the same movement, suggesting that their emotions, rather than their physical bodies, had been dancing in the sky. The choreography of the scene invites the spectator to participate in the characters’ emotional arc, rather than merely following their literal movements. And yet, echoing the Astaire and Rogers numbers in unrealistic fantasy spaces, Luhrmann chooses to convey this *genuine* emotion via a sequence which draws attention to its *artificiality* through obviously computer-generated imagery, unsubtle intertextual references, and juxtapositions of scale (Christian is half the size of the Eiffel Tower).

Luhrmann’s comment on the use of a familiar pop song in this scene could equally apply to the dancing: “Now I have seen this scene with audiences all around the world. . . . And so there’s this kind of laughter, realisation, unsettled, ‘oh I can’t believe it’ moment. But [...] for all of the over-sentiment, actually you can hear the audience being drawn in and, as ridiculously romantic as it is, truly engage in the emotional feeling that’s being generated between the two.”<sup>37</sup> Unlike the 1930s audiences of Astaire and Rogers films, early twenty-first-century Euro-American audiences have been conditioned by the rejection of film musical artifice in the post-war era. Late twentieth-century teen musicals attempted to soften the jarring effect of the shift from narrative to musical number by using a non-diegetic soundtrack to avoid a non-naturalistic “bursting into song” moment.<sup>38</sup> Luhrmann, however, not only returns to characters singing, but intensifies the synthetic quality of this sequence, while retaining its function as a vehicle of uncynical, sincere emotion. This seeming contradiction exemplifies Luhrmann’s cinematic philosophy of “The Big Lie that reveals the Big Truth.”<sup>39</sup> In an act of Sell’s bohemian “theatricalized authenticity,” Luhrmann uses an unashamedly artificial technological device to convey apparently universal aspects of human experience.<sup>40</sup>

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued that this paradox is a condition of contemporary media culture.<sup>41</sup> They see in media technologies the convergence of two apparently opposite tendencies with long historical genealogies: hypermediacy, the desire to increase the layers and channels of mediation (Luhrmann’s “Big Lie”); and



immediacy, the desire to create a sense of presence by erasing the traces of mediation (Luhmann's "Big Truth"). These trajectories coalesce in new digital media that are defined by "remediation," "the representation of one medium in another."<sup>42</sup> In *Moulin Rouge!*, a film which makes extensive use of digital technologies in its construction of artifice, remediation is highly evident. In "Your Song," for example, *digital* technologies are used to reconstruct a cinematic illusion (dancing in the sky) associated with the era of *celluloid* film. Two media are merged in a cinematic choreography designed to *reduce* the audience's sense of mediation, to invite them to join the dance.

In *Moulin Rouge!*, mediation paradoxically produces an immediacy between dancing bodies on screen and the bodies of spectators, allowing the latter to experiment with "other" physical identities. This might be considered a form of virtual bohemianism, a historical and cultural role-play facilitated by cinematic spectatorship. Dance functions here to unite on-screen and off-screen bodies, counterbalancing hypermediacy with the sensation of presence. This aesthetic might be called "Techno Boho," following Australian journalist Sacha Molitorisz's coining of the term to describe one of the style tribes of Sydney,<sup>43</sup> the city in which *Moulin Rouge!* was filmed and where Luhmann bases his production company, Bazmark. Molitorisz describes the Techno Bohos as "a thriving subculture of new Bohemians, who make music, films, visual art and mixed media installations."<sup>44</sup> According to Molitorisz, female Techno Bohos often wear burlesque or vintage clothes, embodying the past in a way reminiscent of *Moulin Rouge!*. However, in *Moulin Rouge!* it is specifically the combination of dance and technological remediation that allows spectators to become virtual bohemians. The expanded term "techno-choreographic bohemianism" might, therefore, be more appropriate for this aesthetic in *Moulin Rouge!*.

## THE END OF HISTORY?

The erasure of historical, cultural, and bodily boundaries through techno-choreographic bohemianism in *Moulin Rouge!* has proved unsettling to a number of critics. Media scholar Jim Collins has summarized critical responses to films that exhibit such "hyperconscious eclecticism": "hyperconscious eclecticism is a sign of (choose one): a) the end of "Narrative"; b) the end of "the Real," "History," etc.' c) the end of art and entertainment for anyone other than overstimulated promiscuous teenagers; d) a sign of all-purpose moral and intellectual decay."<sup>45</sup> All of these criticisms have been leveled at *Moulin Rouge!*. This section analyzes these critiques in relation to the effects of techno-choreographic bohemianism on narrative, history, memory, and the body in the film.

In *Moulin Rouge!*, the bohemian performance of authenticity becomes digitally remastered as postmodern hyperreality,<sup>46</sup> a term defined by Umberto Eco as a cultural condition of the proliferation of the "absolute fake," in which "absolute reality is offered as a real presence."<sup>47</sup> This term resonates with Luhmann's notion of "real artificiality," which refers to the amount of labor necessary to construct the artifice of the

real.<sup>48</sup> Eco notes that America's hyperreal museums commit the "original sin of 'the levelling of pasts,' the fusion of copy and original."<sup>49</sup> A number of theorists have noted this tendency in twentieth-century culture,<sup>50</sup> and particularly in twentieth-century film. Deleuze describes the coexistence of "sheets of past" in film as a type of time-image, a cinematic form in which time is no longer produced as narrative by the characters' actions, but made directly visible, allowing multiple temporalities to be experienced at once.<sup>51</sup> The spectator is opened up to "a whole temporal 'panorama,' an unstable set of floating memories, images of a past in general which move past at dizzying speed, as if time were achieving a profound freedom."<sup>52</sup> Deleuze argues that this can produce in film a "crystal-image" in which the actual and the virtual, present and past, constantly transform into one another.<sup>53</sup>

This sense of time is palpable in *Moulin Rouge!*, particularly in Satine's opening number. As she is lowered into the Moulin Rouge dance hall on a trapeze, Toulouse describes her as "the sparkling diamond." She sits on the rotating trapeze, her costume and jewelry twinkling like a crystal turning in the light (Fig. 1.3), and her spoken lyrics, tying together love, death, and jewels, predict her own demise. On the word "die," the camera cuts momentarily to an image of her lifeless body, forming what Deleuze would call an "internal circuit,"<sup>54</sup> a moment of simultaneity, between this moment, Christian's opening announcement of her death, and her actual death in the finale. She is costumed to evoke past female cinematic icons (as listed earlier) whose images jostle with the contemporary star image of Kidman to form deeper circuits that dive in and out of the spectator's visual memory. Satine's pale skin, deliberately enhanced by blue light, becomes a ghostly surface on which images of past female bodies play. In deed, Luhrmann considers that Kidman's "white reflective skin" identifies her physically with 1950s Hollywood actresses such as Marilyn Monroe, whose skin allowed them to "shine in the frame" despite limited lighting.<sup>55</sup> Sell argues that her "luminously pale" skin also alludes to Edouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863).<sup>56</sup> Like the nude prostitute in *Olympia*, Satine



FIGURE 1.3 Screen capture of *Moulin Rouge!*, director Baz Luhrmann, (2001), "Sparkling Diamonds".

is contrasted physically with her black companion, the Moulin Rouge dancer Chocolat, while sharing in his highly saleable exoticism. In Satine's first moments on screen, her body has already become a "crystal-image" with many temporal facets, reflecting both her own future within the film's narrative, and the history of white, female bodies in Euro-American visual culture.

These historical references proliferate in the song-and-dance number that follows Satine's entrance. She sings "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," echoing Monroe's rendition in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), and O'Connell's choreography at times echoes Jack Cole's, such as the framing of Kidman/Monroe by a sea of suited men. Lyrical reference is also made to Madonna's *Material Girl* (1985) music video, which itself imitates Monroe's performance. This complex web of quotation not only layers the sequence with multiple temporalities and media forms—celluloid film, music video, and digital film—it also evokes Madonna's famed manipulation of historical, ethnic, and sexual identities in performance. Viewers are reminded of this through the performance by the Moulin Rouge dancers of face-framing arm movements reminiscent of Madonna's *Vogue* (1990) video, while they sing the lyrics of *Material Girl*. The choreography for *Vogue* was influenced by the gay African-American and Latino club practice of voguing, with its poses derived from photographs of Hollywood stars such as Monroe and Dietrich. Madonna disregarded copyright issues in these appropriations,<sup>57</sup> instead treating the movements and images as recombinable signifiers through which to construct her public profile. Through Madonna, Monroe is positioned as one of a number of historical female archetypes that can be embodied by performers for both artistic and commercial purposes. Indeed, Satine later discusses with Zidler which model of femininity she should adopt to encourage the Duke to invest: "wilting flower, bright and bubbly or smoldering temptress?" However, like bohemian role-play, Satine's performances of femininity are combined with a desire for authenticity, summed up in her ambition, first stated in this scene, to become an oxymoronic "real actress." Here, Sell's bohemian "theatricalized authenticity" and Eco's postmodern "absolute fake" coincide, highlighting the bohemian lineage of Luhrmann's postmodern approach to the film musical.

Satine's opening number exemplifies how *Moulin Rouge!* creates a prosthetic memory of fin-de-siècle Paris by recombining familiar fragments of visual and musical culture into a new sensory universe. Even before *Moulin Rouge!* was released, Luhrmann proclaimed, "We've reinvented the musical. . . . We've given it a postmodern form. We've taken all the culture of the last 100 years, torn it up, and pieced it back together to make our own world."<sup>58</sup> This can be considered a form of postmodern pastiche, a mode of cultural production that, film scholar Richard Dyer argues,<sup>59</sup> allows film spectators to inhabit and feel the emotional pull of images of the past, while being aware of their historical and cultural construction—precisely the purpose of Luhrmann's bohemian strategy of "real artificiality." During Satine's "Sparkling Diamonds" number, spectators may be drawn into the immediacy of the performance, much of which is filmed from the point of view of the male patrons with whom Satine dances, while recognizing the collage of historical quotations that comprise it. This positioning of the spectator both inside (physically and emotionally involved with) and outside (retaining critical distance from) the

cinematic image is facilitated by the film's slippery refusal to remain ideologically bound by any single cultural form, whether Hollywood, Bollywood, or MTV.

The effects of this method on the representation of history in *Moulin Rouge!* have been scathingly critiqued by English scholar Lael Ewy:

At best *Moulin Rouge* is a lot of fun. At worst it represents the erasure of history. *Moulin Rouge* is set in the Paris of 1900—at least ostensibly it is. The actual Paris of 1900 is the Paris of Satie, the Paris of Ravel, of Debussy. The actual Paris of 1900 is the Paris of Matisse, and at least for part of the year, the Paris of Picasso. . . . What we get in *Moulin Rouge*, though, is a Paris of 1900 filtered through the myopia of late 20th Century pop culture, especially pop music. We get an anachronistic melange of Madonna and Elton John, of Nirvana and Olivia Newton John. In other words, it isn't the Paris of 1900. It isn't even close.<sup>60</sup>

Ewy echoes the lament of many detractors of postmodernism that contemporary culture signals the “end of history.”<sup>61</sup> The linear flow of history as a meaningful narrative is disrupted by the postmodern appropriation of images irrespective of chronology. However, Jacques Derrida “wonder[s] if the end of history is but the end of a *certain* concept of history.”<sup>62</sup> Ewy's historical model derives from the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment, in which the past objectively exists, and therefore historical accounts either reveal its essence truthfully, or obscure it. In this framework, history is linear—it should not be repeated or manipulated after the event. This type of history has been challenged in the twentieth century, notably by Benjamin's reconceptualization of the historian's subject matter as “the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.”<sup>63</sup> This conception of history as a set of moving prisms through which images of the past are refracted in ever changing ways has been adopted and developed by postmodern historiography. It also reflects the way history is used in *Moulin Rouge!*

Robert Burgoyne has argued that contemporary commercial films have the capacity to question the linearity and reality of history by using digital technology to create prosthetic memories.<sup>64</sup> Burgoyne notes that while Landsberg is optimistic about the political potential of prosthetic memory and its effects on conceptions of history, some critics find this tendency in contemporary film troubling. He cites the example of film historian Thomas Elsaesser, who fears that “the burning in of memories via the media—burned in to the point that they create *symptoms in the spectator*—speak not to empathy and new social alliances but rather to cultural obsession, fantasy, and trauma.”<sup>65</sup> This suggests that the challenge of cinematic prosthetic memory to the integrity of history is also read as a challenge to the integrity of the body. If memories can be manipulated, then what of the bodies that rely on them for their sense of continuity and reality? This resonates with the testimonies of *Moulin Rouge!* critics at the beginning of this chapter who experienced the film as a physical assault. Indeed, some critics posit a direct connection between the film's disruption of linear time, its bodily impact, and its manipulation of memory. Journalist Peter Keogh writes,

If we assume he knows what he's doing, then Baz Luhrmann's goal seems to be the *end of cinema as we know it*: i.e., a coherent art form that provides pleasure and meaning.

How else explain *Moulin Rouge*, a film that takes beautiful actors, sets, costumes, and production numbers, fuses (or diffuses) a century and a half of pop culture from Verdi to MTV, photographs it all like a freak show, and chops it into confetti? This is the *Memento* of movie musicals, stroboscopically edited into three-second segments *without apparent logic, cohesion, or continuity* and designed to cater to—or induce—*short-term memory disorder*.<sup>66</sup>

For Keogh, the disregard for linear history in *Moulin Rouge!* pathologically infects spectator's memories. Even some critics who recommend the film pathologize its effects on spectators' memories. For example, Stephanie Zacharek writes, "Luhrmann is a tricky director. I'm not sure how he does it, but his movies have a way of reshaping themselves in your memory after the fact—it's as if they have viruses built into them that spring to life a day or so later, mysterious microorganisms that go to work in your brain to smooth out a movie's flaws and heighten its most sensual or exhilarating moments."<sup>67</sup> Zacharek characterizes the prosthetic memories implanted by the film as technological or biological viruses, infiltrating the body in which, presumably, "authentic" memories, histories, and identities normally reside.

English literature and cultural studies scholar Grace Kehler has noted the frequency of metaphors of disease in reviews of *Moulin Rouge!* and links this to the imagery of prostitution in the film.<sup>68</sup> Satine reproduces the stereotype of the consumptive nineteenth-century prostitute; like Marguerite in Alexandre Dumas' novel *La dame aux Camélias* (1848) and Violetta in Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata* (1853), Satine must die in order to restore the health of society. Kehler cites Lynda Nead's argument that the prostitute's threat lies in her status as an unobtainable commodity that can be perpetually resold. The consumptive prostitute, therefore, embodies the temptations of consumer culture, as well as its threat never to deliver what it purports to sell. Conscious of its own role as a commodity, Kehler argues, *Moulin Rouge!* constructs itself as a nineteenth-century prostitute—exotically alluring, but dangerously diseased.

I propose that the connection between *Moulin Rouge!* and the stereotypical nineteenth-century prostitute is not just the sale of an impossible commodity, but also the sale of a physical encounter with other bodies, cultures, and histories, in an artificially constructed environment (the brothel or the cinematic image). This is the basis of the fin-de-siècle commercialized bohemianism that *Moulin Rouge!* takes as its subject matter, but it also becomes a structuring principle of the cultural economy of the film itself. It is experienced by the spectator as a violent attack on the "authentic" integrity of the body and its memories, and therefore rejected, like Satine, as pathological.

In this identification of the body of the film with the body of Satine, *Moulin Rouge!* rather undermines its own philosophy. While the film ostensibly encourages an openness to other bodies, it renders its embodiment of this encounter in the character of Satine, and thus itself, diseased. When Satine dies, so does the possibility of a bohemian embodiment of other times and places, leaving its audience only with Christian's disembodied, typewritten words. Thus, *Moulin Rouge!* reinforces the nineteenth-century humanist morality that pathologized the figure of the prostitute,

and which informs critics' rejections of the film's seductive, technologically constructed physicality.<sup>69</sup>

By constructing its own techno-cinematic bohemianism as a contagious disease, *Moulin Rouge!* implies that the derivation of pleasure from viewing the film is tantamount to the psychiatric disorder of masochism. This is evident in critic Steven Aoun's response to the film: "In your face doesn't even begin to describe the experience. The film is more like a rabid dog that suddenly leaps at your throat. So, why did I enjoy being knocked to the ground and thrashed about? Well, apart from confessing my own tendency toward masochism, *Moulin Rouge!* also cries out to be loved. The film is nothing less (or more) than an attempt to revitalize the musical in a cynical and jaded age. Only a sadist could delight in resisting its infectious entreaty."<sup>70</sup> Landsberg's notion of prosthetic memory, however, rehabilitates the potential bodily violence of film viewing.<sup>71</sup> She states that although "prosthetic memories, like an artificial limb, often mark a trauma," they nevertheless create "the conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, the 'other.'"<sup>72</sup> Therefore, spectators who enter physically and emotionally into the artificial, historically and culturally eclectic world of *Moulin Rouge!* might open themselves not only to historical, mnemonic, and bodily violence, but also to cross-cultural and transhistorical encounters, engagements, and identifications. This has always been the trade-off implicit in bohemianism, one that Luhrmann reinterprets for the postmodern age.

Perhaps the most audacious historical leap made in *Moulin Rouge!* is between the bohemian tradition of "theatricalized authenticity" and postmodern forms of cinematic prosthetic memory. The film implies a parallel between the bohemian experience of otherness offered by the Moulin Rouge to its customers and the experience of physically participating in a technologically constructed past that is offered to spectators by the film itself. The film musical form provides Luhrmann with a bridge between these two contexts. In its song-and-dance numbers, the film musical retained and developed early cinema's non-linear, spectacular, audience-engaging characteristics, which had much in common with live entertainment of the 1890s.<sup>73</sup> This capacity to physically engage spectators also makes the film musical a powerful vehicle for conveying prosthetic memories, although it does not feature in Landsberg's argument. In the song-and-dance numbers in *Moulin Rouge!*, Luhrmann's "real artificiality" reaches its apogee, and the continuity between bohemian memory and prosthetic memory is most evident. These moments, beyond the limitations of narrative time and place, are also the height of the film's historical and cultural juxtapositions. In these scenes, the film's direct appeal to the bodies of spectators to enter physically and emotionally into Luhrmann's constructed world is most urgent. The film offers spectators two ways of interpreting these physical onslaughts: as pathological attacks on the body, or as opportunities for experiencing, empathizing with, dancing in other worlds, a possibility that underpinned the bohemian tradition, and is reinvigorated for the twenty-first century by *Moulin Rouge!*

## NOTES

1. For example, Robert A. Morace, "Delirious Postmodernism: Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*." (Paper presented at Film Musicals: From the Classical Era to Postmodern Cinema, University College Cork, September 19–20, 2003); Patricia Pisters, "'Touched by a Cardboard Sword': Aesthetic Creation and Non-Personal Subjectivity in *Dancer in the Dark* and *Moulin Rouge*," in *Discern(E)Ments: Deleuzian Aesthetics/Esthétiques Deleuziennes*, ed. Joost de Bloois, Sjeff Houppermans, and Frans-Willem Korsten (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), 151–169; Katherine R. Larson, "Silly Love Songs: The Impact of Puccini's *La Bohème* on the Intertextual Strategies of *Moulin Rouge*!" *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 6 (2009): 1040–1052; Mina Yang, "Moulin Rouge! And the Undoing of Opera," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 20, no. 3 (2010): 269–282.
2. Jose Arroyo, review of *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, *Sight and Sound* 11, no. 9, September 2001, 50–52.
3. Peter Travers, review of *Moulin Rouge!*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, *Rolling Stone*, June 1, 2001, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/moulin-rouge-20010509>.
4. Philip French, review of *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, *The Guardian*, September 9, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/sep/09/philipfrench1?INTCMP=SRCH>.
5. Luhrmann cited in "Behind the Story," accessed April 17, 2002, [http://www.clubmoulinrouge.com/html/member/background\\_orph.htm](http://www.clubmoulinrouge.com/html/member/background_orph.htm) (site discontinued).
6. Luhrmann cited in "Red Hot Music: An Interview with Baz Luhrmann," accessed April 3, 2003, [http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/249299/ref=br\\_bx\\_2\\_1/026-25374](http://www.amazon.co.uk/exec/obidos/tg/feature/-/249299/ref=br_bx_2_1/026-25374) (no longer online); Luhrmann cited in Jason Frank, "Interview: Baz Luhrmann, Director," accessed April 3, 2003, [http://www.gamesfirst.com/articles/jfrank/baz\\_interview/baz\\_interview.htm](http://www.gamesfirst.com/articles/jfrank/baz_interview/baz_interview.htm).
7. John Horn, "The Land of Baz," *Newsweek*, May 27, 2001: 58.
8. Luhrmann cited in "Red Hot Music."
9. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, the Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Subjectivity and Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 57.
10. Luhrmann cited in Rebecca Murray, "Baz Luhrmann Talks Awards and 'Moulin Rouge,'" accessed April 3, 2003, <http://romanticmovies.about.com/library/weekly/aa030902a.htm>.
11. Luhrmann cited in "Red Hot Music"; Luhrmann cited in Geoff Andrew, "Baz Luhrmann (I)," last modified 2001, accessed May 19, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2001/sep/07/1>; see also Diane Sandars, "Highly Hybridic, Mostly Palimpsestic: Innovative Uses of Music Video in the Recent Australian Musicals, *Moulin Rouge* and *One Night the Moon*" (Paper presented at What Lies Beneath, The University of Melbourne, November 6, 2003); and Tara Brabazon, *From Revolution to Revelation: Generation X, Popular Culture and Cultural Studies* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).
12. "Interview with Baz Luhrmann," last modified May 30, 2001, accessed April 3, 2003, <http://www.themoviechicks.com/may2001/mcrrtbaz.html> (no longer online).
13. See Brabazon, *From Revolution to Revelation*, on the use of popular memories of musical sub-cultures in this number.
14. John O'Connell (choreographer, *Moulin Rouge!*), interview with the author, May 30, 2005.
15. Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 73.

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18. Mike Sell, "Bohemianism, the Cultural Turn of the Avantgarde, and Forgetting the Roma," *TDR: The Drama Review* 51, no. 2 (T194) (2007): 45, 47.
19. *Ibid.*, 49.
20. Martin cited in Baz Luhrmann and Catherine Martin, *Moulin Rouge!* (New York: Newmarket Press, 2001), 78.
21. Sell, "Bohemianism," 41.
22. Baz Luhrmann, "Commentary," Disc 1, *Moulin Rouge!*, Two Disc Set, directed by Baz Luhrmann (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2002), DVD.
23. Luhrmann cited in Andrew, "Baz Luhrmann (I)," emphasis added.
24. Luhrmann cited in "Behind the Story."
25. "Interview with Baz Luhrmann."
26. Brabazon, *From Revolution to Revelation*, 172.
27. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993).
28. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions," 57.
29. Brabazon, *From Revolution to Revelation*, 273; Brian McFarlane, "The Movie as Museum," *Meanjin* 60, no. 4 (2001): 212–217.
30. Michael F. Nyiri, "The Buzz Starts Here: The Best Film of 2001," last modified 2001, accessed February 23, 2010, <http://www.allthingsmike.com/ElectricMovies/dvds/MoulinRouge/essay.html>.
31. McFarlane, "The Movie as Museum," 212.
32. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 60.
33. Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
34. *Ibid.*, 192.
35. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," translated by Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973), 233.
36. O'Connell cited in Michael Montgomery, "John O'Connell and Moulin Rouge," *Dance Europe* 45, October (2001): 28–30.
37. Luhrmann, "Commentary."
38. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1993), 128.
39. Luhrmann cited in "Interview: Baz Luhrmann Reveals His Love for Movies, Music, and Putting It All Together," last modified 2002, accessed April 3, 2003, <http://video.barnesandnoble.com/search/Interview.asp?ctr=622158>.
40. Media and culture scholar Patricia Pisters has also addressed this question "of being deeply touched by something that is obviously an illusion," in relation to *Moulin Rouge!* and Lars von Trier's film *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). Pisters, "'Touched by a Cardboard Sword,'" 152. She draws on Gilles Deleuze's argument that film (or any aesthetic creation) is not a representation of something else, but a real experience in itself. For example, Deleuze, *Cinema II*.
41. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
42. *Ibid.*, 45.
43. Sacha Molitorisz, "Tribes of Sydney," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 7, 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/tribes-of-the-sydney-20100107-lv15.html>.



44. Ibid.
45. Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 250.
46. Rachael Turk, "Children of the Digital Revolution," *Metro*, September 1, 2001: 6.
47. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1990), 8, 7.
48. Luhmann cited in Andrew, "Baz Luhrmann (I)."
49. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, 9.
50. For example, Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press and Basil Blackwell, 1988), 166–184.
51. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 95.
52. Ibid., 53.
53. Ibid., 67.
54. Ibid., 67.
55. McAlpine cited in Luhrmann, "Commentary."
56. Sell, "Bohemianism," 48.
57. "No Rave Reviews for Madonna's Horst Play," *The Dallas Morning News*, May 16, 1990, [http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\\_product=DM&p\\_theme=dm&p\\_action=search&p\\_maxdocs=200&p\\_topdoc=1&p\\_text\\_direct-o=oED3D101E429494A&p\\_field\\_direct-o=document\\_id&p\\_perpage=10&p\\_sort=YMD\\_date:D&s\\_trackval=GooglePM](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_product=DM&p_theme=dm&p_action=search&p_maxdocs=200&p_topdoc=1&p_text_direct-o=oED3D101E429494A&p_field_direct-o=document_id&p_perpage=10&p_sort=YMD_date:D&s_trackval=GooglePM).
58. Luhrmann cited in "Moulin Rouge," *Entertainment Weekly*, August 18, 2000, 83.
59. Richard Dyer, "The Notion of Pastiche," in *The Aesthetics of Popular Art*, ed. Jostein Gripsrud (Bergen and Kristiansand: Senter for Kulturstudier and HøyskoleForlaget, Norwegian Academic Press, 2001), 77–89.
60. Lael Ewy, "Moulin Rouge, the Erasure of History, and the Disneyfication of the Avant Garde," *East Westerly Review* 7 (Fall 2001), <http://www.postmodernvillage.com/eastwest/issue7/7a-0003.html>.
61. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 73.
62. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 15, original emphasis.
63. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1973), 245–255.
64. Robert Burgoyne, "Memory, History and Digital Imagery in Contemporary Film," in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 220–236, emphasis added.
65. Burgoyne, "Memory, History and Digital Imagery," 226, emphasis added.
66. Peter Keogh, review of *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, "No Cancan Do: Baz Luhrmann Cuts Moulin Rouge into MTV Ribbons," *The Boston Phoenix*, May 31–June 7, 2001, <http://www.bostonphoenix.com/boston/movies/documents/01655667.htm>, emphasis added.
67. Stephanie Zacharek, review of *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, May 18, 2001, [http://www.salon.com/2001/05/18/moulin\\_rouge/](http://www.salon.com/2001/05/18/moulin_rouge/).

68. Grace Kehler, "Still for Sale: Love Songs and Prostitutes from La Traviata to Moulin Rouge," *Mosaic* (Winnipeg) 38, no. 2 (2005): 145–162.
69. Cathryn Conner Bennett draws similar conclusions in her analysis of *Moulin Rouge!*, but for different reasons. Cathryn Conner Bennett, "The Gender Politics of Death: Three Formulations of *La Bohème* in Contemporary Cinema," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32, no. 3 (2004): 116.
70. Steven Aoun, review of *Moulin Rouge*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, "Home Box Office with Steven Aoun," *Metro*, January 1, 2003, 265.
71. See also Steven Shaviro's work on masochistic film viewing. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
72. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 20, 9.
73. See Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions."

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