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The Korean Journal of Dance

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Cyborg Cinema:

(Dis)Embodying Cultural Memory in the Digital Age*

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Ⅰ. Introduction

In postmodernity, a range of digital technologies are used to store memories.

These include digital cameras, ipods, memory sticks, and online repositories such as YouTube and Flickr. This process is not just personal. Mediated memories, such as songs stored on ipods and films stored on YouTube, often refer to collective experiences, whether those of a group of friends, or a global audience. Once stored, these memory files have the capacity to reinforce existing group identities, as well as creating new imagined communities, bound, for example, by the common experience of watching a YouTube film transmitted around the globe by email. These technologies can therefore be considered as vehicles not just of personal memory, but of cultural memory.

These technological mnemonic devices might appear to be a substitute for the physical, bodily process of remembering. However, they do not function entirely separately from the body. Access to these digital archives can only be gained through human/digital interfaces, such as the computer screen and the ipod control pad. Each of these interfaces demands a certain mode of spectatorship on the part of the human user, and by engaging with the digital interface, the user's body and identity are to a certain extent transformed. For example, the ipod's white earphones and wires may confer on the user a status and identity as a techno-savvy participant in the global exchange of digital music.

Many memory storage technologies do not use moving images. Those that do include YouTube and digital film. Digital filmmaking can be carried out by anyone with a digital video camera, but here I am interested in digital feature filmmaking. Digital feature films obviously differ from media such as YouTube in that they are produced and sold by production companies, rather than created by individual users. However, I hope to show that some of the same processes of digitising cultural memory are present in some contemporary digital films. In this paper I want to look at how dance images in mainstream digital feature filmmaking perform the function of both capturing cultural memory, and providing an interface for spectator's' bodies to interact with these cultural memories. Examples will be drawn from the film *Moulin Rouge!*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, and released in 2001.

II. Cultural Memory in *Moulin Rouge!*

As the media theorist Tara Brabazon (2005) has pointed out, the entire premise of *Moulin Rouge!* is based on memory. The plot is presented in the form of the memories of Christian (played by Ewan McGregor), a young, middle-class writer who visits Paris in 1899 to find inspiration and love. At the beginning of the film the audience finds out that the love he found, a courtesan called Satine (played by Nicole Kidman), is dead, and the film recounts Christian's memories of the events that led to her demise. However, memory is also central to the film on another level. Music and dance are used to provoke the spectator's memories of previous experiences of listening to popular music and watching popular film. For example, in a famous scene set on top of the model elephant in the pleasure garden of the Moulin Rouge, Christian and Satine sing a love medley composed of lines from famous popular love songs such as 'Love is a Many-Splendoured thing" by the Four Aces, "Silly Love Songs" by Paul McCartney, and "I Will Always Love You" by Dolly Parton, and later Whitney Houston. The spectator's memories of listening or dancing to these songs therefore become woven into their experience of watching the film, adding layers of personal and cultural resonance and meaning. The same process occurs in the dance numbers in the film.

For example, in the sequence entitled 'Your Song', in which Christian and Satine dance in a computer-generated sky, the spectator may be reminded of the endings of many Fred Astaire films in which Astaire and his partners dance off into the skies, such as *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939) and *The Belle of New York* (1952). The setting is reminiscent of the scene immediately before Gene Kelly's *American in Paris* ballet (1951), on a balcony overlooking Paris, and Christian's dance with the umbrella quotes another Gene Kelly film – *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Finally, the singing moon refers to the iconic moon face in Georges Méliès's 1902 film *Le Voyage dans la Lune.* Spectators may recognise some, all, or none of these references, or may discern different ones. Personal memories of watching these images may be provoked, as well as cultural resonances, such as the association of Méliès's moon with early trick cinema. The latter will obviously differ depending on the cultural history of the individual spectator, for example, Gene Kelly's film *An American in Paris* may have different resonances for

American spectators than for European spectators, and different resonances again for non-Euro-American spectators.

Many film critics have noted the plethora of filmic and musical references in *Moulin Rouge!*, and either denigrated or praised the film for its postmodern intertextuality. For instance, José Arroyo complained in *Sight and Sound* that, "[t]his *Moulin* is textbook postmodernism at its worst, a relentless pastiche of pop-cultural sounds and representations sutured into the service of a cliché" (Arroyo, 2001, p.50). However, the description of *Moulin Rouge!* as intertextual relies on the assumption that film and dance can be analysed as texts. Some dance writers, particularly those approaching dance from a phenomenological point of view, such as Felicia Hughes-Freeland (2005) have questioned the idea that dance can be "read" as if it were a text. They argue that the experience of watching a dance differs from the experience of reading a text in its fundamentally kinetic and physical nature. This applies even when the dance movement is not live, but composed of digital images, as Sarah Rubidge's (2008) recent research suggests.

Rubidge draws on recent neurological research to suggest that spectators' brains react to digital images derived from human movement by mirroring the neuronal patterns produced by actually performing the movement. These neuronal patterns can produce emotional or affective changes in the spectator similar to those experienced when embodying the movement oneself. This suggests that the experience of watching dance on film is different from the experience of reading a text. It involves a physical and affective reaction to the movement observed, as well as an intellectual reaction to the concepts evoked, and these two elements may be inextricable. Furthermore, Rubidge cites neurological studies that have shown that these physical and affective reactions increase in strength if the spectator has physically experienced movement that is similar in style to the movement observed. This suggests that physical and affective reactions to dance on film are strongly linked to memories of moving, and perhaps also to memories of watching similar movements on screen, since this triggers the same neuronal patterns as performing the movement.

The spectator's response to watching dance on screen may therefore go beyond the

intertextual. Cultural memory functions here not merely to create an intellectual link between the current text and previous texts that the spectator may have "read", but to connect the spectator physically and intellectually with memories of the affective experience of moving and watching movements on screen.

This relationship between dance on screen, cultural memory, and the physical experience of the spectator has been theorised by Gilles Deleuze in his book *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1989). For Deleuze, films do not represent the real world outside the cinema, but are real experiences in themselves, creating their own worlds and sensations. Deleuze argues that in film musicals these sensations are produced by the fact that the song and dance numbers evoke an experience of time itself, in which boundaries between past, present and future dissolve. He says, "what counts is the way in which the dancer's individual genius, his subjectivity, moves from a personal motivity to a supra-personal element, to movement of world that the dance will outline" (Deleuze, 1989, p.61). This movement of world is the shift from a character moving through the world, to a sense of the world moving around the character. According to Deleuze, this produces "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" (Deleuze, 1989, p.55). This sense of time achieving a profound freedom is palpable in *Moulin Rouge!*

For example, Satine's opening number, 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend', refers simultaneously to Carol Channing's original rendition of the song in the Broadway musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1949), Marilyn Monroe's version of the song in the film of the same name (1953), and Madonna's quotation of the Monroe performance in her video for *Material Girl* (1985). Satine's costume in the number was also designed to be reminiscent of Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel* (1930). Nicole Kidman's body seems to flicker with these temporally disparate references as she performs the number. The effect of this historically complex image on the spectator will depend on his/her experience of these images, in the theatre, in the cinema, on MTV or on YouTube. Kidman's performance invokes not only the images themselves, but the prior sensory experience of watching them.

John O'Connell, the choreographer of *Moulin Rouge!*, confirms that his choreography is designed not to recall a specific image, but to evoke a specific feeling:

> Basically when you're in the rehearsal room it's a spontaneous kind of organic thing that happens, so maybe subliminally all those classes you had and all those films you saw that had tango in are in the back of your head, but it would be impossible I think to work, for me, to work where you say "oh that's a great shot, I should put that somewhere". I tried to capture the flavour of something, like the excitement of "let's put on a show!" and the silliness of it.
>
> O'Connell, 2005 [telephone interview]

Laura U. Marks (2000) has argued that it is this capacity of film and video images to "call upon memories of the senses" (2000, p.xi) that allows certain films to connect with the viewer's embodied cultural experience. She argues that some experimental and independent filmmakers use images that invoke the sensory world of certain non-Euro-American cultures, for example, the smells of a particular cuisine, such as couscous in the 2007 film of the same name. In doing so they "attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge, or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West" (2000, p.1). She argues that although commercial film and television participate in this practice to a small extent, it is mainly in experimental and independent filmmaking that these techniques have been developed and explored. However, I contend that a number of popular mainstream films of the turn-of-the-millennium, such as *Moulin Rouge!* and *Amelie* (2001), have attempted to use sensuous imagery as a means of provoking cultural memory, as well as using cultural memory to encourage a tactile, embodied form of spectatorship.

In *Moulin Rouge!*, cultural memory is used to allow the spectator to physically experience historically, culturally and politically diverse bodies and viewing positions. Baz Luhrmann, the director of *Moulin Rouge!*, explains:

> we said, 'Well look, Satine is a courtesan. She sells her love to men.' ···. If she was dressed as a courtesan necked [sic] to knee, you wouldn't understand it. She looks a little bit like Marlene Dietrich in *Blue Angel*. A little bit like Madonna. So we're saying, we're using culture we understand and cultural references we understand to enter into the world of the characters and place.
>
> Luhrmann cited in Anon., no date [online]

So, for Luhrmann, references to *Blue Angel* and Madonna help the twenty-first century spectator to connect culturally with the notion of a nineteenth-century courtesan. In the dance numbers, this transhistorical connection becomes more physical. Luhrmann says of the cancan scene in the Moulin Rouge:

> 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.
>
> Luhrmann cited in Anon., 2001 [online]

In the dance numbers, cultural memory is used to allow the spectator to embody a different cultural and historical reality.

In the above quotation, Luhrmann is referring to the cancan scene that takes place in the Moulin Rouge. As Brabazon (2005) has pointed out, one way in which this scene taps into cultural memory is via the subcultural associations of the popular music used in the number. The male dancers sing the 1991 Nirvana lyric, 'Here we are now, entertain us', invoking the rebellious, socially alienated attitude of grunge music, influenced by punk and heavy metal. The female cancan dancers meanwhile sing 'Voulez-vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?', the well-known French phrase, whose formal grammar implies that the invitation to sleep together is being made by a stranger, presumably a prostitute. The phrase became famous as the controversial lyric of the 1974 disco song *Lady Marmalade* by Labelle, whose setting in the French quarter of New Orleans, is transferred to the red-light district of Montmartre in Paris in *Moulin Rouge!* Harold Zidler, the manager of the cabaret, played by Jim Broadbent, sings 'Because we can, can can', written for the film by the commercial dance music DJ Fatboy Slim, evoking the role played by the DJ in controlling the energy of the crowd in European dance music, a role that Zidler performs in the Moulin Rouge. He also sings Zidler's Rap, surrounded by female cancan dancers, evoking hip-hop music videos in which the rap artist is often surrounded by scantily-clad dancing women. The gender inequalities associated with hip-hop culture become a lens

through which the spectator can interpret gender at the Moulin Rouge. These popular cultural references allow a spectator familiar with one or more of these styles of music and dance to experience the historically and culturally distant world of the Moulin Rouge that Luhrmann has constructed, by remembering the time, place and feelings associated with listening and dancing to these songs.

All of these popular musical references evoke youth subcultures built around resistance to various mainstream values: grunge's resistance to the conformism of middle-class clothing styles and melodious music; disco's inclusive race and sexual politics; dance music's youth rebellion against policing by the older generation; and rap music's critique of white racism. Each of these subcultural references offers the spectator a point of entry into the transgressive politics of the Moulin Rouge, where middle- and upper-class women and particularly men went to experience a release from the conventions of bourgeois Parisian society. Grunge, disco, dance music and rap become analogical experiences through which the spectator can forge connections with fin-de-siecle counter-culture.

These memories are simultaneously personal and collective. They may evoke the personal memories of listening or dancing to these songs in certain venues with certain people at a particular stage in one's life. They may bring to mind the collective experience of belonging to particular subcultures. But they may also suggest more dispersed collective experiences, such as that of engaging with grunge or disco subcultures via the transnational networks of CD distribution, digital music exchange, or MTV. For example, the song *Lady Marmalade* was re-recorded in 2001 for *Moulin Rouge!* by Christina Aguilera, Lil' Kim, Mya and Pink, and the digital distribution of this track via CD and online filesharing provided another possible layer to the memories evoked by the song. Furthermore, the cancan number, and most of the film, is edited using a technique that has become known as the MTV aesthetic, in which shots, often of fragmented body parts, are cut together in rapid succession. In the 1980s, this editing technique, originally a device used in the advertising industry, was combined with the song-and-dance numbers familiar from film musicals, to produce the postmodern medium of the music video. Such resonances provide additional layers of meaning in Luhrmann's construction of the Moulin Rouge as a large-scale commercial operation, which used early mass marketing techniques such as posters, and attracted international audiences. The digital experience of music as a

transnational online network, often publicised using dancing female bodies, connects across time with the early publicity machine of the Moulin Rouge, in which dancing female bodies lured spectators into financial transactions.

As well as these subcultural and transnational resonances, Brabazon identifies another layer of cultural references in the film: references to national identity.

The film's national allegiances are rather complex. It is set in Paris, financed by the American company Twentieth-Century Fox, and positions itself in relation to the Hollywood musical tradition. However, Luhrmann, and many other members of the cast and crew, including the choreographer John O'Connell, are Australian, and the film was largely shot in the Fox studios in Sydney. Two Australian theorists, Brabazon and Diane Sandars (2003), have argued for the Australianness of *Moulin Rouge!* Sandars contends that its Australianness dervies from its status as a palimpsestic text in which the Hollywood tradition is overwritten by Australian parody and popular culture. The casting of Kylie Minogue as the green fairy points towards Australia's globalised popular music industry, while the casting of Christine Anu, an Australian performer from the Torres Straits Islands, as one of the cancan dancers, constitutes an Australian point of reference that may only be recognised by those familiar with Australian popular culture. Brabazon argues that these specifically Australian elements allow the film and its viewers to resist what she calls "globalising Americanizing visuality" (2005, p.169).

In the same vein, I argue that *Moulin Rouge!*'s combination of an Australian perspective, and American money allows it to rework the genre of the film musical from a position on the margins of the Euro-American self. This marginal position allows both a celebration and parody of the genre, an inside/outside point of view that, according to Linda Hutcheon (1988), defines postmodern artwork. In particular, it allows Luhrmann to rehabilitate aspects of Euro-American identity that had often been repressed in European and American modernist artwork and filmmaking, as will be explained in the final section of this article.

Ⅲ. Reinventing the Cinema of Attractions

The primary historical and cultural reference point in the film is the cancan at the Moulin Rouge in the 1890s, and the earliest filmic reference points are early films of cancan dancers at the Moulin Rouge, as well as other cabaret performers, filmed at the end of the nineteenth century. Luhrmann makes this connection clear at the beginning of the documentary 'The Making of Moulin Rouge', included in the bonus features of the *Moulin Rouge!* DVD, in which a montage of early dance films segues into the *Moulin Rouge!* cancan scene.

The film theorist Tom Gunning (1990) has categorised these early dance films, as well as many other early films, as part of the first genre of filmmaking, which he calls the 'cinema of attractions'. He argues that from the birth of cinema in 1895 to 1907, the predominant mode of filmmaking was one in which the film "directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle" (1990, p.58). These films attempted to forge an immediate, physical connection between the image and the spectator. Gunning argues that around 1907 this mode of filmmaking was overtaken by narrative film, which aims at the passive absorption of the spectator into a narrative world, rather than the active physical stimulation of the spectator. According to Gunning, the cinema of attractions did not disappear in 1907, but rather went underground, re-emerging in avant-garde film, such as Eisenstein's work, and in the song-and-dance numbers in film musicals. Several film theorists, such as Linda Williams (1998), Miriam Hansen (1995) and Martin Jay (2000), have argued that the cinema of attractions has returned in mainstream film since the 1960s. They argue that films such as *Psycho* (1960), and Titantic (1997) seek to produce a physical reaction in the viewer, such as jumping with shock, squirming with discomfort, or crying with empathy. My research suggests that *Moulin Rouge!* reinvents the cinema of attractions in the film musical form for the digital age.

The original cinema of attractions attracted the spectator through devices such as the display of the female body, performances of exotic otherness, and spectacular trick photography. These devices broke down the spectator's rational boundaries and expectations, either by physical seduction, or by confounding rational expectations of

causality and reality. In Hollywood film musicals of the 1930s to the 1950s, these techniques resurfaced, but were confined to the musical numbers. *Moulin Rouge!* revives this aesthetic, and makes it central to the film's cinematic language. Images of female and exotic bodies are edited using the MTV aesthetic, grabbing the viewer's attention, and generating a sense of being immersed in the action. These strategies are not confined to the musical numbers, but are used throughout the film. For example, Luhrmann says, "We pushed that editing of the first fifteen minutes so that it was like – the naturalistic version of Moulin Rouge [1952] is wide shot, music, Moulin Rouge. In this film it's like, 'POW, wake up, participate!' It's like you're confronted. It's like you're being asked will you give in, or will you go?" (Luhrmann cited in Murray, no date [online]). Furthermore, mechanical trickery is replaced with digital trickery, as CGI technology allows characters to dance in the sky.

But *Moulin Rouge!* adds another weapon to the cinema of attractions's arsenal of devices designed to seduce the viewer. This is the use of cultural memory to bring the spectator physically into the cultural and historical world of the film. Their own past experiences and memories form a conduit into the sensory universe constructed on screen, erasing historical and cultural boundaries. The spectator is invited to physically and emotionally connect with the historically and culturally disparate images on the screen, via the interface of the screen. Furthermore, the DVD version of the film, which includes a number of interactive bonus features, allows the spectator to enter into a two-way relationship with the images via the prosthetic device of the remote control or computer mouse. It is in this sense that I argue that *Moulin Rouge!* invites the spectator to engage in a posthuman or cyborgian mode of spectatorship, one in which the boundary between body and technology is broken down, and human experiences and emotions are allowed to flow along digital channels.

However, this reinvention of the cinema of attractions also has a number of complicating factors. Although Donna Haraway claimed that she "would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (1991, 181), not everyone in postmodernity chooses to be posthuman. A number of critics claimed that *Moulin Rouge!*'s offer of virtual embodiment was an attack on their rational individuated selves. Jose Arroyo described being "walloped by talent and frazzled

by cleverness" (Arroyo, 2001, 50); Peter Travers, writing for *Rolling Stone*, "felt mauled" (Travers, no date [online]); and *The Observer*'s Philip French was "targeted by a squadron of kamikaze bombers loaded with sugary marshmallow" (French, 2001 [online]). These accounts of assault suggest these critics' rejection of the film's attempt to infiltrate their bounded spectatorial bodies with technologically mediated seductions.

Furthermore, *Moulin Rouge!*'s memory of the cinema of attractions is highly selective. Although the film excavates cultural memories of transgressive politics and unbounded physicalities, it also buries other memories. By referring primarily to the liberal aesthetic of the Moulin Rouge and early cancan films of the 1890s, it deliberately ignores the radical transformation of the cancan in the early twentieth century in which it became regimented in a line, and the identities of its dancers engulfed by set choreography and machine-like precision. The cancan of the chorus line, or the precision kick-line, embodied the mass culture and mass politics that would, under extreme circumstances, produce fascist body politics in Europe in the 1930s. It appeared in two cinematic precursors of *Moulin Rouge!*, Rene Clair's *The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge* (1925) and E.A. Dupont's *Moulin Rouge* (1928). Luhrmann's cancan, choreographed by O'Connell, refers to the 1890s cancan, and to some extent to the choreographed cancans produced by American and French film directors in the 1950s, such as John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (1952), Jean Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955) and Walter Lang's *Can-Can* (1960). Luhrmann and O'Connell's cancan is choreographed, but with a far greater sense of the dancers' individuality and audience interaction than these post-war cancans. But it erases the memory of the cancan of the 1920s and 1930s. Luhrmann and O'Connell's cancan is one of liberal politics, not the mass production of bodies. The only trace of these politics in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* is in the evil character of the aristocratic Duke, who rivals Christian for Satine's affection.

VI. Conclusion

To conclude, *Moulin Rouge!* promotes through its digital imagery a liberal body politics in which the historical, cultural and physical boundaries of the individual are negated. The

spectator can physically enter into a network of historically, culturally and politically diverse bodies and viewing positions, and situate themselves in relation to various subcultural, national and transnational cultural identities. Not all spectators accept this offer, and the politics of the film prescribe the limits of memories and identities available for embodiment. But *Moulin Rouge!*, nevertheless, provides a potent example of the ways in which the digitisation of cultural memory has begun to generate new modes of spectatorship in the early twenty-first century.

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Abstract

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(Dis)Embodying Cultural Memory in the Digital Age

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In postmodernity, a range of digital technologies are used to store memories. These include digital cameras, ipods, memory sticks, and online repositories such as YouTube and Flickr. This process is not just personal. Mediated memories, such as songs stored on ipods and films stored on YouTube, often refer to collective experiences, whether those of a group of friends, or a global audience. Once stored, these memory files have the capacity to reinforce existing group identities, as well as creating new imagined communities, bound, for example, by the common experience of watching a YouTube film transmitted around the globe by email. These technologies can therefore be considered as vehicles not just of personal memory, but of cultural memory.

These technological mnemonic devices might appear as a substitute for the physical, bodily process of remembering. However, they do not function entirely separately from the body. Access to these digital archives can only be gained through human/digital interfaces, such as the computer screen and the ipod control pad. Each of these interfaces demands a certain mode of spectatorship on the part of the human user, and by engaging with the digital interface, the user's body and identity are to a certain extent transformed. For example, the ipod's white wires may confer on the user a status and identity as a techno-savvy participant in the global exchange of digital music.

Although many memory storage technologies do not use moving images, those that do, such as YouTube and digital film, operate in relation to discourses about the relationship between the moving image and the spectator that pre-date the digital era. The image of the dancing body has been integral to this discourse since the earliest films captured the routines of popular cabaret performers at the turn of the twentieth century. Baz Luhrmann's film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), set in 1899 and produced using a combination of digital and analogue techniques, offers a contemporary reworking of this

discourse. The film uses dance and music to invite viewers to enter convoluted circuits of popular cultural memory. Musical references to Nirvana and Fatboy Slim mingle with choreographies influenced by Hollywood musicals. The film has justly been called "a kind of movie museum" (McFarlane, 2001, p. 212).

Like many contemporary museums, this film seeks to physically involve its viewers in the experience of cultural remembering (and forgetting). The film's frenetic camerawork, rapid editing, and rich colours and textures seek to provoke a bodily reaction in the viewer, while the extensive DVD bonus features facilitate an interactive dissection and extension of the film text via the prosthetic device of the remote control. The spectator is invited to become a cyborg, affectively connecting with mediated images and sounds from the popular cultural past. As a cyborg, the spectator can physically enter into a network of historically, culturally and politically diverse bodies and viewing positions, and situate themselves in relation to various subcultural, national and transnational cultural identities. *Moulin Rouge!* therefore offers a posthuman experience of cultural memory for the digital age.