“We are creatures of the Underworld. We can’t afford to love.”
Moulin Rouge! and the Cinematic Representation of the Orphean Myth

In 2001 Baz Luhrmann brought to cinemas his third film Moulin Rouge!, the final film in his “Red Curtain” trilogy. With the film Luhrmann was able to craft a world of 19th century Paris, France in a way that would appeal to modern audiences but tell a fundamentally timeless story. The story that Luhrmann brought to the screen was a collage of various influences, but none more influential than the myth of Orpheus’ descent into the Underworld. Through Luhrmann’s creation of the young poet Christian, Luhrmann was able to bring forth elements of the classic myth and place them into the updated setting of the Moulin Rouge. The cinematic musical, with Christian as the central character, is the vehicle that Luhrmann uses to redefine for the Orphean myth for modern audiences.

First, it is important to define the myth of Orpheus and his descent into the Underworld. The myth tells the story of Orpheus and his love for Eurydice. Orpheus is described as the greatest mortal musician. He “moved the rocks on the hillside and turned the courses of the rivers” (Hamilton 139) all through the sheer power of his music. He is able to capture the heart of Eurydice, though their love does not know happiness for long. She dies shortly after the two are married and thus Orpheus, stricken with grief, ventures on a journey to the Underworld. He is able to persuade Hades, the keeper of the Underworld, to allow him to bring Eurydice back to the land of living on one condition. That he not turn to look at her until they have escaped from the Underworld. At the last
moment, Orpheus falters and glances back at his love, which causes him to lose her forever.

For those who have never seen the film Moulin Rouge!, it may be hard to understand just how the film ties into this myth. If simply judging from the film’s trailer the film may seem nothing more then a stylish musical about a famous brothel. While this statement is in a way true, for it is a stylish musical about the famous Moulin Rouge, it is a scenario that represents so much more. The theatrical trailer for the film, like so many theatrical trailers, is misleading in its marketing campaign, relying upon sex appeal to bring in an audience. However, once the audience has been reeled in, the true story of Moulin Rouge reveals itself. Christian, the primary character, summarizes the film in a line of dialogue near the beginning. “It’s about love!” When you break down the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to its core love is exactly what the myth is about. Christian states “It’s about love!” while presenting the play he is writing to the Duke, but his statement can be applied to the film and myth of which it draws its inspiration from as a whole.

Moulin Rouge opens with a title card stating the time and location of the story, with a grainy overlay to evoke a vintage feel to the picture. The audience sees a collage of the places that will occupy the space of the story. The shot is composed of the background view of Paris, the view of Christian’s apartment and then that of the Moulin Rouge itself, represented by the windmill from which it was famous for. These three images are all laid out on top of one another. The audience is then introduced to the fictional representation of Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa, who appears from the top of the windmill, and it is he who introduces the film’s protagonist, Christian. The film begins its story telling device of using well-known songs from the
20th century. Toulouse begins to sing the lyrics of the song “Nature Boy” and through these lyrics, he introduces the audience to Christian.

“There was a boy, a very strange enchanted boy,” as he sings these lyrics the shot is given another piece of the collage, seeing Christian fade into the shot, looking happy. The look of joy upon Christian’s face is a stark contrast to the next image we see of Christian, only moments later, as the lyrics continue through an omniscient singer. “They say he wandered very far…very far…over land and sea.” By choosing the song “Nature Boy,” Luhrmann was able to get across a good portion of Christian’s character with no literal dialogue. This song, used to describe that of Christian, fits into the character of Orpheus as well. It’s most famous line becomes the main theme of the film itself, is “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love, and be loved in return.” It is not hard to imagine Orpheus saying that lyric word for word.

Like Orpheus, Christian has a seemingly rare gift, though the film specifies him as a poet instead of a musician. The first use of song hints at this gift by the lyric of “strange, enchanted boy.” As the film continues to unfold, the audience becomes aware of Christian’s background through his own words. This is the moment where we can begin to really pinpoint the distinctions of Christian’s literary lineage to Orpheus. While the Orpheus myth traditionally begins with the two lovers already in love and Eurydice’s death occurring nearly immediately, Moulin Rouge! chooses to begin at the end, with Christian stating that Satine, the symbolic Eurydice, is dead. By announcing Satine’s death from the beginning, Luhrmann leaves no room for surprises with the audience, making it evident that Christian will return from the Underworld before the end. But it draws in their attention, making it so they are curious to discover what happened to the
heroine; as well as how the hero came to this state of discontent. Luhrmann and his creative team choose to have the plot’s ending revealed in order to have the audience emotionally invested in the story as quick as possible. By immediately diverting from the typical portrayal of the Orpheus myth, Luhrmann is able to demonstrate how they are simply drawing from the mythology, but will not have a complete representation of the tale.

Edith Hamilton notes that Orpheus “was the son of one of the Muses and as Thracian prince” (Hamilton 138). She tells of Orpheus traveling with Jason and the Argonauts. Orpheus’s background prior to meeting Eurydice is important to bear in mind once Christian begins to tell of his own background. While Christian was certainly no sailor, he was a traveled man; having come to Paris a year prior to the film’s starting point. Christian is quickly shown departing from a train and stating that he had “come to live a penniless existence.” During his quick speech of his own background, the viewer is shown brief images of Christian’s father, and given the impression that Christian was born into an at least moderately wealthy family. This assumption then helps to give his statement of a penniless existence more weight, since he’d be abandoning the world that he knew. By going with the impression that Christian did come from a wealthy family, one could link back to the Hamilton version of the myth that recalls Orpheus as the son of a Prince. While being the son of a wealthy family does not translate directly to royalty, it does help to establish the same importance of heritage. Christian, like Orpheus, at least at the start of the film, is more socially dignified then the majority of the cast of characters. The exception in this case would be the Duke.
However, Christian abandons his life of luxury to pursue a life of bohemian ideals. “Yes, I had come to live a penniless existence. I had come to write about truth, beauty, freedom and that which I believed in above all things, love.” Due to the time frame of the film, Christian would have been more than likely unable to pursue these ideals had he of remained under the watch of his family, so he has to toss away his wealth. Orpheus did not have to toss away any sense of royalty he may have had, but Hamilton does not make reference to his lineage any other time than in the beginning of her selection about Orpheus and Eurydice. It is interesting that in the selection on Orpheus and Eurydice from Bulfinch’s Mythology, Orpheus is the son of a God instead of a Thracian Prince. He is in that selection the son of Apollo and his father encourages Orpheus’ pursuit of music. While the difference between Bulfinch and Hamilton’s lineage for Orpheus is interesting, it is Hamilton’s Orpheus that fits the representation of Christian, as the viewer is given the very strong impression that Christian is not encouraged by his father to pursue his writing. Christian’s father appears to be a very stereotypical Victorian patriarch and in order for Christian to flourish creatively, he needs to escape from the bourgeois mindset.

Quickly, the story is pushed forward by the introduction of the Bohemian’s, including the proper introduction of Toulouse Lautrec. Christian is, by a series of events, persuaded to go upstairs into Toulouse’s apartment to stand in for a part in a play they are putting on. It is during this section that Luhrmann’s crew reveals the first glimpse of Christian’s genius. The Bohemians are writing a play, which when described to Christian, the viewer will immediately recognize as almost identical to the plot synopsis for the film *The Sound of Music*. The cast of Bohemians argue amongst themselves about how a lyric
should be constructed and the argument gets so chaotic that it is hard to follow anything that the characters are saying. As Christian listens to the banter, he keeps trying to cut in and suggest something, but he is overpowered by the other voices. Then as if by the grace of the Gods themselves, Christian lifts his head to the sky and bursts out the lyric, “The Hills are alive with the sound of music.” The room goes silent.

This essential moment to the development of Christian demonstrates his Orphean talent. Toulouse had given hints to Christian’s abilities earlier when the film began, but it is the first moment the characters within the film and the viewers are able to experience the true range of his gift. The argument harks back to the Hamilton selection on Orpheus and his time on the Argo. Hamilton writes of Orpheus, “if a quarrel threatened he would play so tenderly and soothingly that the fiercest spirits would grow calm and forget their anger” (Hamilton 139). The Bohemians argument is stopped when Christian breaks into song, demonstrating his gift of poetry. The Bohemians are completely awed by his use of lyrics and suggest that he help write the show with the current writer. The writer becomes offended and quits the production, leaving the position open for Christian to take hold of.

Another element in this scene that shows how talented Christian is, and why he deserves the title of the Orpheus character, is that the Bohemians are all artists themselves. Two of the Bohemians are loosely based upon real historical figures, that of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Erik Satie. Toulouse was the famous painter and Satie was a famous composer. They represented two forms of creative expression, while the other forms of creative expression were represented through the Narcoleptic Argentinean, an actor, and the Doctor, an electrician. Electricity may not be viewed so much as an art form in modern day society, but it was still in an infantile state during the time period of
the film and thus could be considered an art. These four artists were amazed by the artistic ability of Christian, the young writer. It helped to exemplify Christian’s artistic ability.

There are other moments in the film that present Christian’s Orphean talent. The most important one, from a narrative stand point, occurs after he has met Satine. Both Hamilton and Bulfinch are vague about the life of Orpheus and Eurydice prior to their marriage, so Luhrmann’s creative team had no tradition to go on with developing their love story. However, they do assume that Satine, the stand in for Eurydice within the narrative, was drawn to Christian because of his gift with words. She looks upon Christian at first simply as a financial endeavor (she is trying to seduce him to gain financing for the play the Moulin Rouge is putting on, as she believes he is a wealthy Duke), but the moment he bursts into song, she stops everything and gives him her complete attention. As they had earlier, the Bohemians also stop everything when Christian breaks into song. In the DVD writer’s commentary, Baz Luhrmann sums up the situation wonderfully, “Orpheus sings and the world stops” (Luhrmann). The viewer can tell that as Christian sings a popular Elton John song Satine falls in love with him. However, since this is not a Greek myth, Christian has to spend more time convincing her to give herself over to love, since Satine is unwilling to give herself over to love initially. Through more examples of his poetic genius, he is able to woe her over and they begin a secret love affair.

The film is sprinkled with many more examples of Christian’s Orphean genius. However, it is now important to point out the other aspect of the Orphean myth that appears in the film. That of course would be the descent into the Underworld, which
could quite possibly be defined as the most memorable portion of the myth. From the beginning of the film, Luhrmann has his characters constantly identifying the Moulin Rouge as the ‘Underworld.’ This is done for two reasons. The first reason, and the most obvious upon the initial viewing, is that the Moulin Rouge represents the lower levels of society. There is no hiding the fact that the actual place of the Moulin Rouge is a dance hall that is commonly thought of in a negative sexual light. It is the Underworld of the more dignified, stereotypical view of Paris.

However, it also signifies a symbolic Underworld, alluding literally to the concept of death or hell. Though the Greek Underworld did not mean hell, it was where all souls went after death; often the term evokes a feeling of hell. It also suggests death, which was what the Underworld’s purpose was, because of the conditions of the backstage. The scenes that take places behind the scenes of the establishment demonstrate the poverty the members of the Moulin Rouge live in and due to their occupation; it is not unlikely that they have contracted diseases through their cliental. Harold Zidler, who is based upon the real life figure of Charles Zidler, is the literal keeper of the Underworld. It is virtually impossible for someone who is in the Moulin Rouge to escape the lifestyle of a prostitute. In the case of Satine, she is the star of the Moulin Rouge. Zidler, as the owner of the Moulin Rouge, would not wish to let her go because she helps to bring in profits. Satine is referred to constantly as “The Sparkling Diamond,” a name which refers to her beauty, but also her value to the Moulin Rouge establishment as a whole. She is the most important courtesan in the eyes of the public and Zidler. Thus, Christian is charged with the eventual task of leading Satine out of the Underworld. The viewer knows he will not be able to rescue Satine from the Underworld since he stated in the opening monologue,
but once the influence of the Orphean myth becomes apparent, the viewer becomes aware that it is impossible for more than just that reason. It is impossible for Christian to lead Satine from the Underworld, because the narrative is based upon the myth, and it would debase the entire structure and point if the Orpheus figure was indeed able to save the Eurydice figure.

Christian does try to lead Satine from the Underworld. Satine was promised by Zidler to the Duke, who finances the play, and once she is nearly raped by the Duke, Christian suggests that they leave the Moulin Rouge. Satine however is stopped by Zidler, when he announces the Duke’s plans to have Christian murdered if he returns to the Moulin Rouge and also announces that Satine is dying from consumption. Satine decides to sacrifice her happiness for Christian’s life, but knows in order to do so; she’ll have to break his heart. She fabricates a lie, informing Christian that she has decided to remain with the Duke, and this betrayal sends Christian into a downwards spiral.

At this moment, our protagonist ceases to be the Orphean figure. In his book *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, Raymond Knapp explores the concept of Satine as the Orphean figure. Knapp’s book states that Satine begins a descent into the role of Orpheus later in the film, but she actually settles into the metaphorical role the moment she discovers her imminent death. In this moment, Satine becomes the Orphean figure and it is Christian who becomes the stand in for Eurydice. Satine is attempting to prevent Christian from returning to the Underworld, knowing if he does return, he will be killed and in the world of the film narrative, there is no possible way to descend into the after life to bring a lover back to the land of the living. Satine and
Christian have to protect one another from the possibility of death, unlike Orpheus who has the opportunity to fetch his lover back from the land of the dead after she passes on. Christian, of course, does return to the Moulin Rouge in order to get closure, driven completely by his grief and sense of betrayal. After returning to the Moulin Rouge, Christian confronts Satine on stage during the opening night performance of the play they crafted together; treating her the way society sees her, as a whore. After throwing money at his lover’s feet, he goes to depart from the Moulin Rouge forever, a broken man. Our original Orphean figure has given up completely on his ideals of love and now, the original Eurydice figure takes his place as the Orphean figure. Knapp writes, “Eurydice has at this point become Orpheus, empowered by song and empowering those who hear her” and continues, “Satine halts his departure from the theater with the first words of “Come What May”” (Knapp 109).

Knapp brings about the importance of the song “Come What May,” one of the only original songs written specifically for the film. The sequence when Christian and Satine are writing “Come What May” is where the audience gets the first glimpse of Satine’s fate to eventually take place as the Orphean figure. She is an artist, just as Christian, though she is primarily a singer and an aspiring actress. But during this scene, which takes place right around the middle of the narrative, Luhrmann is able to show the wedding of sorts between Christian and Satine. Due to the time constraints of the narrative, which takes place over just a few weeks, the characters do not have time to engage in a lengthy romance. But during the scene of “Come What May,” which occurs literally right before the Duke becomes aware of their romance and brings about the attempts to escape the Underworld, the audience is able to see Christian and Satine taking
vows to one another. They are not nuptial vows, but it is the closest thing to a wedding these two characters can experience with one another. “Come what may, I will love you till my dying day,” they sing, a promise to one another. This song, this promise to one another, is written not just by Christian but by Satine as well. They create a creative partnership with this song and it alludes to Satine’s eventual shift in importance, when she is required to stand in as Orpheus and the broken-hearted Christian must be the figure of Eurydice.

Knapp also mentions the inevitable by writing, “in turning back to her, he proves his love, but at the price of losing her” (Knapp 109). Christian is unaware of Satine’s sickness, for she had been shielding the information from him. Christian then participates, with Satine, in the ending of the show, overjoyed at the prospect of being able to remain with the woman he loves. After the curtain drops on the stage, Christian is exuberant. Zidler, the stand in figure for Hades, essentially gave his blessing for Christian to take Satine away from the Moulin Rouge, by punching the Duke and sending him away. The primary threat of Christian’s death is averted, since the Duke leaves, and this act symbolizes Zidler’s blessing of Satine and Christian’s relationship.

In a pivotal shot, Luhrmann has the scene set up so that the audience sees Christian leading Satine behind the stage, holding her hand. The scene is dimly lit and Christian’s attention is ahead of him. Christian, presumably, is expecting that life will be wonderful from this moment on. Christian feels he is about to have his happy ending, because after all, he has the woman he loves and has just put on his very own play, which has received a standing ovation from the audience on the other side of the curtain. Christian does not see what the viewer sees, Satine struggling to breathe, obviously in
pain. The camera slows and focuses on Christian’s head turning back to look at his lover. Satine lets out an audible gasp, nearly collapsing, and the shot shows the look of terror on Christian’s face.

If the viewer is viewing the film specifically for the aspects of the Orphean myth, this is the most important shot within the entire film. In the Orphean myth, the deal with Hades was that Orpheus could bring Eurydice to the land of the living once again, because he was so moved by Orpheus’ song. The only condition was that Orpheus not look at Eurydice until they were out from the Underworld. At the very last second, Orpheus turns and looks to Eurydice, and she is pulled from him for good. The way that Luhrmann sets up the shot, Christian has no idea Satine is even sick, so he presumably feels like he is about to leave the Underworld for good with Satine. It is as soon as he turns that he becomes aware of the painful truth. In that moment he loses Satine forever as Satine dies moments later, cradled in his arms, while the poet holds her in disbelief.

Unlike the Orpheus myth, Christian does not suffer the fate of Orpheus. Orpheus eventually is torn to pieces by worshippers of Dionysus, the Bacchanals. Christian remains in his flat by the Moulin Rouge, sinking heavily into the depression that we see him in at the beginning of the film. Orpheus suffered the same depression that Christian suffered, eventually being murdered, but Christian is able to emerge from his depression as he remembers the promise he made to Satine right before her death. Satine asked him to go on living and to tell their story. Her reasoning for this request was so that she’d always be with him. In a narrative world where it is impossible to go to the Greek representation of the Underworld, the writing of their story is a way for Christian to relive their love. It may not be the same as being reunited in the Underworld, like Eurydice and
Orpheus do, but it is a way for Christian to go on loving Satine until his own dying day, where he may or may not be reunited with Satine. It also enables Christian to strive to continue sharing his Orphean gift with the world instead of it being wasted.

While *Moulin Rouge!* may not have completely remained true to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it drew heavily upon aspects of the myth. Its central character was blessed with a gift for song that was similar to that of Orpheus. However, when the stand in for Eurydice needed to switch places with the stand in for Christian, Luhrmann was not afraid to do this, for it forced the narrative to move on towards the climax. Satine was able to redeem Christian by giving him a purpose so that he would not suffer the same fate as Orpheus, the purpose of writing down their story. *Moulin Rouge!* certainly wasn’t the first form of entertainment to draw upon the Orpheus myth, but it was able to take aspects and make the narrative that it told feel as timeless as the Orpheus myth does.
Works Cited


