

Student's Name

Dr. Paul Marchbanks

English 380

2 November 2009

### The Depiction of Disability in the Film *Moulin Rouge!*

What is “a force darker than jealousy, and stronger than love?” (*Moulin Rouge! 2001*)

Baz Luhrmann's comedic- musical *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) tells the story of a beautiful courtesan, Satine, who is pursued by several men. The story is set in 1900, and Satine is the star of the cabaret dances at the Moulin Rouge club in the Montmartre District of Paris. Unbeknown to her suitors, Satine suffers from Tuberculosis (Consumption) and eventually succumbs to her illness. Her tuberculosis can be considered a disability in that it is a fatally serious ailment that was very common in the early twentieth- century. A critic of the role of disability in art said that “Disability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the norm.” (Mitchell and Snyder 205) This is not true of *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) The film does not show Satine's illness as a defining feature of her character, an obstacle to overcome, a source of ‘the stare’, or a source of stigma. Rather the Tuberculosis serves only as a tool to increase the drama of this story of love.

**Comment:** Unnecessary info. given your audience (experts familiar with the film)

**Comment:** No hyphen unless the two words are being used jointly to modify a noun

**Comment:** “One”

**Comment:** a clearly stated and combative thesis. Nicely put.

**Comment:** “essay, the critics illustrate”

In Mitchell and Snyder's essay they illustrate how a disabled character is defined by their disability by recounting the story of the Brave Tin Soldier. “Narrative interest solidifies only in the identification and pursuit of an anomaly that inaugurates that exceptional tale of the tale of exception.” (Mitchell 209) In a story like the Brave Tin Solider, the disability is a defining feature of the character which makes his actions and adventures all the more impressive since he is “disabled.” The soldier is considered special since he is unlike his twenty-four perfect

comrades. *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) does not fit into this argument. Satine is defined first and foremost as a cabaret dancer and the interest of all the men within the club. Viewers do not look at her as a character who is exceptional because **if** she is overcoming a disability. In Linton's essay *Reassigning Meaning*, she says that "disability is understood as marker of identity." (Linton 162) This is not true of Satine. Her beauty, voice and performances are the characteristics that the movie emphasizes. She is introduced during a dance number, where the men are in awe of her beauty, and all hope for the chance to dance with her. It is not until the end of the number that the audience is shown that she may have an illness. She starts coughing and has a fainting spell, but nothing more is said. The film does not return to her illness for several more scenes.

**Comment:** a convincing beginning

The audience almost forgets that Satine might be sick **at all**. Once revived from her first fainting spell, she gets ready to seduce the Duke. She remains healthy for a large part of the film, and as an audience member one forgets that she might be ill **at all**. It's not until midway through the film where she becomes so weak that she requires medical attention, **and at this point** the viewer remembers that she fainted at the beginning. After this second bout of illness she is healthy and rehearsing as if there is nothing wrong. No fatigue, just the occasional cough. The film so lightly depicts her illness that the viewer does not define Satine's character as that of a disabled person.

**Comment:** too colloquial (and you use it again two sentences later)

**Comment:** avoid contractions—here and elsewhere—since this is a formal writing assignment

**Comment:** "attention that the viewer remembers"

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001) also touches on and emphasizes the disabilities and ailments that are suffered by other characters. When Christian first comes to Paris he encounters his neighbors, a narcoleptic Argentinean and "a dwarf dressed as a nun" (*Moulin Rouge! 2001*) who is none other than **the painter** Toulouse-Lautrec. Since they are introduced by these characteristics, this is the first impression that the viewer has of these individuals. This one scene establishes "the

**Comment:** to highlight your foil here, use something like "does however touch on and emphasize the . . ."

**Comment:** I wonder if this paragraph might be more effectively introduced *before* you leap into the discussion of Satine. It almost seems dropped in randomly here.

stare” in the film that leaves the viewer remembering what is ‘different’ about them. Later on in the film, Toulouse describes himself as “a drunken, vice-ridden gnome.” (*Moulin Rouge! 2001*)

The treatment of these characters is much harsher than that of Satine. The treatment of Satine is much more delicate. The audience is never explicitly told what Satine has, whereas other characters are first introduced by their diseases. Viewers are left to guess what the illness is based on historical knowledge. Even though Satine’s illness is considered a disability, she does not fall victim to the stare as Toulouse and the Argentinean do. Satine is more subject to ‘the gaze.’ She is considered very beautiful, and being a courtesan, she is more than just aesthetically pleasing—she is the subject of many men’s sexual desires.

**Comment:** redundant—you repeat yourself here.

Within the world of the film, Satine is not an object of stigma. The only characters who know the severity of her ailment are her boss Zidler, a female attendant, and the doctor. Both the Duke and Christian, her lover, are kept in the dark about the Tuberculosis. Her bouts of illness are so few that neither suitor notices any developing symptoms or her worsening condition. She says a few times that she stayed in sick, but this admission is not used to judge her. Satine herself is never told of the severity of her illness until the end when Zidler reveals the doctor’s prognosis—she’s dying. Within the film she cannot be a subject of stigma because her ‘disability’ is not noticed by the other characters.

**Comment:** an interesting point given Goffman’s claim that disabled people often internalize the marginal status placed on them by others. Satine never has the chance to consider herself disabled because even *she* remains ignorant of her real condition.

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001) does not accurately depict Tuberculosis though the film. There are scenes where Satine will cough or faint, but generally she seems to be healthy. According to the Mayo Clinic, Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection of the lungs that causes sudden weight loss, chest pains and difficulty breathing. Satine was still healthy weight with her body being admired by the men. She did not have the appearance of being ill. Satine was also still dancing and singing for ‘Spectacular Spectacular!’ which would indicate that she could still breathe normally.

**Comment:** What is the best place for this paragraph?

**Comment:** good point

Since Tuberculosis is an infection of the lungs she should have had extreme difficulty when performing since she would struggle to breathe. The only indication of her illness is when she coughs or faints. Causes of Tuberculosis are malnutrition, poor health care and close contact with others. A courtesan would likely live in such conditions, so the choice of Tuberculosis is historically accurate, especially in 1900s Paris where the illness spread so easily.

**Comment:** "include"

**Comment:** should you open the paragraph with this claim (following a topic sentence that identifies the imperfect portrayal of tb)?

In Simi Linton's essay *Reassigning Meaning*, she talks about how certain terminology we use can make judgments on the lives of the disabled. *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) seems to follow Linton's argument that the phrase "suffering from an illness" is not accurate since it denies that a person can feel "pleasurable moment and satisfactions." (Linton 169) Instead of emphasizing the pains of illness, the film emphasizes "that people are often actively engaged in living even in the face of a serious illness." (Linton 169) Satine can still sing, perform and fall in love despite her illness. This film uses Tuberculosis not to shed light on an illness or enlighten viewers, but rather to introduce a dramatic element [that is a tragic end to a love story](#).

**Comment:** "assume," "force," or "perpetuate" ??

**Comment:** yes

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is not the story of a disabled character. Satine remains healthy throughout most of the film, and is still an object of desire for the men in the club. This film is in conflict with Mitchell and Snyder's comment that disability is a defining feature that sets a character apart from the 'norm.' Linton defines disability in a legal sense as a "medicolegal term signifying loss of function and earning power." (Linton 162) Her tuberculosis in no way 'disables' her from singing, rehearsing, seducing, and living her life. Satine is also not subject to stigma, since her illness affects her so little, that no other characters seem to notice her declining health. The 'disability' is little more than a tool employed by the writers to create drama. *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is not the story of a woman suffering with a chronic disease, but rather a love that is tragically cut short by a fatal illness. *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is "a story about a time, a story

**Comment:** "claim"

**Comment:** delete comma

**Comment:** your language here detracts from your earlier, implied claim that the filmmakers' portrayal of tuberculosis (no need to capitalize) actually empowers Satine by *not* limiting her to the spectacle of suffering victim.

about a place, a story about the people. But above all things, a story about love.” (*Moulin Rouge!*  
2001)

Works Cited

Goffman, Irving, *Selections from Stigma*. Disabilities Studies Reader. New York: Routledge

Taylor and Francis Group, 1963. 131-140

Linton, Simi, *Reassigning Meaning*. Disabilities Studies Reader. New York: Routledge Taylor

and Francis Group, 1998. 161-172

*Moulin Rouge!* Dir. Baz Luhrmann. Perf. Nicole Kidman, Ewan McGregor, John Leguizamo,

Jim Broadbent, Richard Roxburgh. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2001. Film.

*Moulin Rouge! (2001)*, imdb.com. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0203009/>> , Web. Accessed 25

October 2009.

Mitchell, David and Snyder, Sharon, *Narrative Prosthesis and the Mentality of Metaphor*.

Disabilities Studies Reader. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2001. 205-

216. Print.

*Tuberculosis*. The Mayo Clinic. <<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/tuberculosis/DS00372>>

Web. Accessed 26 October 2009.

Content

- thank you for the confrontational thesis. You convinced this reader that *Moulin Rouge!* is indeed an exception to the rule laid out by Mitchell and Snyder.

Organization

- Though you support your claims with close, appropriate evidence, at times the structure of your argument feels odd, as if you dropped in related ideas as you thought of them, instead of considering the best possible order in which to introduce all your thoughts.

Style & Grammar

- I've noted a few bits of odd or inexact phrasing, but this essay usually sports your expert facility with language

Use of Disability Criticism & Ideas

- very appropriate, organic insertion of disability criticism into your own argument. Instead of feeling added in, the disability criticism helps provide a foundation for your argument (even when you disagree with the critics)

**Score: 9.3 of 10**