

Bachelorarbeit

Sylvia Krenn

**Postmodern and
Oriental Elements in
*Moulin Rouge!***

Film Analysis



**Bachelor + Master
Publishing**

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Postmodern and Oriental Elements in 'Moulin Rouge!': Film Analysis

Originaltitel der Abschlussarbeit: Oriental and Postmodern Elements in Moulin Rouge!

ISBN: 978-3-86341-644-7

Herstellung Bachelor + Master Publishing, ein Imprint der Diplomica® Verlag GmbH,
Hamburg, 2012

Zugl. Universität Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Deutschland, Bachelorarbeit, November 2007

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Hamburg, 2012

<http://www.diplom.de>, Hamburg 2012
Printed in Germany

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	7
2	Orientalism	10
	2.1 From Oriental Studies to Orientalism.....	10
	2.2 Orientalism in English Literature	14
	2.3 Orientalism in Film.....	17
	2.4 Preliminary Conclusion	18
3	Bollywood – the Hollywood of the East?.....	20
	3.1 History of Bollywood Cinema.....	20
	3.2 The Bollywood Aesthetics.....	22
	3.3. Preliminary Conclusion	25
4	Postmodernism	27
	4.1 A Short Note on Postmodernism.....	27
	4.2 Postmodernism in Film.....	28
	4.3 Preliminary Conclusion	29
5	Film Analysis of <i>Moulin Rouge!</i>	30
	5.1 Postmodern Elements in <i>Moulin Rouge!</i>	30
	5.1.1 The Many Faces of <i>Moulin Rouge!</i>	30
	5.1.2 The Theatricalized Cinema Style	32
	5.1.3 Essential Postmodernism: Imitation, Intertextuality and Self-reflexivity	36
	5.2 Orientalism in <i>Moulin Rouge!</i>	42
	5.2.1 Orientalism and the Bohemian Revolution	42
	5.2.2 The Bollywood Style.....	44
6	Conclusion.....	48
	Works Cited.....	51
	Appendix	59

1 Introduction

"The show will be a magnificent, opulent, tremendous, stupendous, gargantuan, bedazzlement! A sensual ravishment. It will be Spectacular, Spectacular."¹ (Moulin Rouge 12) Zidler is right. That is what *Moulin Rouge!* is – spectacular. Zidler (the impresario of the Moulin Rouge) tries to sell the bohemian play 'Spectacular, Spectacular', which Toulouse and Christian present to the Duke. However, *Moulin Rouge!* is 'Spectacular, Spectacular' and vice versa. The Duke is the maharajah, Christian is the penniless sitar player and Satine is the beautiful courtesan. Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001) is loud, colorful, fast, postmodern, a melodrama and a musical, and it is about love. Opinions are much divided over this film and many critics wonder if it is just bad taste and kitsch or an ingenious piece of filmic art. In other words, it is an original Baz Luhrmann.

Until today, the Australian director has made three movies, which are interconnected as he calls them the 'Red Curtain Trilogy'. He started it with *Strictly Ballroom* in 1992, which was followed by *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* in 1996 and which was completed with *Moulin Rouge!* in 2001. Baz Luhrmann calls his way of filmmaking "a theatricalized cinema style" (Luhrmann 9). Luhrmann definitely is a unique and versatile character himself. However, if *Moulin Rouge!* belongs to the category of art or trash remains a matter of opinion. Luhrmann himself disassociates from any categorization in the sense of low culture and high art, taking into account that back in time Shakespeare was also considered as popular culture in the same way as operas were the lowest form of culture at their peak times. He counters his critics and their objections that "*die Story ist dünn und simpel*", with, "*Doch gerade das ist eine Konvention des Musicals, aber auch der Oper, mit Ausnahme von Wagner. Aber eigentlich zieht auch Wagner nur einen dünnen Plot in die Länge.*" (Bühler). The other often expressed criticism that his latest work was "a direct assault on eyes, ears, and expectations" (Abele), and hard to exceed in terms of kitsch, he only retorts with the credo that, "*Persönlicher Geschmack ist der Feind der Kunst.*"² (Bühler).

¹ The citation is based on the MLA Handbook. The reference of film quotations refer to scene numbers according to the film protocol in the appendix.

² Baz Luhrmann explains further: "Die unbequeme Wahrheit über klassische Statuen ist, dass sie zur Zeit der Griechen in Diskofarben bemalt waren, mit rosa Gesichtern und blauen Lidschatten. Sind die nun geschmacklos oder Kitsch? Das ist rein subjektiv."

Moulin Rouge! is a mélange of film, music and dance. Set in 1899 but somewhat 'furnished' with contemporary music, it is a work of extremes. Everything in this film seems to be screaming 'Anything goes!'. Nevertheless, Luhrmann follows a certain concept. Nothing in this film happens accidentally - it is all part of the director's distinctive style. Luhrmann's 'Red Curtain Trilogy' comprises several distinct storytelling choices. He uses a rather simple story, based on a well-known myth, which in *Moulin Rouge!* is the myth of Orpheus. Luhrmann wants the audience to know from the very beginning how the story will end, and by using a simple play-within-the play, Luhrmann manages to capture the audience's attention. He sets the story in a man-made world "that is once familiar yet distant and exotic" (Luhrmann 9). Finally, each of his films has its own device, which raises the audience's awareness of the storyteller's presence and their being conscious of the fact that they are watching a film (cf. Stoppe 19). In *Moulin Rouge!* music and dance are the two devices that create the effect of an unnatural world. Although this movie sometimes seems chaotic, particularly regarding its widely differing influences of opera, Greek myth, latest film techniques, modern pop music and Bollywood, in the end Baz Luhrmann meets the ravages of time.

After all, Bollywood is en vogue. In 2001, Andrew Lloyd Webber stages his West End and Broadway hit *Bombay Dreams*, the Victoria & Albert Museum opens an exhibition about Hindi Cinema's visual culture, and Bollywood music as well as Hangar raps enter the charts all over Europe (cf. Stadtler pp. 518). Luhrmann uses the exotic Orient in the form of the relatively unknown – at least to the Western audiences – Bollywood cinema to reinvent the old musical tradition "in a style as iconically heightened as any of the classic musical spectaculars [...] in a form ironic as never before." (Luhrmann 73).

This paper aims at examining the use of the concepts of Orientalism and Postmodernism in *Moulin Rouge!* and their significance in the larger scale regarding Bollywood as a representative of the East, and Hollywood as the agent of the West. The paper shows that first of all, Luhrmann is in good company when utilizing the Orient for a genre rejuvenation and second, that the use of oriental references inevitably leads to the broader discussion of Orientalism. More precisely, this paper elaborates on the subject of oriental and postmodern elements in *Moulin Rouge!*. But what is considered oriental or stands for the Orient respectively? Moreover, the question comes up as to what Luhrmann's motivation was to give his film an oriental look. The answer to the first

question is part of a diverse and complex discussion circling around Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Thus, chapter two gives an overview of the development of the term 'Orientalism' and critically explores the subject of using oriental styles in literature and film. The latter aspect also partly covers for the second question, but the essential notion here is Bollywood. Therefore, chapter three provides a history of Bollywood cinema and the basics of Bollywood aesthetics.

Secondly, it is the term of Postmodernism that is always mentioned in the same breath with *Moulin Rouge!*, which is why this concept will first be outlined very briefly and generally. Secondly, its use in film will be focused on, which provides the basis for the discussion of postmodern elements in *Moulin Rouge!*. Each of the first three chapters ends with a preliminary conclusion to link those different concepts. The main part is the film analysis with regard to the oriental and postmodern elements in the context of the previous discussions and results. Luhrmann's 'Red Curtain' style serves as a structuring element for the postmodern analysis.

2 Orientalism

2.1 From Oriental Studies to Orientalism

The all-embracing name in the discussion of Orientalism, or rather anything that is related to the Orient, is Edward Said. He is omnipresent in nearly every book or essay that deals with Orientalism or oriental studies after 1978. This is the date when Said's influential and controversial book *Orientalism* was published. This chapter aims at giving an overview of the development of Oriental studies and the term Orientalism before and after Said. This implicitly touches on the period before the term Orientalism became "an academic buzzword" (169), as Heehs calls it in his essay *Shades of Orientalism*. What he alludes to is the negative connotation of Orientalism as "the Other" and the associated imperialistic discussion in postcolonial studies, an aspect which will be addressed in the following text as well.

Oriental studies as a discipline have a long tradition especially in Europe and particularly in Germany (cf. Irwin 153). However, the attempt to commit on a date that marks the beginning of Orientalism turns out to be rather difficult. Some regard Ancient Greece to be the origin of Orientalism. Others in turn have thought of scholars such as Guillaume Postel (1510-81) and Edward Pococke (1604-91) or Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838) as the founding fathers of Orientalism. There are also scholars who do not speak of Orientalism until Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798 (cf. Irwin pp. 6). The institutionalization of Orientalism proceeded with Sir William Jones - also known as 'Oriental Jones' - who founded the *Asiatick Society of Bengal* in 1784 (cf. Irwin 122). In the first half of the nineteenth century, other important scholarly associations as for instance the *Société Asiatique* (1821), the *Royal Asiatic society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1824), the *American Oriental Society* (1842) and the *Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft* (1845) were founded (cf. Gaeffke 67). This was also the time of the establishment of English rule in India and shortly after Napoleon's raid on Egypt, which Said often uses to legitimize his view of Orientalism only in relation to Imperialism. However, many of the scholars among Said's critics continually stress that originally, interest was first and foremost put into Oriental languages mostly with regard to theology or, as Irwin describes it, "Orientalism was founded upon academic drudgery and close attention to philological detail" (Irwin 8).

Moreover, it is important to distinguish between the already described academic Orientalism and Orientalism in arts. Schlegel, for instance, spoke of Indian scholars as "the most cultivated and wisest people of antiquity" (qtd. in Heehs 174). Heehs points out that in arts "the word 'Orientalism' meant the study of literature, language, religion, arts and social life of the East to make the West aware of another culture." (Heehs 174). Novelists and poets saw themselves driven towards the Orient out of curiosity and fascination about the exotic, unknown Eastern wisdom and the aspiration of some sort of a second Renaissance (cf. Gaeffke pp. 67).

In the same way the term 'Orientalism' changed its meaning over time, the notion of the 'Orient' was adapted and expanded with the increasing exploration of the East. Much eighteenth-century literature about the Orient refers to what we today know as the Middle East, whereas in nineteenth-century texts, it also included North Africa, and in the twentieth century Central and Southeast Asia (cf. Lowe 7). However, despite the British rule over India and large parts of the Arabic world, British scholars were not notably engaged in Oriental scholarship for a long time and Germany still held the primacy in this field with names such as the Brothers Grimm, Schlegel, Humboldt and Max Müller (cf. Irwin, *Oriental Discourses*). Only during World War II, Britain started to show more interest in Arabic, Asian and African languages and culture (cf. Irwin 237). From the 1930's onwards, Orientalism also reached American universities, which heavily started to recruit European and Arab Orientalists to set up their departments (cf. Irwin 247). The period of decolonization after the end of World War II was the starting point of the transformation of 'Orientalism' as referring to a scholar versed in oriental languages and literature or to an artist playing with oriental styles, into an ideological and political term. The moving spirits were (American) scholars and intellectuals who came from or had been living in the Orient before, as was the case with Edward Said (cf. Macfie 2).

Since the 1970's, 'Otherness' is starting to become an issue in the discourses about Orientalism. In the course of the growing economic and cultural globalization, ideas of 'self' and 'other', of identity and gender became popular. It seems as if the Orientalism debate awakened a multitude of other related and postcolonial studies. A new concern as to how Western societies have perceived and interpreted oriental societies through imperial expansion was in the air. In the 1980's, the field of 'cultural discourse studies'

emerged from those debates. From that point on, the discussion of 'the Other' entered feminism, black studies and recently also Postmodernism (cf. Turner 3).

After this overview of the historical development of oriental studies, the following paragraph provides a short discussion of Said's argumentation and the critical reactions. Said acknowledges the ordinary meaning of Orientalism as described earlier but also adds two more. First, Orientalism to him is above all a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (Said 2). Second, it is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Said 3) His main concerns are that 'the Orient' was abused and usurped to define it as 'the Other' of Europe and that Orientalism and these Western-dominated presentations have a long history in Europe. Thus, the Orient only exists as a social construct, a set of ideas that project the Western visions of the East into a concept of an 'imaginative geography'. Moreover, for Said Orientalism is a politically and ideologically driven discourse about the Orient as the 'Other' of Europe that not only comprises politics but also social, cultural and academic life on all levels. (cf. Balfe pp. 78). He heavily draws on Foucault's theory of power, and the relationships among power, knowledge, and discourse to argue that the only aim of Orientalists' work and writing was to legitimate the domination and exploitation of the East and to establish a regime of knowledge (cf. Krug pp. 28). Said carries his point so far as to inextricably link Orientalism and Imperialism. Irwin summarizes Said's argumentation as follows: "Orientalism is the hegemonic discourse of imperialism that constrains everything written and thought in the West about the Orient and particularly about Islam and the Arabs", and, "[c]haracteristically Orientalism is essentialist, racialist, patronizing and ideologically motivated" (Irwin 3).

Since the publishing of *Orientalism*, numerous critics appeared on scene which offered a differing view and which defended an entire scholar field against this compromise. The most popular names among them are Bernhard Lewis, Robert Irwin, Martin Kramer, Lisa Lowe, and John MacKenzie. The following discussion summarizes their major concerns in seven points of criticism. Generally, Said is criticized for his methodological approach, or in the words of Irwin, he was caught in "a labyrinth of false turns, *trompe-l'oeil* perspectives and cul-de-sacs (Irwin 4, italics in original). They blamed him for drawing conclusions from eighteenth and nineteenth century texts in order to explain current social and political developments that had primarily taken place

in the Arabic world. Within this point, reproval is inscribed on at least two levels. Firstly, by trying to explain away Said's assault on Orientalism as "a personal sense of loss and national disintegration", A.L. Macfie criticizes the politicization of a literary criticism, thus connecting Said's assault on Orientalism to his own biography (Macfie 3). The other implicit reproach is the stereotypical depiction of more than three hundred years of Orientalism. According to Said, academic Orientalists, explorers and novelists participated in a common Orientalist discourse (cf. Irwin pp. 281). Thus, Said also sees no necessity to distinguish between Orientalism in arts and Orientalism as an academic discipline. Kramer quotes a critic who counters this point of view:

Who, after all, had ever thought that Lamartine and Olivia Manning, Chateaubriand and Byron, Carlyle, Camus, Voltaire, Gertrude Bell, the anonymous composers of El Cid and the Chanson de Roland, Arabists like Gibb, colonial rulers such as Cromer and Balfour, sundry quasi-literary figures like Edward Lane, scholars of Sufism like Massignon, Henry Kissinger — all belonged in the same archive and composed a deeply unified discursive formation!

Therefore, a main argument is that the same way Said accuses the West of a monolithic and stereotypical view of the East, he constructs a similar perception of the West, which implicitly is a form of Occidentalism (cf. MacKenzie pp. xvii). Lowe also rejects "a totalizing framework that would grant such authority to Orientalism" (x) that heavily reduces this discourse. Said should have been aware of the fact that Orientalism in serious scholarship and popular culture is not conveyed similarly. The portrayals of the Orient in films, for instance, differ from those in literature and can not be compared to Oriental studies of scholars (cf. Irwin pp. 8). Therefore, reductionism is the most predominant accusation towards Said. He reduces the Orient to the Arab world excluding North Africa and Asia, the Occident to France and England and Orientalism to Imperialism (cf. Irwin 5). Krug adds that Said ignores the historical context of Europe in the early nineteenth century where 'the Others' for England, for instance, were France, Ireland, or Jews and not only 'the Orient' (cf. Krug 30). Heehs and Kramer note that Said neglects the fact that German scholars, who did not possess an Eastern Empire, dominated Oriental studies in the 19th century. Also, Said disregards the fundamental differences of opinion amongst Western scholars regarding the Orient. In his book *For the Lust of Knowing*, Irwin presents the work of the most important Orientalists that Said failed to acknowledge, but also concedes that figures like Ernst Renan and Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau were racist. Finally, as already mentioned in the very beginning of this chapter, Orientalists blame Edward Said for the stigmatization of an entire scholarly field. Bernhard Lewis complains that "Orientalism has been emptied

of its previous content and given an entirely new one – that of unsympathetic or hostile treatment of Oriental peoples". For a more balanced view on this topic, it is important to note that Lewis is also accused of political reductionism and of over-generalizing the debate (cf. Bahmad 56).

At least most critics agree on the stimulating effect of *Orientalism* on postcolonial studies and the influence it has had on many other fields such as Poststructuralism, Discourse Theory and Postmodernism (cf. MacKenzie xii). Particularly with respect to the ongoing discussion about globalization as 'westernization', it offers a necessary impulse for reflection and consideration. Many critics have also come to the understanding that Orientalism was always a source of inspiration for Western arts that was avowedly manipulated and reinterpreted, which produced stereotypes and which had its racial twists (cf. MacKenzie 203). Therefore, the following chapter gives a short overview of Orientalism in literature and film, of how it was used and particularly why the Orient was so popular for such a long period of time.

2.2 Orientalism in English Literature

The overview of Orientalism in literature and theatre is limited to British literature with a focus on nineteenth-century melodrama (cf. Krug). The use of oriental motifs and stage settings has been very prominent at that time in England whereas during that period and according to Mayer, the American melodrama only offers a few examples that draw on oriental images (21). The focus on nineteenth century texts also originates from *Moulin Rouge!* being set in the nineteenth century and alluding to coeval theatre practices.

When Said attacks Orientalism, he often refers to the depiction of the East in literature and film. "The Orient", Said writes, "was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." (qtd. in Bernstein 2) From early on the Orient had much to offer for writers who were looking for new ideas and inspiration. For them, everything was different from what they knew from their own traditions and conventions. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, writers got bored from contemporary literature at that time and were looking for rejuvenation, which they found in Orientalism. The Orient was admired for its "imaginative power, its characters, vegetation and fabrics" (Mac Kenzie 184). As early as in the 17th century, Horace Walpole admitted,

"Read Sinbad and you will be quite sick of Aeneas." (Irwin *Oriental Discourses*) Jones was of the same opinion and found more leisure in reading *The Thousand and One Nights* than in reading the Classics - and he was not the only one. Addison, Coleridge, Tennyson and Proust read and were influenced by oriental literature (Irwin *Oriental Discourses*). According to the Norton Anthology of Literature, Orientalism in English literature started with the earliest translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* from French into English (Grub Street translations). The most popular translations were made by Edward Lane in 1840, and Richard Burton in 1885. Lane was a linguist and anthropologist who regarded the *Nights* as an ethnographic text full of encyclopaedic information concerning Middle Eastern popular culture, whereas up to this day, Burton's translation is the main source for the erotic imagery associated with the Orient, which also caused a huge scandal in Victorian England (cf. Balfe 79 and Nishio 156). Both translations are criticized for not corresponding to an 'Oriental' reality but for freely enriching their translations with their own images and fantasies about the Orient (cf. Marzolph 5). Thus the so-called 'Oriental Tale', of which Samuel Johnson's *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssina* (1759) is a good example, became popular in England. Romantic Orientalism produced various important works, among them poems, novels, pantomimes or melodramas with recognizable elements of Asian and African place names or historical and legendary people in them. As some of the most prominent examples, the dream of "an Arab of the Bedouin Tribes" in book 5 of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, a tempting affair with an Indian maiden in Keats's *Endymion* or Saife, and an Arab maiden in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* come to mind (cf. The Norton).

Another rich source for Orientalism was the extensive travel literature at that time, for instance *The Turkish Embassy Letters* from British writer Lady Mary Montagu, or Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travel* (cf. Lowe pp. 34). The depiction of the Orient in all these writings in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was extremely heterogeneous and obviously always influenced by its time. The entrancing portrayals by many female writers travelling around the Orient often differ from popular depictions of an uncivilized and exotic Orient that were used to point at the putative, stable and powerful West (cf. Lowe 31). However, the question remains if this process only served to separate the English 'Self' from the Oriental 'Other' or whether the Orient was used as a stage, a free zone to evacuate the social or political issues of the time.