INTEGRATED AND INTERSECTED

Kylie Minogue, Baz Luhrmann and the use of popular song material in Moulin Rouge!

Philip Hayward

Abstract

This article complements Rebecca Coyle’s analysis of Baz Luhrmann’s authorial signature in the ‘Red Curtain’ film trilogy (elsewhere in this issue) by reflecting on the involvement of enduringly popular Australian audio-visual performer Kylie Minogue with Luhrmann’s 2001 feature Moulin Rouge! (in which she acted the part of an ‘absinthe fairy’). The article discusses the career trajectory that led Minogue to this role and the manner in which Minogue’s body of work represents a distinct oeuvre that has intersected with Luhrmann’s at various points. Discussion of the ‘absinthe fairy’ scene in Moulin Rouge! also engages with the more recent work that Coyle undertook on the use of music in animation cinema and links this into aspects of the audio-visual heritage that generated Minogue’s fleeting presence in Luhrmann’s film. The article’s focus on these aspects stretches the usual parameters of screen soundtrack studies, reflects on the nature of contemporary screen music performance and provides a case study of the deployment of popular song material in a particularly dense, inter-referential media text.

Keywords

Kylie Minogue, Baz Luhrmann, Moulin Rouge!, absinthe, music video, animation

Introduction

In the year before her untimely demise in late 2012, Screen Sound editor Rebecca Coyle was researching and theorising the use of previously recorded musical material in feature film scores. Two aspects particularly interested her. The first was the manner in which their music and lyrics could be understood to function in both similar and different ways to that of original film scores and/or original song materials featured in scores. The second was the issue of the cohesive integration of these elements with original score and sound design and the issues of creative authorship involved in their inclusion within audio-visual texts. As a researcher concerned with Australian cinema and its relation to global media culture, she had a particular interest in the inter-relation of the two through uses of popular song. Coyle’s work on this area first manifested itself in her doctoral thesis
(2002) which examined notable examples such as the use of Swedish pop band ABBA’s music in Stefan Elliott’s *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* (1994) and, more recently, had addressed the use of music in Baz Luhrmann’s ‘Red Curtain’ trilogy (2013). Another major area of interest to Coyle throughout her research career was animation cinema (most recently manifested in her 2010 anthology *Drawn to Sound*). This essay draws on Coyle’s work to address the nature and the inter-textual context of Minogue’s role in *Moulin Rouge!* and the creative and industrial contexts that facilitated it.

I. Kylie Minogue and *Moulin Rouge!*

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001) was the third, most successful and most spectacular instalment of the so-called ‘Red Curtain’ trilogy directed by Baz Luhrmann (following *Strictly Ballroom* [1992] and *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* [1996]). It was also the most expensive, with production costs of around US $52.5 million, reflecting both the production team’s grand vision for the film and its ability to attract substantial funding after the lower budget successes of its predecessors. The film’s score was assembled in a manner that is now often referred to as a ‘mash-up’, a somewhat vague vernacular term (see Hayward, 2012) that refers either to a collage of edited and processed samples and/or a collage utilising sequences of newly recorded, re-arranged and/or remixed materials. The latter approach predominates in *Moulin Rouge!* and also extends to the incorporation of lines of song lyrics into dialogue. Coyle’s analysis of the trilogy emphasised the manner in which multiple aspects of the auteurial signature attributed to the films’ director (as defined by the detection of “consistent themes, motifs and/or styles across a body of films”), were “as much a product of patterns of texts” produced by creative teams as the product of “an actual individual” (2013: xx). Her analysis also identified the key stylistic aspect of the ‘Red Curtain’ trilogy as its eclectic selection of source material and imaginative manipulation into a stylistically harmonious whole (ibid).

The main musical materials reworked for the film were western pop songs produced from the 1950s to 1990s together with a very modern reworking of Jacques Offenbach’s composition *Infernal Galop* (1858), the iconic musical signifier of the Parisian can-can, closely associated with the Moulin Rouge. The compositions selected for adaptation and incorporation were not chosen on a purely musical basis (in the sense that the sonic essence of music can be regarded as effectively a thing-in-itself). Instead, they were selected on the strength of lyrical and thematic aspects of particular song materials and, in many cases, the audio-visual associations accruing to them through their prior representation in memorable film and/or music video sequences. The musical team then arranged and integrated renditions of the source music texts to support Luhrmann’s overall aesthetic vision for the film and to integrate with the image and choreographic editing.\(^1\)

In a manner that has become routine for features produced by Luhrmann’s production company, Bazmark Inq, new sequences and elements were added to and deleted from the film right up until its final cut. Minogue was originally approached to record a new, slower tempo version of Olivia

\(^1\) For a detailed insight into this process see Tom Flint’s 2001 interview with musical director Marius De Vries.
Newton-John’s 1981 hit single *Physical* with a more sultry vocal style. While Minogue’s version of *Physical* was not eventually included in *Moulin Rouge!,* it featured in her live act in the early 2000s (and a live rendition is included on her in-concert DVD—*On a Night Like This Tour* [2001]). Minogue’s reinterpretation of Newton-John’s track is significant, within the project of this essay, for engaging with her most notable predecessor. Newton-John was the first female Australian pop singer to gain significant career traction through a variety of screen media activities. Her career spanned live TV in the early 1970s, music recording, roles in feature films and prominence in the early music video era. *Physical* was released in 1981 at a point in Newton-John’s career when her brand image was in transition and when new media outlets were transforming the role and potential of popular music performers. After establishing herself as a personable but somewhat ‘anodyne’ vocal performer, Newton-John secured a new, more assertive profile through her acclaimed role as Sandy, the female lead in Randal Kleiser’s 1978 film *Grease.* *Physical*’s lyrical scenario represents a couple ending a romantic dinner with the singer reiterating ‘Let’s get physical, physical/ I wanna get physical/ Let’s get into physical/ Let me hear your body talk’. While the raunchiness of these lyrics was offset by the bright uptempo production and trademark ‘chirpiness’ of Newton-John’s vocal delivery; the female vocal protagonist’s desire remained evident and comprised the song’s central lyrical, melodic and thematic hook. The video for *Physical* (directed by Brian Grant), avoided a literal interpretation of the song’s lyrics by setting its lip-synched performance in a gym with Newton-John in (then) fashionable aerobics attire, as a trainer, marshalling overweight middle-aged men and then lusting after svelte, younger ones (who eventually turn out to be gay—implicitly deflating the charged sexual scenario established in the latter half of the video). Released shortly after the music-video channel MTV commenced in the US in September 1981, at a time when the cable service was searching for quality content, *Physical* received frequent airplay that substantially boosted Newton-John’s US profile and sales.

While Minogue’s version of the song was neither released as a single nor subject to visualisation in music video form, its on-stage performance in the elaborately designed and choreographed ‘On a Night Like This’ European and Australian tour (2001) represented a far more explicit visualisation of the song’s chorus and one that operated within the overt (hyper-) erotic parameter for female pop star performance established by Madonna in the early 1990s. Minogue’s 2001 show was directed and choreographed by Luca

---

2 Where she appeared as ‘Lovely Livvy’ in her mid-teens on Melbourne’s HSV station (a Channel 7 company).

3 Fittingly, with regard to their career parallels, both singers were named as ‘Living Treasures’ by the National Trust of Australia in 2012.

4 With international hits such as *Banks of the Ohio* (1971).

5 Sandy transitions from prim teen to coiffured ‘bad-girl’ during the course of the narrative. This performance facilitated a ‘make-over’ from winsome chanteuse to the more assertive and sexualized image she displayed, dressed in leather, on the cover of her first post-*Grease* album *Totally Hot* (1978).

6 Prior to MTV’s inception, the production of music videos—let alone ambitious high-budget ones—was not a common industry practice. MTV’s success soon changed this situation and led to a far higher number of videos being produced by the mid-1980s.

7 In videos such as the title track of her *Erotica* album (1992), directed by Fabian Baron, and ‘Sex’ (1992), a book featuring erotic photos of her taken by Steven Meisel).
Tommassini (who had previously worked as a dancer on Madonna’s 1993 ‘Girlie Show’ live tour). In contrast to the gym scenario in Newton-John’s original video, Minogue’s live performance featured the singer and skimpily-clad dancers participating in an ensemble pole dance routine. The difference between Newton-John’s 1981 video and Minogue’s stage performance illustrates both the increasing sexualisation of female performers in the two decades between them and, indeed, the increased sexualisation of Minogue between her earliest music videos (Loco-Motion [1987] and I Should be so Lucky [1988]) and her later work.

Minogue’s first two hit singles capitalised on the popularity of her role as Charlene, the youthful ‘tomboy’ mechanic in the hit Australian TV series Neighbours in 1986–88. A series of formulaic and commercially successful pop-dance songs produced by British trio Stock, Aitken and Waterman (SAW) in the late 1980s–early 1990s established her as a high-profile pop performer. After leaving SAW’s stable of artists, Minogue embarked upon a more varied and experimental career phase, signing to UK independent label Deconstruction in 1993. Her first single for the label, entitled Confide in Me, produced by US House music duo Brothers in Rhythm, mixed diverse instrumental textures over a sparse rhythm track and featured a vocal that alternated sprechstimme and sung melodic lines. The song’s video (directed by Paul Boyd) featured Minogue in six different guises inviting members of an interactive audience to dial in and confide in her. Suggestive, rather than overtly sexualised, the video allowed her to assume a number of identities and represented her as a more mature performer than earlier song visualisations (in which her ‘cuteness’ was paramount). Her artistic credibility was further enhanced by her duet with iconic Australian rock vocalist Nick Cave on his original composition Where The Wild Roses Grow (1996), a song specifically written for her. The song and video significantly diversified Minogue’s product image on various levels: through the ‘darkness’ of the song’s lyrical theme (concerning a murdered female lover); the intense, sultry vocal interplay between the performers; and the carefully crafted ‘swamp Gothic’ video (directed by Rocky Schenk), featuring Minogue lying in water like a latter-day version of Ophelia from John Everett Millais’s eponymous painting (1852).

Figure 1: Drowned Kylie in Where the Wild Roses Grow video

---

8 Djs, Steve Anderson and Dave Seamen.
Her 1997 album (released as Kylie Minogue in Australia and Impossible Princess in the UK) featured eight tracks produced by Brothers in Rhythm and was released with striking visual packaging (ie CD artwork, promotional materials and music videos) designed by photographer Stéphane Sednaoui. This approach was continued in Minogue's most experimental audio-visual collaboration (to date), her collaboration with former Deee-Lite DJ Towa Tei on German Bold Italic, a track from his 1998 album Sound Museum. The video, also directed by Sednaoui, featured Minogue as a postmodern geisha in New York and opens with her rotating in a bathtub in a bikini reciting the repeated opening line “Do you like my sense of style?” before she proceeds through various city locations in full geisha outfit while enunciating the song’s lyrics (which describe the attractions of the font identified in the song’s title). If this marked the most extreme audio-visual distance from her persona in Neighbours and her early music videos; the video for her 1997 single Did it again, directed by Pedro Romani, emphasised the multiplicity of personae she was able to juggle in the late 1990s, featuring four different version of Minogue—identified in the video as ‘Cute Kylie’, ‘Dance Kylie’, ‘Indie Kylie’ and ‘Sex Kylie’—alternately jostling each other for position as the song’s dominant persona and sharing the screen space with each other. At this stage in her career, she had established herself not simply as a former TV actress with a career as a pop singer but rather as a versatile and multifaceted singer, dancer, actress and model who retained a clearly recognisable star persona (ie as ‘Kylie’) whatever role she performed.

In terms of international profile, perhaps the biggest career boost for Minogue was her performance at the Closing Ceremony for the Sydney Olympics (2000). Her selection for this event reflected her prominence as an internationally recognised (and recognisable) Australian audio-visual performer capable of communicating to an international audience. She was featured performing two numbers, her then current single On a Night Like This and a number specifically recorded for (and lip-synched at) the Ceremony, her version of ABBA's 1976 hit single Dancing Queen. The latter reflected the ‘localisation of identification’ with international repertoire (and ABBA in particular) that Rebecca Coyle explored in her work on Priscilla: Queen of The Desert in her 2002 doctoral thesis. As Coyle details, in the introductory essay to her 2005 anthology Reel Tracks, the closing ceremony for the 2000 Games featured an ensemble ballroom dancing sequence that adapted Australian singer John Paul Young’s samba-styled version of his earlier hit Love is in The Air (as featured in Luhrmann’s Strictly Ballroom) before Minogue appeared, in a Las Vegas showgirl style outfit (Figure 2 below), accompanied by a host of purple clad male dancers, lip-synching to an anthemic, uptempo version of the ABBA song. This performance cross-associated Minogue’s own career as a versatile audio-visual performer with a modern tradition of popular Australian cinema that she had, up until that point, not been involved in, despite an association with Luhrmann that dated back to the early 1990s.  

---

9 The emphasis here is on “popular”. While Minogue starred in Chris Thompson's 1989 Australian film The Delinquents, the film was not a box-office success. (See Jarosiewicz [1992] for further discussion).
Luhrmann and Minogue first worked together in 1994 when Luhrmann and his long-time collaborator Catherine Martin and colleague Bill Marron guest-edited an issue of Australian *Vogue* magazine that included photo-shoots of two young Australian female performers who had caught the editorial team’s eye as rising stars, Minogue and actress Nicole Kidman.\(^{10}\) Minogue’s photo spread, designed by Luhrmann and shot by American photographer Bert Stern, featured her in 1950s’ Hollywood glamour mode as the (fictional composite) ‘Judy Lamour’. In 1998, Luhrmann’s company Bazmark entered into an agreement with Fox Studios which the Studios’ press release described as “a far-reaching, multi-faceted deal” with “one of the world’s leading creative forces in theatrical and motion picture productions” which included audio-visual media, music and theatre products. News of this agreement was timed to coincide with the opening of Fox Studios Australia and a gala performance co-ordinated by Bazmark. One of the highlights of the latter was a close recreation of Marilyn Monroe’s classic on-screen performance of the song *Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend* (from Howard Hawks’s 1953 film adaptation of Leo Robin and Julie Stynes’s 1949 Broadway musical *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) performed by Minogue and supporting male dancers.\(^{11}\) This performance wove Minogue and Luhrmann into an intertextual string that included Mary Lambert’s video for Madonna’s

---

\(^{10}\) This association sparked Luhrmann’s enduring interest in her star persona—as elaborated in Luhrmann’s foreword to Chris Heath’s volume on Kylie’s costumes and images, published in conjunction with the exhibition of costumes, memorabilia and photographs of her held at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum in 2007.

\(^{11}\) Archived online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T10VecAun-Y. Also see a split channel audio-visual comparison of the original film version and Kylie’s gala performance online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3aDdOnddW0
single Material Girl (1985), (which mimicked the choreography and set design of the sequence in Hawks’s film), and foreshadowed the rendition of Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend (incorporating lines from Material Girl) featured in Moulin Rouge!, performed by Nicole Kidman (in role as the courtesan Satine).\textsuperscript{12}

The Absinthe Opportunity

*The visual effects were instrumental in producing an aesthetic for Moulin Rouge! that was both nostalgic and ironic, on one hand celebrating the naivety and experimental energy of periods of technological innovation, on the other deconstructing the postmodern desire for perfect simulacra… This aesthetic does not trade in the fake reality that is said to be the essence of the hyper-real… Rather, it points up its own trickery, seducing the audience into an unruly experience.* (Cook, 2010: 93)

The Montmartre depicted by Luhrmann and his design team in *Moulin Rouge!* is, as Cook suggests, an “unruly” collision of period-researched verisimilitude, quasi-‘Steampunk’ chic\textsuperscript{13}, pastiche and parody. In a particularly astute review of the film, Levy characterised that Luhrmann constructed his (re-)imagination of the Moulin Rouge as:

>a microcosm of Parisian society circa 1900, the epitome of moral and sexual decadence. Visually and thematically, the club is a blend of the cabaret in Josef von Sternberg’s The Blue Angel (with Marlene Dietrich), Liza Minnelli’s performance space in Bob Fosse’s Cabaret, and precursor of the infamous Studio 54 at the height of its 1970s popularity. (2001: online)

While Studio 54 was infamous as a mecca for cocaine consumption and for the cocaine fuelled revelries that characterised a particular (moneyed) subcultural experience at the time; the iconic drink of fin-de-siècle (ie. end of 19\textsuperscript{th} Century) European bohemianism was absinthe—a green-coloured, high-proof spirit with a distinct flavour provided by anise, fennel and wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*), from which it gained its name. Its high alcoholic content and the presence of small amounts of the chemical thujone led it to be regarded as a potent and potentially hallucinogenic drink that was, nevertheless, avidly consumed. The artists Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Vincent Van Gogh and writers Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine were known to be frequent consumers and absinthe drinking was represented in paintings by artists such as Edgar Degas, Edouard Manet and Pablo Picasso. Reflecting this prominence in the demi-monde of Montmartre, absinthe is foregrounded in the film. In the initial sequence that introduces...
us to the neighbourhood, for example, we move past ‘The Absinthe Bar’ as a key marker of place.

![Figure 3: (Detail from) Albert Maignan's 1895 painting 'La Muse Verte'](image)

During the protracted production of *Moulin Rouge!* the creative team considered shooting a sequence where absinthe was represented by a seductive female figure who then metamorphosed into a wicked, satyr-like sprite (in the mode of dark charismatic rock stars such as Ozzy Osbourne or Marilyn Manson\(^\text{14}\)). This idea, in itself, was an interesting departure from the established association of the drink with female imagery. The personification of absinthe as a female figure derives in substantial part from the drink’s French nickname ‘La Fée Verte’ (literally ‘the Green Fairy’). A notable visual representation of this is provided in Albert Maignan’s 1895 painting ‘La Muse Verte’ (‘The Green Muse’) which shows a (human size) green fairy floating behind an enraptured young man, touching his temples with her fingers (to indicate her powers of inspiration) in a tawdry artist’s garret with a floor strewn with manuscripts. Despite this tradition of female visualisation, the production team went as far as to record Osbourne singing and screaming but eventually decided to keep a single gender for the absinthe fairy. After some consideration, Luhrmann and key collaborator Catherine Martin offered the fairy role to Minogue, recognising her as a charismatic performer who could switch between cute, seductive and more aggressive performance modes.

\(^{14}\) Manson would have been a particularly appropriate choice, given his dedication to the spirit (which has extended as far as his devising and marketing his own version, entitled ‘Mansinthe’). See [http://mansinthe.com.au/](http://mansinthe.com.au/) for product details (and ordering options).
Minogue appeared—in miniaturised form—as a green fairy who enraptures a group of young artists and leads them to the Moulin Rouge. Her representation in the film derives from both the artistic tradition of visualisations of ‘La Fee Verte’ discussed above and is similar to the representation of Tinker Bell in Disney’s 1953 animated version of Peter Pan (directed by Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson). Unlike the fairy in J.M Barrie’s original stage play (1904), who was represented by optical effects and tinkling bells alone, Disney’s Tinker Bell was an attractive, curvaceous female (often credited as being inspired by Marilyn Monroe but actually modelled on drawings of actress Margaret Kerry) dressed in a skimpy green outfit closely similar to that worn by Minogue’s fairy character in Moulin Rouge!

Minogue appears early in the film (at 10.05 in the DVD version) in a scene where Christian (played by Ewan McGregor) interacts with a group of bohemians (including Toulouse-Lautrec) who are devising a new play, entitled ‘Spectacular Spectacular’. The play is set in the Alps, and is created, in somewhat haphazard fashion, in a room liberally bestrewn with glasses of absinthe. Christian’s first decisive contribution is to resolve a dispute about a line of lyrics from a proposed song by singing a new phrase—“The hills are alive with the sound of music”—that meets with instant acceptance, and then adds a subsequent line “with songs they have sung, for a thousand years”. The lyrics and melody intoned by Christian are the opening lines of the title song of The Sound of Music, made famous by Julie Andrews in her

15 See http://s104588189.onlinehome.us/tinktalks/home.htm

16 She appears even earlier in the DVD version where she announces “I’m the Green Fairy”, flies across the screen and holds a bottle of absinthe aloft alongside the initial DVD menu.
performance in Robert Wise’s eponymous 1965 film. The musical, with music and lyrics by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, was based on the (real-life) story of the singing von Trapp family, which fled Nazi-occupied Austria in 1938. The musical opened on Broadway in 1959 (starring Mary Martin, as Mari von Trapp) and became a major success, running for fourteen years and being adapted into a successful film in 1965. Wise’s screen version featured Julie Andrews’ performance of the title song in an Alpine pasture, celebrating her unbridled joy in nature (and showcasing the actress’s melodic precision and emotively expressive soprano) in a visually dramatic scene that remains one of the best-known sequences from the film. Luhrmann has cited musicals such as The Sound of Music as early inspirations for his film work\(^\text{17}\) and the 'Spectacular Spectacular' creative workshopping sequences and the repetition of the lines of the title song function to inscribe that inspiration and also to identify a creative expression of an idealistic, joyful purity that contrasts to the tawdry glamour of Montmartre.

Acclaimed for his inventive powers as a lyricist, Christian accepts the position of writer of the drama and, flushed with enthusiasm, the group toast Christian’s new role with glasses of absinthe (his first experience of the concoction). The screen image shows the label of the bottle, which features a Green Fairy logo modelled on Minogue. As if liberated by the men drinking the spirit, she becomes animated, introduces herself (“I’m the Green Fairy”) and flies off the bottle, trailing glitter (like Tinker Bell in Disney’s 1953 Peter Pan) before hovering in the air and joyfully singing the line “The hills are alive with the sound of music” in a high, light operatic voice together with the enraptured men. Switching mood, she alights on a shelf where she dances suggestively to an instrumental passage from a version of the T. Rex song Children of the Revolution (1972) (a performance which is far less airy and innocent than her previous intonation of the song lines). This is no incidental detail in the drama; her dance moves enact the opening lines of the original T. Rex song: “Well you can bump and grind/ It’s good for your mind/ Well you can twist and shout/ Let it all hang out”. She then beckons Christian on before flying across the front of the screen ‘sky writing’ the words ‘Freedom, Beauty, Truth” in green glitter, as the young bohemians sing these words in chorus, before rendering the men’s final sung word “Love” in red lettering as “L’amour Fou” (literally, ‘crazy/mad love’). The significant adjectival addition to the translation of the latter term—and its emphasis in red—serves to underline the men’s misperception that absinthe intoxication can deliver freedom, beauty and truth. While this appears as a subtle visual message in a scene of considerable visual impact and complexity, its intentional editorial comment on the drama can be ascertained from consideration of the ‘Green Fairy Previsualisation’ sequence shot for the film (and included in the 2002 bonus DVD edition\(^\text{18}\)). This sequence (in which Kylie’s role is taken by visual effects assistant Serena Rettenmaier, also in green garb), underlines this aspect by having the fairy

\(^{17}\) Indeed, Luhrmann has emphasised that one of Bazmark Inq’s “proud moments” was when Robert Wise, director of The Sound of Music (1965) and West Side Story (1961), “the great-great-grandfather of musical cinema” said, “I’ve seen Moulin Rouge! and the musical has been re-invented.” Quoted on IMDB http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0525303/bio.

\(^{18}\) This sequence is included on Disk 2 of the double DVD pack of Moulin Rouge! included in the special DVD edition of Moulin Rouge! included in the five DVD set Baz Luhrmann’s Red Curtain Trilogy (2002).
indicate two visual captions that inform the (uncaring) young men about the effect of absinthe. The first states, “One glass tells the truth” and the second, “Too much and it lies”.

Returning to the front of the perspectival space after her ‘sky writing’, the fairy then hovers in the air in a cloud of green glitter and repeats the vocal line from *The Sound of Music* over the male group’s rendition of the chorus from the aforementioned T. Rex song (*Children of the Revolution*) which immediately follows the previously quoted extract. Here again were have ironic juxtaposition. While the opening line of Rogers and Hammerstein’s song is about innocent joy in nature, in Luhrmann’s film it is sung by fairy who personifies the hallucinatory nature of a powerful form of alcohol. Similarly while Bolan’s lyrics may proclaim that you “can’t fool the Children of the Revolution” (implicitly the young artistic idealists themselves); the young men are clearly intoxicated and clearly enraptured by the spirit of the bottle. As if to underline her essence as an hallucination, the image is then multiplied and a chorus-line of eleven Kylie fairies briefly shimmy—foreshadowing the choreographic displays on offer at the Moulin Rouge—before she flies outside, pointing the young men to the venue as Christian declares that “We were off to the Moulin Rouge and I was to perform my poetry for Satine”). The absinthe fairy’s expression switches at the last moment to a more demonic intensity, her eyes flashing red as she emits a malevolent scream, signalling the darkness beneath the glamour of the Moulin Rouge and the dangerous nature of absinthe itself.

Minogue’s screen time is a mere 50 seconds but she provides the key transition point to the film, shifting Christian and his colleagues to the Moulin Rouge itself and creating a complex, teasing, intertextually rich persona that complements the film’s overall fantastic a-realism. The essence of her performance is her digital rendition as an animated (rather than simply miniaturised) figure within the hyper-stylised rendition of Montmartre and the Moulin Rouge in the film. As Belinda Bennetts, the film’s visual effects art director, has emphasised:

> The green fairy was always supposed to be a vision, she was a hallucination and it was really important that she had an hallucinogenic quality. And there’s all kinds of ways you can go with that idea but it was also really important that she was located within the image system that Baz had constructed for the film…. You have to have particles if you’re gonna be a fairy... but they needed to be particles that had a handcrafted quality... It was really important that the imagery looked like it had been created with steam age technology rather than digital technology and so we really tried to make things look like they had been made on an optical printer, that they were double exposed, that they had blurry edges.\(^1\)

---

19 There is further irony in that Bolan’s lyrics are also playful and ironic, occurring in a song that includes throwaway lines such as “I drive a Rolls Royce ‘cos it’s good for my voice”.

20 The scream was a processed version of one provided by Ozzy Osbourne.

21 Interviewed in a featurette on Disk 2 of the double DVD pack of *Moulin Rouge!* included in the special DVD edition of *Moulin Rouge!* included in the five DVD set *Baz Luhrmann’s Red Curtain Trilogy* (2002).
Minogue’s transmogrification into a blurry-edged animated sprite is akin to both the earlier cinematic tradition of modelling classic animations on sketched renditions of actual performers (eg, Margaret Kerry’s modelling for Tinker Bell, as discussed above) and the vocalisation/vocal character interpretation of performers in recent digital animations (such as Angelina Jolie’s performance as Grendel’s mother in Beowulf—directed by Robert Zemeckis, 2007) in which the animated character is clearly recognisable as the (actual) performer. In this manner, as Minogue enacts the role of the green absinthe fairy, her performance carries with it the (very different) traces of her ‘Dancing Queen’ appearance at the Sydney Olympics Closing Ceremony and the trail of earlier audio-visual performances that comprise her 1990s audio-visual oeuvre.

Conclusion

Rebecca Coyle’s 2013 analysis of Luhrmann’s authorial signature across the ‘Red Curtain’ trilogy, identified an eclecticism that (at its best) “bridges... syncretism in which seemingly inharmonious elements are blended in” (2013: xx). While Coyle’s characterisation refers specifically to the score of the films, it can also be extended to characterise the incorporation and deployment of diverse performers (and their pre-existent personae) in the ‘Red Curtain’ trilogy. In this context, performers such as Minogue are rendered as englamoured signs whose performances are components of the rich, intertextual spectacle key to the ‘Red Curtain’ aesthetic. Rather like the visual design of the film, characterised by Cook in terms of its blend of naïve, nostalgic and experimental elements, crafted from state of the art digital technologies and industrial creativity in order to seduce the audience “into an unruly experience” (2010: 93); Minogue’s persona and career are similarly eclectic and seductive. As Coyle acknowledges in her analysis of the ‘Red Curtain’ trilogy, Luhrmann’s core creative team generate ‘his’ creative signature; similarly, the multiple incarnations of Minogue’s persona generated across a range of songs, photo shoots, videos, films, TV programs and concert performances result from her collaboration with a succession of
other creative personnel. Transformed into an animated fairy that is still recognisably herself; her rendition represented a further phase in the transitions that marked the first fifteen years of her career (and, indeed, continue to distinguish it). In this manner, her performance in Moulin Rouge! is just as much part of her œuvre as an audio-visual performer as it is part of the acclaimed director’s, (re-)emphasising the multiple characterisations and analyses of creative authorship possible within screen media. The uses of popular song materials in Moulin Rouge! are, as exemplified in the absinthe fairy scene discussed above, subtle, resonant and complex; illustrating the range of potential deployments available to composers and music supervisors concerned to integrate such materials into core thematic aspects of audio-visual texts.

Thanks to Rebecca Coyle for the discussions that informed this essay, for introducing me to screen sound analysis back in the 1990s and for 25 years of scholarly insight and dialogue.

References


